Narrating the Transnational: Refugee Routes, Communities of Shared Fate, and Transnarrative Form

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If the novel is the preeminent form for narrating the nation, what form can narrate the transnational?¹ Few subjects pose this question for literary form more urgently than the life histories of refugees. Their displacements from one nation to another, their liminal status outside the protections afforded by nation-states, and the ties they maintain across borders make clear a transnational tension: borders with the power to cleave lives versus the relations that span those borders. This essay pursues the opening question by examining a narrative of Asian American refugees, whose migrations cannot be grasped without recognizing their links to the trajectories of US military violence in Asia. Scholars working within transnational frameworks are pursuing models of social relation to address the global currents and imperial routes navigated by Asian American refugees and migrants.² Asian American fiction makes important contributions to this effort by developing narrative forms that make perceptible the linked trajectories that condition transnational displacements. My case study is Vietnamese American author Aimee Phan’s 2004 short story cycle We Should Never Meet. Mapping the fallout from the evacuation of children from South Vietnam, this story cycle draws out the relations among the vectors of US power, the mass displacements they produce, and the uncertain positions the displaced inhabit in the United States.

Phan develops a transnarrative form that gives shape to transnational lives. In her hands, the story cycle’s capacity to invite and frustrate the links among its constituent stories captures the tension of interconnection and dispersion in the community of Vietnamese child refugees. These children are the subjects of national narratives invested in containing familial relations, collective histories, and American entanglements in Vietnam by focusing on salvation in the United States. A “rescue” narrative of America as a refuge for Vietnamese fleeing communism elides the memory of American militarism (Espiritu 48), and a narrative of American families saving abandoned “Third World” children suppresses family ties and the geopolitical power relations that condition transnational adoptions.
(Briggs 129-30, 152, 157, 232; Eng 102). Spanning these contained histories, Phan’s story cycle remaps the migrations of these children as inseparable from the global webs of US power. It imagines how political community might be realized in these webs. *We Should Never Meet* develops a form that encompasses the noncontiguous ethical and political relations produced by the Vietnam War, making these relations available to aesthetic response and, potentially, political accountability.

*We Should Never Meet* draws on a story-cycle form that has roots in regionalist fiction and traditionally emphasizes local community and region. Phan adapts the genre’s subnational spatial rubrics to tell stories of transnational displacement. This surprising adaptation suggests the largely unrecognized potential of the story cycle to narrate global routes. Recent studies of American literary regionalism have read against the grain of the genre’s provincial focus to uncover its attention to global networks. I argue that regionalism did more than register transnational relations on the margins of its focus on local communities. It developed a story-cycle form that can span multiple national settings and place transnational communities at the center of its focus. Many critics note the story cycle’s capacity for representing local community. A shared location often unifies the stories (Ingram 44), and the genre’s structure of individual stories that form a greater whole often functions as an analog of community. However, little attention has been paid to the story cycle’s potential for narrating collectivities beyond the local, even though story cycles spanning transnational settings emerged at least as early as Ernest Hemingway’s *In Our Time* (1925). One exception is Susan Koshy’s essay “Minority Cosmopolitanism” (2011), which considers Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) as a story cycle articulating an ethics of global relations from the standpoint of diasporic subjects. Koshy opens a line of inquiry that should be pursued further. Specifically, criticism needs a more capacious theory of the story cycle’s formal possibilities that extends beyond examples depicting local community to explain the genre’s powers of narrating transnational community. This is important for multi-ethnic American literary studies because story cycles spanning transnational settings are prominent in contemporary ethnic literatures. To meet this need, I expand on story-cycle theory and criticism with a formal concept of transnarrative. This concept theorizes the relations across the gaps separating individual narratives, the aesthetic means by which story cycles with transnational ambitions apprehend social relations across national borders. I also situate the story cycle’s capacity for tracing global connections as an extension of, rather than a break with, the regionalist tradition. When we acknowledge that early regionalist story cycles recognized global ties, a counterintuitive possibility emerges: that the capacity of the story cycle to map local community may be a strength in mapping transnational relations. This capacity is powerful because it can bring ideas of community and mutual responsibility into perceptions of distant ties that seem to exceed the
contours of recognizable community. In the face of refugee displacements shaped by global networks of actions and effects, transnarrative story cycles engage the need for aesthetic forms that can make transnational relations of interdependence feel as palpable as the ties binding local communities.

We Should Never Meet retrofits the regionalist story cycle to address global political relations. It is generically striking because it disintegrates the rooted location and central protagonist that unified many regionalist story cycles. Its dispersed settings and character system stretch the idea of community to encompass the contours of refugee routes. This is not a complete break from regionalism. The focus on mapping community remains, but the sense of community expands, transcending a rooted group with a shared identity. The discontinuous community traced by Phan’s stories is a transnational network of the Vietnam War’s chaotic conditions, difficult choices, and far-ranging consequences. The story cycle offers an aesthetic experience of this global network of effects, bringing to life what political theorist Melissa S. Williams describes as cosmopolitan “communities of shared fate” (43).

Transnational Tensions and Transnarrative Form

Imagining justice within networks generated by mass displacements entails grappling with a tension between borders and flows. Scholars are exploring the possibilities of relations beyond the powers of the nation, but the extent of those powers, particularly as they act on disadvantaged migrants, must remain squarely in view. We might see border-crossing approaches too sanguinely if we do not sustain attention to the material borders that migrants confront and the role of nations in generating and blocking migrations (Concannon et al. 3). As Dalia Kandiyoti observes, “the age of global flows is also the era of fences and walls” (24). Militarized borders, exclusionary immigration policies, and the racial segregation of diasporic populations coexist with movements of people across borders, creating a “tension between enclosure and translocality” (5-6). This tension places formal pressures on diasporic narratives, where textual strategies must register both mobility and enclosure (43).

Story cycles can powerfully express the transnational tensions between borders and flows. However, to recognize this capacity, we need to expand story-cycle theory, which has been modeled on story cycles depicting local community. The concept of transnarrative form offers a more capacious theorization of the genre’s formal possibilities so that we can analyze the workings of story cycles with transnational ambitions. The term transnarrative emphasizes the story cycle’s powers for narrating the transnational. Set against story-cycle theory, which sees a balance between the individual story and the whole cycle (Ingram 15), transnarrative suggests that these powers do not stem from a harmonious balance but from a
series of tensions, especially the tension between narrative borders that separate stories and the connections that link them.

*Transnarrative* articulates the distinctive reading experience generated by this tension. If “trans-” denotes “across,” “from one place, person, thing, or state to another,” and “beyond” (“Trans-”), *transnarrative* describes the way story cycles generate meaning from one story to another, across and beyond the boundaries of individual stories. The term is informed by transnational studies and transgender studies.8 (I should note that the term *transnarrative*, while informed by transgender studies, is distinct from the term *trans narrative*, sometimes used to refer to transgender narratives.)9 Much work in transgender studies examines states in between gender categories and calls for rethinking this “position which is nowhere” as its own space of possibility (Stone 230). The “trans” in transgender expresses dynamic movements across gender boundaries while recognizing that these crossings do not signify the dissolution of those boundaries (Chare and Willis 284). Scholars in both transnational and transgender studies recognize a tension between borders and crossings. These senses of in-between spaces, dynamic crossings, and tension are at work in transnarrative form. Each story in a story cycle sets the boundaries of its story world while transnarrative relations link stories across these narrative borders.10 These relations are usually implicit; readers participate in constructing them from one story to another.11 The narrative and spatiotemporal gaps between stories spur readers to consider principles of relation that might link the stories. However, these gaps can also frustrate definite connections. Inviting links and frustrating them, transnarrative form embodies the tension between crossings and borders.

In story cycles with transnational scope, transnarrative relations are often indirect or ambiguous. They involve distant and mediated causal relations that provoke a question: to what extent does a story set in one place affect the outcome of a story set elsewhere? As we will see with *We Should Never Meet*, these indirect relations are well suited to trace transnational networks of cause and effect. The social relations linking characters in different stories also tend to be mediated, involving degrees of separation and spanning different social circles. Phan’s story cycle suggests consequential relations among widely dispersed groups of Vietnamese and Americans. Story cycles connected by indirect transnarrative relations can disperse their stories across such wide ranges of characters and settings. *We Should Never Meet* develops this capacity to expand beyond the local communities and settings that unify many regionalist story cycles.

A transnarrative framework highlights formal possibilities in the story cycle with rich potential for narrating transnational relations and the borders that cleave them: a tension of narrative interrelation and separation, an expansive spatiotemporal range, a participatory reading experience of constructing connections across narrative discontinuities, and an emphasis on indirect relations and gaps. *We Should Never Meet* activates this potential by mapping national borders
separating the United States and Vietnam onto the narrative borders separating stories. Meanwhile, plot effects and character relations are implied across these borders. This fragmentary yet linked structure captures the “undecidable” nature of the transnational, which is “neither in nor out of the nation-state” (Pease 5). Just as transnational relations unsettle national coherence and boundedness (Briggs et al. 627), transnarrative relations destabilize the sense of any narrative being complete in itself. They suggest that the social and causal relations portrayed in a story may extend beyond it. Transnarrative form can model the force of national borders and vast distances in its fragmentation of narrative continuity while recognizing that the stories of migrants are not defined entirely by enclosures and separations. Out of the experiences of the most disadvantaged migrants can come “emergent forms of social relation” (Tsing 270). Imagining new forms of social relation and political community is crucial to address the injustices endured by the orphan refugees Phan depicts. *We Should Never Meet* spurs this imaginative work. It confronts us with the fragmenting effects of displacement in the gaps between stories and challenges us to develop new principles of connection across narrative and national borders.

**Interweaving the Split Narratives of Operation Babylift**

*We Should Never Meet* confronts our capacities for envisioning political community with an extraordinary range of people and places entangled in the Vietnam War and an evacuation known as Operation Babylift. Highlighting the story-cycle form’s expansive possibilities, the text jumps from wartime Vietnam to wartime America to Ho Chi Minh City and Orange County’s Little Saigon years later. This structure allows attention to the reverberating impacts of these two events. The need for a form encompassing separate peoples, places, and times comes out of the ruptures and proliferating trajectories generated by the war and Operation Babylift. Years of warfare in Vietnam resulted in mass orphaning and a class of *con lai*, the mixed-race children of American GIs and Vietnamese women. Near the war’s end, such children overwhelmed South Vietnam’s orphanages, and their fates as the North Vietnamese took control were the subject of mass fear (*Operation*). In April 1975, as South Vietnam fell, Operation Babylift, a joint effort of the US government and private orphanages, evacuated over two thousand children and placed them with adoptive families in the United States. Debate raged over whether the evacuees were actually eligible for adoption and why Americans were removing them from Vietnam (Sachs 102-05). The chaotic evacuation severed children from identifying documents that tied them to their pasts (58-63). “On every level,” Dana Sachs observes, “from the original decisions about which children would be airlifted to the protocols for finalizing adoptions, Operation Babylift suffered from acute disorder and a nearly
complete lack of oversight” (190). The impact of Operation Babylift is complex and, for some children, tragic. Placements were haphazard and although many adopting families provided supportive homes, in some cases, the experiences were traumatic, even abusive (212-13). Many who arrived via Operation Babylift struggled with their national, racial, and personal identities. Many did not know their family, parents, birth dates, or names. These are lives ruptured by the devastation of one nation and the unchosen displacement to another. The trajectories created by Operation Babylift are dizzying, and not just for the orphans. Each orphan’s life touched the lives of many others: birth and adoptive parents, orphanage workers, doctors, adoption agency staff. These are the trajectories Phan tracks across her interlinked stories.12 The temporal scope of We Should Never Meet emphasizes the “prolonged effects of the war” (Jungha Kim 61), and the range of settings stresses the transnational scope of these effects.

Marguerite Nguyen and Catherine Fung argue that Southeast Asian American writings intervene through their aesthetic strategies in the discourses framing refugees (2). This is certainly true of We Should Never Meet. Its range and cross-cutting structure are strategies for untangling the web of narratives enclosing the Vietnamese refugee and adoptee in the American imagination. As reminders of a morally difficult war, Vietnamese refugees remain a key site of ideological work (Espiritu 1). Yên Lê Espiritu observes that a narrative of Americans rescuing Vietnamese refugees from communism emerged to recuperate the moral justification for US military interventions in Vietnam and beyond (48, 100, 104). This story allowed Americans “to remake themselves from military aggressors into magnanimous rescuers” (10). With Operation Babylift, the plight of Vietnamese orphans became a highly publicized cause, a way for Americans to “salvage something from the horror of the war” (Briggs 156). The disproportionate interest placed in these 2, 500 child refugees (a fraction of the millions of displaced Vietnamese) suggests their importance in the process of replacing the history of US militarism with the deeds of US humanitarianism. These ideological investments split the narrative of Vietnamese displacement, disconnecting the history of US forces entering Vietnam from the history of Vietnamese refugees entering the United States. The latter story becomes one of helpless Vietnamese offered salvation in America while the former tells of American soldiers losing their innocence in the hell of Vietnam.13

Reinforcing this split was the framing of Cold War Asian adoptees, which was also suffused with rescue narratives. These narratives, Jenny Wills observes, posed the adoption of Asian children as evidence of American benevolence rather than a legacy of Cold War military interventions. As Laura Briggs argues, Cold War transnational adoption policies were themselves interventionist, driven by a central theme of saving Asian children from communism, poverty, and “Asian ‘barbarism’” (152). These narratives helped shape child refugee policies,
emphasizing adoptions and permanent separation from birth families and nations in contrast to earlier policies of supporting children until they could be returned to parents (130). This practice created pressure to suppress racial identities, birth families, and pasts in Asia to fit adoptees into American families.\textsuperscript{14} This split scheme eclipsed the role US interventions played in creating the conditions from which Asian children needed to be “rescued,” an elision that might foster the view that further American intervention in the form of removal is what such children need. In the framing of Operation Babylift, the narratives of Americans saving Vietnamese refugees and Americans saving Asian children intersect to overdetermine a separation of what the United States does to people “over there” from what the United States does for people “over here.”

Phan’s representation is striking for how it spans this separation. The stories interweave the history of US actions in Vietnam with the paths of refugee children in the United States. Interweaving national settings is a prominent impulse across Vietnamese American narrative because the life stories of many Vietnamese refugees were disrupted and dispersed by war. Many narratives try to link past and present, Vietnam and the United States.\textsuperscript{15} What makes Operation Babylift refugees stand out are the gaps in their knowledge of their lives and families. The presence of these gaps is why such subjects are important (and why they lend themselves to transnarrative form, which emphasizes narrative gaps); they expand Vietnamese American narrative beyond the usual genres of personal memoir and family sagas.\textsuperscript{16} The stories of many Operation Babylift children are illegible within these parameters. Reconstructing a continuous personal narrative or family history is out of reach. In taking on this subject, Phan expands the traditional scope of Vietnamese American narrative to grapple with ethical and political relations that cannot be grasped within the purview of an individual life or kinship ties.\textsuperscript{17} Her story cycle makes evident the entanglements of refugee routes with the actions of multiple scales of agents, from individual aid workers to militaries. The political community of the US nation-state, with its investments in containing large swaths of the histories affecting Vietnamese refugees, cannot encompass these webs. Phan’s story cycle outlines a different, transnational shape of community to map these diffuse networks of effects and the claims of justice they generate.

**Networks of Unresolved Responsibility**

The opening story, “Miss Lien,” takes place during the war. It centers on a teenage girl from the Mekong Delta sent by her parents to the city of Can Tho to make desperately needed money. The family’s crop has been destroyed by fighting. After she endures months in the city, her parents insist she stay longer: “The money was too valuable. So Lien stayed. This was her responsibility” (20). In
circumstances left implicit (the story suggests a rape by an American GI or her Vietnamese employer), Lien becomes pregnant. She realizes she cannot tell her parents: “They would only blame her. They would never believe that they were partly responsible” (22). The phrase “partly responsible” expresses the ambiguous relation this story cycle charts: neither direct connection nor disconnection between the actions of one party and their mediated effects on others. Feeling unable to care for the child, Lien leaves the infant on the steps of a Catholic orphanage. In a moment that will prove resonant, the nun who answers the door looks around for the mother and pauses to give her a last chance before taking the child inside. Feeling her responsibility lifted, Lien thinks: “This child was safe. This child would not have to suffer” (23). The story ends there. However, in the next story, transnarrative relations emerge that trouble this closure with ties of partial responsibility that may bind Lien’s story to others.

The next story, “We Should Never Meet,” is set nearly twenty years later in Little Saigon, Orange County, California. Kim, a Vietnamese American teenager, is a high school dropout with few prospects and no family to support her. We learn that Kim is a mixed-race Operation Babylift orphan who suffered sexual abuse in various foster homes. Possible connections begin to form across vast distances, time spans, and what seems a definitive story break. Is Kim the same child left at the orphanage in Vietnam years before? The story continues to suggest resonances but does not resolve the question. When a Vietnamese shopkeeper lets Kim off for stealing, Kim is drawn to her, yearning to see this woman as a substitute for the mother she never knew. Their relationship develops hints of affection; the woman gives Kim a jade bracelet, which echoes a bracelet Lien’s grandmother gives to her. Interpreting the gift as a sign of familial relation, Kim asks the woman for money, which, in another echo, she needs to address an unexpected pregnancy. However, the shopkeeper rejects her. With that, “the woman became a stranger again. Her features were not so similar to Kim’s, her face, body language not so loving.” Kim walks out “half-hoping the woman would call out to her” (50), but she does not. For readers, the moment suggests a path back to the orphanage in Vietnam when a mother had a chance to call out and take back her child. Kim lashes out at what she feels is a second abandonment by sending her boyfriend’s gang to rob the store. Staying behind, she realizes the gang often attacks the merchants they rob. The story ends with Kim trying to reach them: “Not yet, not yet, she thought, still convinced she could undo what was happening” (54). In a reverberation of the end of “Miss Lien,” Kim also commits an irreversible act. However, this ending revises the previous one, in that Kim realizes that she has not fully reckoned with the impacts of her decision.

As this opening pair reveals, the stories of We Should Never Meet form vertiginous narrative structures that suggest networks of effects and responsibilities linking separate times, places, people, and stories. As transnarrative relations, these links are rarely explicit. Readers construct them across pronounced
spatiotemporal and narrative separations. The cross-cutting arrangement of stories exacerbates these gaps while suggesting the extent of the potential links. The first, third, fifth, and seventh stories are set in wartime Vietnam and are sequenced chronologically. They trace the trajectory children take from their beleaguered mothers (“Miss Lien”) to a rural orphanage (“The Delta”) to a Saigon adoption center (“Gates of Saigon”) to their evacuation (“Bound”). This sequence alternates with another sequence set largely in Orange County’s Little Saigon in the 1990s. This latter series follows the troubled paths of the teenage orphans as they grow up (“We Should Never Meet,” “Visitors,” “Emancipation,” and “Motherland”). The story cycle cuts back and forth between these series, evoking them as different pieces in the fragmented life histories of Operation Babylift children. These movements across narrative and national gaps challenge readers to link the present conditions of the orphans to past events while considering how the chains of events that shaped the children’s lives concatenate, producing further effects, such as the impact Kim has on the shopkeeper.

Transnarrative form generates meaning from the relations between individual stories in a larger network. In Phan’s work, these relations are of distanced effect. This story cycle’s form suggests a network of actions and effects stretching across time and space. The third story, “The Delta,” centers on a Catholic nun at a convent in the Mekong Delta overrun by orphans. The story suggests (but again does not confirm) that Phuong may be the same nun who took in Lien’s child. The story reveals the relief that mothers feel in delivering their children to an orphanage as a displacement of responsibility onto others. “The Delta” observes how this burden affects Phuong and those around her, generating a further tier in the network of effects. To devote herself to caring for the orphans, Phuong breaks off a long-standing engagement. “Her decision,” the story notes, “traveled a devastating path” (82), disrupting her fiancé’s life, splitting neighboring families, and dividing a village. Phan traces such devastating paths across her stories. By the end of the story, Phuong transports some of the orphans to an adoption center in Saigon. A Vietnamese employee named Hoa takes them in, another transfer of responsibility. Hoa reappears as the protagonist of another story, “Gates of Saigon,” in which the staff works frantically to secure passage out of the country for the children before Saigon falls. The story portrays the chaotic conditions in which they make evacuation decisions and forge records with incomplete data, choices with permanent consequences for the children. Meanwhile, the fate of Hoa and her family remains unclear. The North Vietnamese government condemned Operation Babylift, and involvement with the operation places employees such as Hoa at risk of being “branded as traitors” (138). As their decisions shape the orphans’ lives, the people who take responsibility for them bear the effects of that responsibility on their own lives. The transnarrative relations connecting the individual stories imply chains of transference linking seemingly separate lives.
Phan registers how actions of agents in one place create distanced effects that shape the situations within which other agents act and affect others still further away.

Phan traces these effects beyond the Vietnamese who were impacted and beyond Vietnam. The story “Bound” concerns Bridget, an American pediatrician whose volunteer stint at the Saigon adoption center becomes three long years away from her husband and young daughter. Feeling that Americans bear an ethical responsibility to these orphans, Bridget stretches herself in the “impossible” effort to “save them all” (191). This commitment devastates her family. After several years of pleading for her to return, her husband files for a separation. The stories also observe the effects on the orphans themselves and those they impact in the United States. For example, “Visitors” focuses on Kim’s boyfriend, Vinh. With few prospects for belonging, Vinh joins a gang of Vietnamese orphans. Feeling that “they’d been denied so much from their new country and government-issued families,” they rob houses and stores “to break even,” believing “they had no other choice” (52). “Visitors” ends with Vinh betraying, robbing, and assaulting an elderly Vietnamese man who had earlier befriended him. The implied connections among the stories invite readers to situate this story’s outcome within the chain of events that disrupted the lives of the orphans and factored into their impacts on others. 18

The “community” that We Should Never Meet elaborates is a transnational network of partial responsibility and mediated effect. It is a community centered on child refugees and encompassing the many people shaping and shaped by the contingent paths they take. The members of this community impact each other’s lives in uneven ways. The links of effect binding them are characteristic of trans-narrative character relations: tangential connections between people in separate social worlds. These links differ from traditional community ties because they do not involve sustained or even direct contacts. They are unexpected, impermanent connections: a chance viewing of a news special on Vietnamese orphans draws Bridget to the adoption center in Saigon; the children pass from one pair of hands to the next according to circumstance; the Vietnamese man attacked by Vinh meets Vinh when he gets lost in Little Saigon. Other connections are indirect. Without ever having met them, Phuong, Hoa, and others bear the impact of decisions made by mothers such as Lien. Likewise, the life of the shopkeeper is indelibly impacted by the figure of Kim’s biological mother. Phan focuses on these forms of glancing and indirect connection. The title We Should Never Meet expresses a sense of collectivity that exceeds direct contact, a “we” whose members are linked in ethically significant ways even if they should never meet.

Communities of Shared Fate across Scales and Nations

The links Phan depicts are not bound in the same ways as those in a community. Their spatiotemporal extent is not clearly delimited. Perhaps what this cycle
maps, then, is not a community in any recognizable sense. However, the fact that *We Should Never Meet* draws on regionalism’s narrative technology for rendering community encourages us to examine the stakes of that term within the global routes of refugees. The connection raises the possibility that the urgency with which this cycle leads us to draw links beyond the contours of recognizable community is the urgency of envisioning new ideas of community that can encompass the ethical and political relations generated by global disruptions, such as the evacuation of South Vietnam. Without some form of collectivity to understand these relations, they might not be recognized at all, thus making political accountability impossible. If regionalist works make clear the “tangible social relations” of local community (Joseph 157), can more distant relations of consequence be made similarly palpable? With the capacity of transnarrative form to render a dispersed character system, this story cycle asks us to imagine an expanded form of community whose stakes are intensified in situations of refugee displacements. I draw on the work of Hsuan L. Hsu in framing these stakes. Hsu argues that scalar distinctions can conceal the interrelations among spaces. This boundary setting can “constrain and atomize political struggles by hiding the agents and trajectories of exploitation” (13). This process diffuses ties of responsibility, a diffusion enabled by the distances and mediations of global relations. Buffeted by diffuse forces, Operation Babylift children raise the question of how to claim justice in networks of effect that seem impossible to map.

Many of the stories address this question. In the final story, “Motherland,” two orphans, Mai and Huan, visit Vietnam hoping to make sense of the events that marked their lives. At the end of the story, Mai comes to terms with the deep anger she has harbored: “I know better. It’s not our parents’ fault. Or anyone else’s here. How could I be angry with them, expect them to do right when there was no such thing? When everything here was wrong?” (243). The ending of “Motherland” carries symbolic weight as the end of the story cycle. However, whatever sense of unified resolution it offers remains in tension with the multiplicity of stories that do not fully merge with Mai’s and Huan’s. It does not close the questions of responsibility opened by the other stories. Kim, for instance, wonders why her adoptive family rejected her when she was only three years old. She concludes that “she must have done something wrong” (48). In “Emancipation,” Vinh calls out Mai’s good fortune in having a stable home and family. Mai pushes back: “You can’t blame me for that.” “That’s no one’s fault, right? Just the luck of the draw who your foster parents are,” Vinh retorts (166). Their argument and the multiplicity of stories in the cycle highlight the diversity of child refugee experiences. Mai is one of the more fortunate ones. She had been “allowed a childhood, unlike her former foster brothers and sisters” (147); with her foster family’s support, she goes on to college and a successful career. As Emily Cheng notes, these relative privileges allow Mai’s story to approach the narrative of a “model orphan,” who reconciles with the violent past
of the war and achieves success (110-11). Mai’s acceptance of the past, then, does not resolve the concerns of orphans such as Kim and Vinh. References to Kim in the final story suggest her more troubled outcomes. Mai notes that Kim struggles as a working parent and does not have the leisure to travel to Vietnam. Significantly, Kim would not want to either. Even as Mai achieves a sense of reconciliation, she recognizes Kim’s very different feelings: “I think she might hate Vietnam more than she hates America” (Phan 225).

Envisioning collectivity matters in the case of Operation Babylift because the questions of responsibility cannot be resolved on an individual scale. The poignancy of Kim’s self-blame suggests that the scale of individual responsibility presents serious problems for refugee children. The rhetoric of transnational adoption tends to individualize and privatize the story of adoption (Eng 103). Meanwhile, “damage-centered” perspectives on refugees localize the presumed “problem” of refugees within the “bodies and minds” of refugees themselves (Espiritu 5; Malkki 443). The individual scale in these discourses can pathologize adoptees and refugees, rooting whatever problems of formation they may have within the realms of the private and familial instead of within the histories of imperialism and militarism that produced mass displacements. We need to restore a collective historical scale of understanding to these experiences of displacement (Eng 137).

Addressing this need, Phan’s stories recognize the importance of individual actions while insisting that the scales of agency involved in Operation Babylift are diffuse. For instance, Lien’s decision to abandon her child, which seems to precipitate effects across the stories, is itself shaped by a web of forces stemming from her parents, the troops that ravage their crops, and the US military intervention that places Vietnamese women in a troubling sexual economy with American GIs. Tracing one chain of effect back to Lien’s parents, “Miss Lien” reveals the difficulty of their decision to send her to the city. They feel they have “no other choice” (15), a formulation many of the stories repeat as they depict individuals caught in circumstances they cannot fully control. The personal costs of Phuong’s and Bridget’s commitments to the orphans stem from the overwhelming burdens they attempt to shoulder. More abandoned babies show up each day; mothers scream at Bridget to take their children.

A moment in the ending of “Miss Lien” encapsulates this feeling of inadequacy and demonstrates how Phan uses formal ambiguities to destabilize questions of individual responsibility. While Lien is waiting for the nun at the orphanage to take her child, the nun pauses and looks around. “What was she doing?” Lien wonders, not understanding that the nun is offering her a last chance to take back her child. “Did they need [her] to say she couldn’t keep this child, that there was no possible way she could ever care for it?” As with most of the story, the moment is focalized through Lien. The next paragraph reveals how overwhelmed she feels by the responsibilities she bears: “It wasn’t fair. So many open mouths and outstretched hands, expecting her to fill them. She couldn’t have another one.
She didn’t ask for this.” The following paragraph, however, is narrated through the nun’s focalization: “One final look out on the road, one last chance” (23). This focalization makes the previous paragraph far more ambiguous, for the thoughts of being overwhelmed by yet another open mouth could also belong to the nun. This convent receives more abandoned children each day. The passage could be the thoughts of either woman, and like many ambiguities in this story cycle, it is irresolvable. To decide the attribution would be potentially to decide which of these figures is more overwhelmed, who should step up to bear responsibility. The ambiguity frustrates these questions of individual attribution to evoke the broader conundrums that render such questions not only irresolvable but comparatively insignificant: the mass of “open mouths and outstretched hands” that dwarf the capacities of each of the individuals pulled into the war illustrates the futility of trying to individualize responsibilities that cannot be individualized. The scale of human need the war produces is simply impossible to meet or adjudicate on the level of individual responsibility.

Transnarrative texts ask readers to attend to divergent scales of narrative relations, from the direct relations within a story to the more distant relations suggested among the stories. Phan deploys this dynamic to map the trans-scale causes and effects of the evacuation of South Vietnam. The relations of partial responsibility linking the stories extend beyond any one scale or narrative. Kim’s story implicates the social worker who placed Kim in abusive foster homes. This is an immediate factor affecting Kim’s life, but one passage alludes to factors lying beyond this story’s focus on Kim’s direct relations: “Kim was classified as an orphan when she arrived in the States as part of Operation Babylift. But that didn’t mean her parents were dead, only that they’d given her up. No identification on her but her name” (36). The reference to giving up children reinforces the potential link to “Miss Lien,” a story that registers the roles of birth parents and militaries in shaping child abandonments. Kim’s missing identification invites a connection to “Gates of Saigon,” in which an adoption agency forges documents during the evacuation. This process obscures the paper trail these children would need to track down their parents’ identities. These relations within and between stories implicate many agents, from individual aid workers to the institutional scale of adoption agencies to the geopolitical scale of Cold War military intervention. The cycle thus weaves nonkinship relations, institutions, and public histories into the stories of the adoptees’ seemingly private suffering, and it challenges readers to synthesize these pieces into a community of consequence whose links resist the scalar containments that atomize political action. This community may be diffuse, but such diffusion only makes it more urgent to develop forms that can make transnational relations perceptible. Perceiving the linked trajectories implicated in transnational displacements is crucial to envisioning alternative political communities that can encompass the many parties involved in Operation Babylift and direct their actions toward addressing its injustices.
The aesthetics of *We Should Never Meet* responds to this urgent need, allowing us to imagine the vast networks generated by refugee displacement as a community “bound,” as the American doctor Bridget is, by distant yet ethically consequential relations. The work contributes an aesthetic form expressing mediated yet powerful connections to current political theory that is grappling with similar questions. Melissa S. Williams proposes a concept that dovetails with the model of social relations Phan’s story cycle develops, “communities of shared fate,” which articulates the idea that in a globalized world the actions of agents in one place impact distant others in unexpected ways (41). As Phan’s story cycle shows, we do not necessarily know the boundaries of our actions’ reverberating consequences. The word “fate” expresses a sense of conditions surpassing intention: “[E]thically significant relationships . . . are not all of conscious choosing. There are forces not of our own making that bind us to one another, like it or not” (Williams 43). These “webs of relationship” with others raise questions of responsibility even when we may not yet have the institutions to arbitrate those questions (44). The concept is a foundation for envisioning political agency and justice within the kinds of noncontiguous relations Phan maps. As Phan’s stories show, the injustices generated by the war and Operation Babylift are impossible to address at the level of the individual. Extending beyond the individual story, transnarrative relations challenge us to imagine the many parties involved in Operation Babylift as a transnational community of shared fate. Williams argues that this sense of community can transform networks of actions and unintended impacts into sites where we “exercise intentional political agency aimed at a common good” (42). Through the different modes of fiction and academic theory, Phan and Williams expand the boundaries of community beyond traditional measures of shared identity, culture, and place. In this model, Williams explains, “what relates individuals to one another is not necessarily a shared identity, a shared sense of membership, . . . it is a system of social interdependence, often characterized by inequalities of power in which individual-level actions generate effects beyond the parties immediately concerned” (41). Phan and Williams present an alternative mapping of community that includes actions, consequences, agents, and affected parties, not necessarily contained or even recognizable within traditional community boundaries. Communities of shared fate cut across borders and scales. Although Williams develops the concept to meet the demands of transnational political relations, communities of shared fate are not exclusive to the transnational; they connect agents on national, subnational, and other scales.

Thus, communities of shared fate and local communities are not mutually exclusive, and the adaptation of the regionalist story cycle to refugee narratives may not be so strange. Several of Phan’s stories focus on the ethnic enclave of Little Saigon, but the local focus in each of these stories hovers against the transnational horizon of the Vietnam War’s community of shared fate, which produced this
enclave. This horizon is made apparent by links to the other stories that range from wartime to the present, Vietnam to the United States. As Susan Koshy notes, the form of the story cycle can place “individual lives and stories against an ever-shifting cosmopolitan horizon of meaning” (“Minority” 595). Coupling local and global scales of community, Phan’s work develops a tension that is often latent in the regionalist story cycle. Scholars of regionalism have shown that its local focus encodes an awareness of globalization (Foote 3). Not just depictions of provincial communities, regionalist texts revealed local sites shaped by the very foreignness the genre is assumed to preclude (13). I suggest that we connect the tension of local and global in regionalist fictions to the parallel tension of local and translocal that Dalia Kandiyoti perceives in diasporic fictions (39). In stretching the story cycle’s spatiotemporal scope, We Should Never Meet does not break with regionalism but rather foregrounds the connections to broader communities already contained within the genre.

This relation to regionalism also highlights a third scale of community: the imagined community of the nation. Regionalism, Stephanie Foote observes, emerged as a literary strategy for managing difference in a period of anxiety about immigration (3-14). It expressed an ideal that regional and cultural difference could be incorporated into a unified nation (6-9). However, to do so, the genre often had to suppress the contradictions among local, national, and transnational communities. For diasporic communities that are racialized as foreign, the regional can be a productive scale because its unsettled place within the nation can reveal these suppressed contradictions, highlighting the problems of “abjection and dis-unity” in the nation (Sohn 166).

Phan’s story cycle emphasizes the tensions among these three scales of community. Few minority subjects are caught more fully within the contradictions of local, national, and transnational communities than the displaced orphans she depicts. In “Visitors,” Vinh expresses his alienation from the United States: “It’s like I’m visiting, and I’ve overstayed my welcome” (97). Uprooted from his country, failed by the state, and bounced among foster homes, Vinh presents serious problems for national incorporation. Phan paints a moving portrait of an orphan who transforms his feelings of rejection into a defiant stance against assimilation. Vinh condemns “selling out to the Americans” and pities the orphans who successfully integrate into American families and society. The less fortunate orphans may have suffered in their foster homes, but at least “[t]hey knew where the Americans” (103). In the wartime stories, caretakers wrestle with this question: what place will the orphans have in the United States? In “Gates of Saigon,” Hoa’s landlady criticizes her for sending children to the United States. “What if they’re not accepted?” she asks. “Those Americans hate us now” (131). She also broaches the issue of racial difference: “No one wants to raise a baby who isn’t their own, especially if it’s not even their own race” (132). These concerns play out in the
orphans’ lives. We learn that Kim’s adoptive parents returned her because they had not realized “how difficult it would be to raise a foreign child” (151).

The US national horizon of identification does not square with the orphans’ place in the Vietnam War’s violently dislocated community of shared fate. As Vinh bluntly says of Americans: “They destroyed our country, then they left. To ease their guilty conscience, they took some of us in” (96). Refugees, Timothy K. August observes, are expected to disappear “from plain sight when incorporated into the national body,” a process that helps the nation leave behind the violent histories that produced the refugee condition. However, the “temporality of the refugee condition” is not so easily contained; “lingering contradictions” continue to shape refugee lives (68). If regionalism had difficulties suppressing contradictions while fitting marginal subjects into the national community, the contradictions Vinh identifies are even more difficult to reconcile. For what must be suppressed is the sense of a community of shared fate utterly shaped by the actions of the United States. Phan’s story cycle works against that suppression by mapping the displaced Vietnamese not just as a community that does not fit within the United States but also within a transnational sense of community that encompasses the war’s web of actions, effects, and responsibilities. This community of shared fate does not allow the racial and national difference entering the United States to be disconnected from America’s actions in Southeast Asia. To borrow Lisa Lowe’s formulation, the mixed-race orphans of Operation Babylift are a “material legacy of the repressed history of U.S. imperialism in Asia” (16). “These Amerasians are children of the U.S. military,” Bridget explains, “they’re products of this war” (Phan 194). Offspring of an American war, their liminal racial and national identities are markers of history. When acknowledged, these refugees dredge up unresolved feelings about one of America’s most difficult wars, and they unsettle paradigms of national identity that suppress histories of US imperialism and its impact on immigration. Phan situates Operation Babylift orphans within a transnarrative structure that interlinks the past and present of the United States and Vietnam, spans the split narratives of the adoptee or refugee saved by the United States, and expands the purview of Vietnamese American narrative to trace relations of consequence that cannot be encompassed within the scope of a single life or family history. We Should Never Meet advances its scope to historicize the problem of placing this group of subjects within America as inextricable from the problem of the actions and responsibilities the nation would rather forget.19 It raises two related questions: Have Americans developed a sense of citizenship commensurate to the unbound communities of shared fate in which our actions have already involved us? Is our sense of national community commensurate to those already here whose fates have been shaped by our involvements elsewhere?
Narrating the Transnational into Being

Communities of shared fate, Williams insists, are not just there to be seen (42). The relations that constitute them are often distant and difficult to perceive. Before they can be acted on, the sense of these networks of effect as communities whose members bear ethical and political responsibilities to each other needs to be imagined. For literary scholars, Williams makes a striking suggestion: what we need are “storytellers” who bring communities of shared fate to life. “Through their words and their actions, they attempt to persuade other parties to these relationships that the connections between them are real and that their actions have real consequences for others” (43). Williams makes a strong case for why the kind of work done in We Should Never Meet matters. If transnational communities of shared fate must be narrated into being, Phan’s cycle offers a transnarrative form for doing so.

Through its participatory reading experience, We Should Never Meet invites us to construct the narrative relations that bring communities of shared fate to life. However, in doing so we confront the challenge of attending to border crossings without ignoring the force of borders. The formal means by which this transnarrative text invites participation, the gaps between stories that we are tempted to fill, recognizes this challenge. These gaps call us to draw connections between stories while simultaneously obstructing that impulse. For example, Phan avoids specifying the gender of the child abandoned in the first story. The narrator refers to the child with the gender-neutral “it” (18, 21, 22). This choice makes any identification between this child and the teenage Kim in the second story even more difficult to establish despite the resonances between the stories. Kim is not the only character whose story invites links to the first story. The final story, “Motherland,” follows Huan, another mixed-race Operation Babylift orphan, as he returns to Vietnam to reconstruct his past. This return to Vietnam holds out the promise of the story cycle circling back to resolve its unresolved questions and tie together its stories. Tantalizing details emerge. Huan traces his path back to the Saigon adoption center where Hoa and Bridget worked and to the convent in the Mekong Delta where Sister Phuong still lives. There, he finds an intake record listing his name, weight, and age, “the first evidence of his existence” (237-38). His weight, six pounds, and age, a few days old, resemble the details of Lien’s child, but even at this level of detail Phan introduces ambiguities. The weight of Lien’s child is only estimated in the first story, around “six, seven pounds” (17). The trail ends at the convent because there is no record of his birth parents. Even this, the most investigated of the life stories, cannot be resolved. The gaps in these lives and in the story cycle’s form remain.

Such invited but never quite realized connections span the cycle. This move is a formal recognition of the interconnected yet fragmented world of the orphan refugees. It withholds from readers the comfort of believing that life stories
disjointed by warfare can be smoothly reconstructed. It confronts readers with the difficult task of imagining political communities that address rather than smooth over such ruptures. The refusal of definitive narrative links on the scale of an individual life suggests that we cannot limit our mapping of consequential affiliations to any one scale. To link Kim and others to the child in the first story we must move through the broader scales of adoption agencies, refugee policies, and militaries. We can only complete the links metonymically, with relations of individual responsibility mediated through the institutional, national, and geopolitical scales of connection in the contemporary world. Williams admits that telling stories to fill in the “indeterminacy of political space” in a globalized era presents difficulties (52). However, in the face of networks of consequence that state institutions cannot adjudicate and nation-based models cannot comprehend, writers and scholars refuse to accept that such difficulties permit us to abdicate the responsibilities that bind us together. Transnational responsibilities call for a narrative form that can give them shape. With We Should Never Meet, we see a transnarrative Asian American literature developing to narrate elusive communities of shared fate into being.

Notes

I am grateful to Hsuan L. Hsu, Angela Naimou, David Palumbo-Liu, Stephen Hong Sohn, and Alex Woloch for their helpful feedback and conversations as I developed this essay.

1. For an influential example of the argument connecting the novel and the nation, see Benedict Anderson. My investigation is inspired by work in British and postcolonial literary studies on narrative form and the transnational. Stephen Clingman examines the syntax of postcolonial novels and Rebecca L. Walkowitz explores how modernist techniques develop cosmopolitan thought. I break from such scholars by considering how narrating the transnational may require forms beyond the novel. Peter Hitchcock suggests an interesting possibility in novelistic series. I complement this focus on narrative extensive-ness by exploring the productivity of narrative gaps.

2. For a few important texts on transnationalism in Asian American studies, see Sau-ling C. Wong, Susan Koshy (“Fiction”), and Kandice Chuh.

3. The American story cycle emerged in regionalist texts such as Sarah Orne Jewett’s The Country of the Pointed Firs (1896) and Sherwood Anderson’s Winesburg, Ohio (1919).

4. Stephanie Foote, Hsuan L. Hsu, Philip Joseph, and Jason Arthur are among those who have contributed to this transnational turn in studies of regionalism.

5. See J. Gerald Kennedy and Rocío G. Davis.
6. Beyond Jhumpa Lahiri’s and Aimee Phan’s work, other important examples include Daniyal Mueenuddin’s *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* (2009) and Junot Díaz’s two story cycles, *Drown* (1996) and *This Is How You Lose Her* (2012).

7. The disintegration of a central protagonist also makes *We Should Never Meet* stand out from many story cycles with transnational ambitions, many of which retain central protagonists as unifying principles.

8. I follow transgender studies scholars Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore, who urge us not to “contain the relationship of ‘trans-’ conceptual operations to ‘-gender’ statuses” alone; they suggest exploring the critical work these operations make possible across different suffixes, including “–national” (11).

9. There is a rich body of scholarship on transgender and transsexual narratives (see Jay Prosser, Kate Drabinski, and Pamela L. Caughie). Such narratives are sometimes abbreviated with the term *trans narratives*. Let me clarify the distinction between *trans narratives* and the term *transnarrative*. *Trans narratives* refers to narratives about transgender experiences and identities. In this term, “trans” modifies the implied suffixes “gender” or “sexual.” In the term *transnarrative*, “trans” modifies “narrative.” *Transnarrative* describes a form in which narratives stand in trans-relation to each other, a structure emphasizing relations across bounded narratives. There is potential overlap between these terms as transnarrative form may be productive for transgender stories. Jay Prosser suggests that postmodern transsexual narratives rely on a discontinuous collage form, which could be read in transnarrative terms (174-75).

10. By narrative borders I mean the distinctions between the delimited diegetic world concerned in a story and the broader fictional universe that its world-making opens up. For more on this distinction, see Remigius Bunia.

11. On the participatory reading experience offered by story cycles, see Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris (18).

12. In addition to Operation Babylift children, the stories also focus on the characters Mai and Vinh, who came to the United States as boat refugees.


15. Important examples include Le Ly Hayslip’s *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (1989), Nguyên Quí Đúc’s *Where the Ashes Are: The Odyssey of a Vietnamese Family* (1994), Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge* (1997), and Lê thi diem thúy’s *the gangster we are all looking for* (2003).

16. Both Michele Janette and Isabelle Thuy Pelaud survey examples of the family saga in Vietnamese American literature, and they stress the dominance of
personal memoir (Janette xix; Pelaud 27). Janette suggests that works that go farther afield in genre, style, and subject matter have become more prominent since the 1990s (xxii). I situate Phan’s work as part of these movements beyond memoir.

17. Linh Dinh’s *Love Like Hate* (2010) is another interesting case of expanding beyond the family saga. It explores how unexpected relationships develop in wartime and postwar Vietnam. Dinh focuses on interpersonal relations and sexual encounters and less on the multiscaled networks of effect that Phan traces.

18. Viet Thanh Nguyen observes that the “violence that had supposedly ended erupted once more in the refugee community, caused by those traumatized by the war or by those who had no other opportunities because of the war” (146).

19. On the “historical revisionism” pervading US discourses about the Vietnam War, see Monique Thuy-Dung Truong (28) and Nhi T. Lieu.

20. As the story is focalized through Lien, the word “it” functions as a translation of the Vietnamese word “nó,” the gender-neutral pronoun that would be used to refer to an infant. I thank Erin Khuê Ninh for this observation. I suggest that the choice has an additional effect of removing identity information.

21. I am grateful to Jenny Wills for discussing this point with me.

**Works Cited**


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