

Queer Time, Queer Memory:

An Analysis of Queer Temporality and Nonlinear Narrative in Monique Truong's *The Book of*

Salt and Ocean and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

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Abstract

Vietnamese-American literature has often been defined by the refugee narrative. This thesis seeks to explore Vietnamese-American literature beyond said narrative while keeping this narrative in mind, it will seek to examine beyond this narrative through an exploration of nonlinear narrative and queer temporality. In Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt* and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, the queer protagonists Binh and Little Dog often tell their narratives using fragments, splintered memories and symbols interweaving into their present. This thesis asks, "How are these stories expressed in nonlinear narrative? What defines and makes up a nonlinear narrative? How does queerness disrupt time within these novels?" I comparatively read how Binh and Little Dog respectively express (or at times, repress) their queerness through their nonlinear narratives. This comparative reading is closely supported with exploration into the theoretical fields of narratology and queer temporality. After exploring both theoretical fields, the project seeks to interweave these frameworks with close readings of the novels. Specifically, this thesis explores the queer expressions of the protagonists as well as the interactions of the protagonists with secondary characters, especially familial ones. This thesis also seeks to hold the multiplicity of recognizing that these novels must be viewed through a historical, post-colonial, and racial lens.

Keywords: Monique Truong, Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, *The Book of Salt*, nonlinear narrative, queerness, temporality

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To begin, I've always been a reader. I often read whatever I could get my grubby hands on as a kid in a busy immigrant household who did not have parents who could entertain them. Yet, I was often limited to reading about either privileged or white protagonists who went through fantastical adventures. That's not to say these protagonists were all so bad – but it was more of the fact that I couldn't relate to them in their entirety. Admittedly, there were characteristics I shared with these characters, but still these stories felt more like fantasies I immersed myself in rather than stories I could see *myself* within. As I went through university at Berkeley, I continued to pursue my love and passion for literature. Yet, a lot of my curriculum focused on British and English literature and I deeply desired to read more different kinds of literature in class, specifically Vietnamese literature too (which connected me right back to home). This led me to add Comparative Literature as another major. Through CompLit, I fulfilled this desire and in Professor Britto's class my sophomore year, I was exposed to Monique Truong's wonderful debut novel, the *Book of Salt*. This novel was one of the first instances of seeing a queer Vietnamese character in a class context, and as a fellow queer Vietnamese person, I felt intrinsically drawn to Binh. Then, in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* I met Little Dog too, and this project sprang forth from them, to explore these queer Vietnamese protagonists and the difficult temporalities they live within, much like my own temporality I exist within.

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Introduction

“To view Vietnamese American texts only as refugee narratives restricts the full recognition of Vietnamese American experiences and identities ... Viewing Vietnamese American literature in relation to the notion of hybridity, despite my own political desire to uphold Vietnamese American texts as modes of resistance, facilitates paying close attention in the second part to issues and themes raised within the texts themselves, regardless of the positive or negative images they may convey.” (Isabelle Thuy Pelaud 59-60)

When one thinks of Vietnamese-American literature, their first few thoughts may be of its association with the refugee narrative. Often, this refugee narrative told by popular culture and media is full of tearful protagonists who are family-torn and poverty-stricken, devastated by the Vietnam War and escaping by whatever means to get to America to build a new life. That's not to say that this story isn't true — aspects of it are certainly true for many. Yet this refugee narrative cannot be the sole defining characteristic of Vietnamese-American literature. In Isabelle Thuy Pelaud's *This is All I Choose to Tell: Hybridity and History in Vietnamese American Literature*, she argues that reading Vietnamese American literary texts through the Vietnamese War solely can make for limiting representations (Pelaud 75). Therefore, we must think of Vietnamese-American literature encompassing not just the limited “refugee narrative” but *more*.

It's crucial to view Vietnamese-American literature with Pelaud's definition in mind – we must view works from Vietnamese-American texts as not just memories from and about the war but to hold them “outside of the framework of war too” (Pelaud). Alongside Pelaud's viewing of Vietnamese-American literature beyond the refugee narrative, I seek to explore *more* from the Vietnamese-American literature I read. Freed from the limiting perspective of these works as only refugee narratives, what else did they hold within them?

In reading these Vietnamese American novels *The Book of Salt* by Monique Truong (2003) and *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong (2019), I notice how the queer protagonists of these novels tell their stories – often fragmented, chronologically splintered between their present, a past of deeply difficult memories, and a future of terrifying uncertainties. The queerness of these characters themselves is represented through this nonlinear structure. I explore how queerness disrupts what we consider to be linear time. Queerness would seem to exist within the present moment of its recognition, yet also within the past and future. Therefore, I will first examine both the formulation of the nonlinear narrative and queer temporality itself before combining these theories into my interpretations of my selected texts.

To fully understand how these stories function as “nonlinear” narratives, I must first understand how a narrative and then perhaps “linear”/ “non-linear” narrative functions. Therefore, my first section of this thesis will be to introduce the field of narratology. Mieke Bal, author of *Narratology, Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* writes, “Narratology is the theory of narratives, narrative texts, images, spectacles, events; cultural artifacts that ‘tell a story’” (Bal 3). Similarly, Gerald Prince writes in *Narrative Analysis and Narratology* that “Narratology studies the form and functioning of narrative and tries to account for narrative competence. More specifically, it examines what all narratives have in common – narratively speaking – and what enables them to be narratively different.” (182). Drawing upon Bal and Prince’s respective critical definitions, I describe the characteristics of a narrative– and therefore a nonlinear narrative– and then apply these concepts to my selected texts. How do these novels and their fragmented structure form a nonlinear narrative? For example, Bal defines and lists these terms that make up a narrative to explain how these terms within a text itself make up a narrative text. Furthermore, she emphasizes how an author can play with, adjust, or change a narrative through

so many different methods. I then examine how my primary texts are “nonlinear” narrative-wise through Bal’s definition of a *story* (which is synonymous with my usage of narrative), “a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors”, and of a *fabula*, which is “a fabula that is presented in a certain manner” (Bal 5). Furthermore, I extend these definitions toward supporting characters, who often have a critical role in the nonlinear expression of these narratives.

Afterwards, I turn to the theoretical field of queer temporality to support my interpretation of my novels – that these nonlinear narratives highlight the queer temporal space our protagonists exist within. I seek to reckon with these questions: How do queer time and space differ from conventional conceptions of (perhaps) heterosexual time and space? How do these texts resonate with the notion of “queer time and space”? Jack Halberstam’s *In A Queer Time & Place*, defines queer time as “a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance” as well as queer space which “refers to the place-making practices within postmodernism in which queer people engage and it also describes the new understandings of space enabled by the production of queer counterpublics” (Halberstam 6). After defining these concepts of queer time and space, I will apply these concepts to my protagonists within my primary texts, *Little Dog* and *Binh*. With these texts in mind, I examine how the protagonists exist in “a queer time and space” and how they move through and with it. In *The Book of Salt* and *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, the characters must reconcile with themselves within and outside of these temporal frames. However, it must also be noted that the characters do not exist within the most idyllic temporal frames either. Both protagonists come from very complicated upbringings of non-nuclear families with very different power dynamics.

The Book of Salt's protagonist Binh has both father and mother present yet separated physically within the same household, while *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*' protagonist Little Dog has a more matriarchal structure within his family of living with his mother and grandmother. These relationships must be examined in influencing and creating the queer temporality these characters exist within.

Therefore, my closing section will intertwine close readings and these critical theories to demonstrate my interpretation that queer temporality and nonlinear narrative are closely interwoven and are represented through each other in these novels. This thesis— alongside its main exploration into narratology and queer temporality— seeks to hold the duality of recognizing that these novels must be viewed through the lens of the war but cannot be limited to that framework, and will be viewed too through a historical, post-colonial, and racial lens. I would also like to note that despite the intention to emphasize queerness with Vietnamese refugee literature, it is limited in only viewing these specific, semi-fictional, representations of queer Vietnamese men/ AMABs (assigned male(s) at birth) through these specific time periods of the 1920s-30s and the 1980s-90s. This thesis cannot fully encompass all of the very real and fictional (queer) Vietnamese refugee experiences and I can only hope this work can be expanded upon one day, whether by myself or others.