

‘I Was Certain I Saw My Future in Him’: Coming into Intergenerational Empathy and Escape in lê thi diem thuy’s *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*

Asha Jeffers ^{1*}

Published: September 12, 2022

ABSTRACT

The 2003 novel by lê thi diem thuy, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, explores its unnamed narrator’s coming of age particularly through an exploration of her relationship with her father, both in terms of their actual interactions as well as her understanding of herself through her understanding of him, including the ways that she sees herself being or becoming him, both psychologically and physically. The primary means by which the narrator comes to understand herself and the world is through an imaginative empathy with those around her, most prominently her refugee father, which is depicted as a deeply embodied experience. Yet her empathy is also a burden that, while shaping her subjectivity, constrains her sense of self. Thus, the novel raises a question: how is it possible for the children of immigrants to form their own identities in the shadow of their parents’ suffering and sacrifice? This article argues that the novel stresses the necessity of working to understand one’s immigrant parents as well as the simultaneous potential necessity to distance oneself from them. In other words, the novel explores the generative possibilities of bodily distance as a means of achieving psychic closeness.

Keywords: gender, migration, refugee, empathy, intergenerational

INTRODUCTION

The 2003 debut novel of lê thi diem thuy, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, explores its unnamed narrator’s coming of age particularly through an exploration of her relationship with her father, both in terms of their actual interactions as well as her understanding of herself through her understanding of him, including the ways that she sees herself being or becoming him, both psychologically and physically. While the novel contains many of the common elements of coming-of-age narratives, including depictions of schooling, sexual awakening, and coming to understand the world through the loss of childhood innocence and ignorance, it works through these common themes in a very uncommon fashion. The primary means by which the narrator comes to understand herself and the world is through an imaginative empathy with those around her, most prominently her refugee father, which is depicted as a deeply embodied experience. Yet her empathy is also a burden that, while shaping her subjectivity, constrains her sense of self. Thus, the novel raises a question that arises in numerous one-and-a-half and second-generation texts: how is it possible for the children of immigrants to form their own identities in the shadow of their parents’ suffering and sacrifice? While this question is ubiquitous in texts of its kind, lê’s approach to addressing it is unusual in that novel stresses the necessity of working to understand one’s immigrant parents as well as the simultaneous potential necessity to distance oneself from them. The novel explores how the act of recuperating complex and painful familial dynamics does not always take the form of family reunion. In other words, the novel explores the generative possibilities of bodily distance as a means of achieving psychic closeness.

IMAGINATIVE EMPATHY

By imaginative empathy, I mean the ways in which one can bring about the feeling of empathy through the exercise of imagining oneself as or in the place of the other in a creative way that extrapolates beyond just what one observes and that is possible without direct interaction. The concept of empathy is complex and contested,

¹ Dalhousie University, CANADA

*Corresponding Author: asha.jeffers@dal.ca

having been explored across the sciences, social sciences, and humanities (see Engelen and Röttger-Rössler, 2012) for an overview of many of the key questions the concept raises). Drawing upon interdisciplinary research, Schmetkamp and Vendrell Ferran define empathy as ‘the apprehension and understanding of others’ mental states such as emotions, beliefs, and desires’ (2020: 743). This definition highlights that empathy is active and applicable to not just feelings. In a psychological context, it can be broken down into ‘three major neuroanatomically based subprocesses’:

- (a) an *emotional simulation* process that mirrors the emotional elements of the other’s bodily experience with brain activation centering in the limbic system and elsewhere (Decety & Lamm, 2009); (b) a *conceptual, perspective-taking* process, localized in parts of prefrontal and temporal cortex (Shamay-Tsoory, 2009); (c) an *emotion-regulation* process used to soothe personal distress at the other’s pain or discomfort, making it possible to mobilize compassion and helping behavior for the other (Elliot *et al.*, 2011: 43).

This formulation is useful both because it recognises empathy as an embodied set of processes and because it allows me to differentiate between empathy as emotion and imaginative empathy as narrative practice engaged in by both characters and novel; in the context of the novel, the characters experience the emotion of empathy as defined above and project themselves into the minds and experiences of others, while the novel itself mirrors these acts of imaginative empathy as a function of the narrative. This creates a layering effect that highlights the role of imagination for the characters and readers. Imagination is generally considered a part of empathy, although the precise nature of its role is an area of debate (Schmetkamp and Ferran, 2020: 746); empathy’s emergence out of the German word *Einfühlung*, meaning ‘feeling into,’ indicates the way that empathy functions as an ‘imaginative projection’ as well as ‘a kind of voyage’ (Veprinska, 2020: 2). The imaginative empathy that this article is concerned with retains this idea of journeying into the other, but expands both who or what may be included in the other and the value of such a voyage even if it leads to a greater distance from its object.

Much discussion of empathy in literature understandably focuses on the ability or inability of literature to produce empathy in readers and the value or danger of this ability (see Whitehead (2017), Hammond and Kim (2014)). Suzanne Keen (2007: 4), for example, posits that ‘fictional worlds provide safe zones for readers’ feeling empathy without experiencing a resultant demand on real-world action. This freedom from obligation paradoxically opens up the channels for both empathy and related moral affects such as sympathy, outrage, pity, righteous indignation, and (not to be underestimated) shared joy and satisfaction’. Part of what is interesting about lê’s novel is that it actively depicts empathy as a complex emotion experienced by the characters, especially the narrator and her father. This empathy is directed not only toward other people they encounter but toward non-living beings and towards people they experience through media. In other words, my discussion of *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* is primarily concerned with empathy *within* the novel and how that positions the reader as a witness to the characters’ empathy at the same time as it puts them in the position to feel empathy themselves. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper, it might be interesting to consider whether the representation of empathy strengthens or weakens the freedom from obligation that Keen describes.

Critical writing on lê’s novel is diverse and often interdisciplinary; see, for example, sociologist Yen Le Espiritu’s discussion of it in *Body Counts* (2014) and Jutta Gsoels-Lorensen’s article (2008) focused on the role of the photographic in the novel. Literary analysis of the novel has largely been concerned with the ways in which it represents and navigates the geopolitical space inhabited by Vietnamese refugees in the United States whose dislocation to the US is the result of imperialist war by the very nation that they are finding their place in (see Liu (2018), Kase (2015)). As seen in his article, Brian G. Chen is concerned with embodiment in this novel, though his focus is on the individual subject’s walking and wandering (2017: 63) while my own focus is more relational. Isabelle Thuy Pelaud takes an intersectional approach to the novel and the circumstances of its publication, stating that her article ‘brings forth the notion that Vietnamese American identities and imaginaries are multilayered, complex, and diverse and that Vietnamese American women writers of the 1.5 generation in particular are exceptionally burdened by being refugees, people of color, and female’ (2015: 96–97). She highlights the ways that the novel has been seen as semi-autobiographical even though lê has tried to resist the overdetermination that can come from such a reading, usefully engaging with lê’s own commentary on the reception of her work within and outside of the Vietnamese American community. My reading of the novel will not retread this ground but will draw from Pelaud’s analysis and insights into the tension between the communal and the individual when representing refugee communities.

MIGRATION, IMAGINATION, FREEDOM

The Gangster We Are All Looking For has a poetic and nonlinear narrative, structured almost but not completely like a series of short stories; it follows the growth of an unnamed girl narrator, who arrives in the United States as

a small child with her father and ‘uncles’ and is eventually joined by her mother. The novel begins with place, drawing attention to the narrator’s experience of the physical world. However, rather than this description of place suggesting a groundedness, it is used to emphasise movement. The narrator begins by saying, ‘Linda Vista, with its rows of yellow houses, is where we eventually washed ashore’ (3), at first giving the impression that this neighbourhood was their point of arrival in the United States. The next sentence, however, reveals this impression to be false: ‘Before Linda Vista, we lived in the Green Apartment on Thirteenth and Adams, in Normal Heights. Before the Green Apartment, we lived in the Red Apartment on Forty-ninth and Orange, in East San Diego’ (3). Immediately, the novel interrogates what it means to arrive and, by using the phrase ‘washed ashore,’ questions what arrival looks like. What does it mean to wash ashore years after literally arriving? The narrator, her father, and the uncles did not even arrive by boat but rather by plane, so the idea of washing ashore is metaphorical even as it is grounded in physical experience; just as a person can still feel the water rocking beneath herself after getting off a boat, the characters remained at sea long after leaving the boat behind. From the beginning, this novel identifies migration as an ongoing experience rather than an action with a defined beginning and ending. Crucially, this is not an experience of fragmentation but of motion; the characters, while unsteady, are still at least metaphorically in the same boat.

The defamiliarisation of space and distance permeates the novel. The use of a child narrator makes this device plausible, but also suggests that confusion around these dimensions is a natural result of migration. The narrator wants to go to the beach because she believes her mother is there, but her father tells her no: “‘You told me she was at the beach,” I said. “Not the beach here. The beach in Vietnam,” Ba said. What was the difference?’ (13). Without a developed understanding of spatiality or geography, migration is experienced by impression rather than knowledge, and distance is an abstraction. To cope with the disorientation that results from her experience of migration and its many aftereffects, the narrator relies heavily on her imagination. In this way, the novel makes clear the connection between her embodied displacement and her use of imagination as a means of coping with it.

The concept of imagination is as ubiquitous as it is difficult to define; after all, ‘the history of imagination is the history not simply of a word, but of a category of mental activity whose definition and interpretation has varied very greatly from age to age and from author to author’ (Murray, 2005: xiii). Nevertheless, imagination as represented in the novel is in keeping with the Romantic idea of it as ‘no longer simply a reproductive faculty which forms images from pre-existing phenomena, but a productive and creative power which autonomously frames and constructs its own image of reality’ (Murray, 2005: viii). Throughout the novel, the protagonist’s imagination is emphasised, serving as the primary means by which she withstands hardship and develops a sense of self in the face of the often-alienating process of racialisation.

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator is six years old. At every point in the text, the narrative voice reflects her age, so that her level of understanding the world around her is always expressed. The non-linear narrative forces the reader to adjust to multiple ways of seeing throughout the novel. Imagination is not only central to the narrator’s child perspective but also to the retrospective voice, the voice that draws attention to the adult woman who makes a few appearances in the text. When describing their first night in America, the narrator imagines the conversation their sponsors have outside their door, re-creating an exchange she could not have understood at the time because she did not know English. Understanding her past through narrative requires this kind of imaginative reconstruction. When she imagines Mel, the man who inherited the position of their sponsor after his father’s death, telling his mother, ‘I feel like I’ve inherited a boatload of people. I mean, I’ve been living here alone and now I’ve got five men I’ve never met before, and what about that little girl?’ (6), her imagining seems a realistic reproduction of what a man in Mel’s position might think, but it also is inflected by her own approach to language, as can be seen by the use of the term ‘boatload,’ which is more in keeping with her preference for sea-related figurative language than Mel’s way of speaking. While in this moment she is engaged in an act of imaginative empathy – she is literally imagining the experience of their arrival from the perspective of Mel – she is mobilising that empathy to better understand her life, not that of her brief benefactor.

The narrator’s imaginative approach to her life is a direct result of her lack of control over what takes place around her, as well as her understanding that this lack of control extends to those she loves. First literally and then figuratively buffeted around by the ocean, she has the limited agency that all children have in the world of adults; this lack is compounded by her position as a refugee, as a racialised girl with damaged parents living in poverty or close to it. Her isolation and her lack of freedom are explored symbolically through her relationship with a butterfly encased in glass found in Mel’s office. Mel is an important but distant figure, whose role of benefactor does not fit him or the narrator, Ba, and the uncles comfortably. Yet this relationship has defined terms; the narrator muses, ‘If it was true that this man Mel could keep us from floating back there – to these salt-filled nights – what could we do but thank him. And then thank him again’ (8). There is no question here; the clause is completed by a period, not a question mark. All they can do is thank, repeatedly. The compulsion to be thankful is the defining feature of the relationship.

Mel's paperweight is the externalisation of the narrator and her father's lack of freedom. The glass encases a butterfly, and the narrator finds the artifact immediately troubling. Her child's mind is confused by how such a thing could come to exist: 'Though I turned the glass disk around and around, I could not find the place where the butterfly had flown in or where it could push its way out again' (25). She goes to her father with her concern for the butterfly, which she believes she can hear rustling in the disk (25). She tells Ba, 'I found a butterfly that has a problem'; she believes that it is alive but trapped, and that it wants to get out (25–26). In this way, she imaginatively feels with a body that can no longer feel. When he asks her how she knows, she says, 'Because it said this to me: "Shuh-shuh/shuh-shuh"' (26). Her father refuses either to tell her she is wrong or to offer to help the butterfly, instead choosing to pretend to knock the butterfly's sound out of his head so that he can sleep (26). This reaction is telling. Their kinship with the trapped butterfly is apparent, but for Ba, there is no room for empathy with it. This lack of empathy is reinforced when the narrator takes her concern to the uncles. They tell her that 'that butterfly got itself into a lot of trouble flying into a disk' and that there is nothing they can do about it (27). The narrator demands they empathise, asking, 'But doesn't it sound terrible?' (27). They resist, stating, accurately, that the butterfly must be dead. But when the girl insists that she can hear it rustle its wings, they tell her, 'Listen to me, little girl, no butterfly could stay alive inside a glass disk. Even if its body was alive, I'm sure that butterfly's soul has long since flown away' (27). All of the uncles agree that the butterfly's soul must have departed even if its body remains. Here, the uncles give her a lesson that defines the nature of their American life – that it is possible to continue to live only in body, especially when one is confined. They explicitly connect the butterfly's plight to their own. When the girl argues, 'If there's no soul, how can the butterfly cry for help?', the uncles answer, 'But what does crying mean in this country? Your Ba cries in the garden every night and nothing comes of it' (27). Whether or not the girl's concern for the butterfly is consciously a substitute for concern for her father, who she knows cries at night but whom she is powerless to help, the butterfly paperweight is the first symbolic site of the narrative's preoccupation with how the feeling of being trapped shapes subject formation and how escaping it is necessary to come of age with any degree of hope. At the same time, this escape is characterised as an unavoidably violent and destructive process, despite or because of its necessity.

When the narrator tries to free the butterfly, the paperweight's metaphorical significance is made even more explicit, as her actions cause herself, her father, and the uncles to be expelled from Mel's home, suggesting the incompatibility of her longing for freedom with the terms of their American life as refugees. Their banishment is stated before the incident that precipitates it is described, creating a cause-and-effect relationship in order to reveal their expulsion's unreasonable nature through the telling of the story. Her father's reaction to the incident is also revealed beforehand: 'Ba said it wasn't my fault, wasn't anybody's fault' (31). Her father's response – his unwillingness to blame his daughter for her desire for freedom and his inability to blame Mel for his grasping for the first excuse to kick them out – reflects the fatalism that the novel suggests is a result of both wartime experiences and the experience of migration. Her father's awareness of his lack of control makes him vacillate wildly between calm acceptance and enraged lashing out so that his behaviour throughout the text is difficult to anticipate for both the reader and the narrator, seeming as it is untied to the severity of any infraction.

Indeed, her father is harshest when the narrator's only mistake is seeing him:

One night when my father was sitting on the couch looking sad and broken, he turned and realized there was someone standing where he had thought there was only a shadow. He came for me because I had seen him. I leapt through a window and ran from the house, but before I could make it to the street, he caught me by my hair and pulled me back inside. Gripping my head with one hand, he raised the other and demanded to know what I had seen (117).

erin Khuê Ninh points out that immigrant parents exercise sovereign power over their children in numerous ways, one of which is enacting discipline without revealing expectations: 'the fact that infractions are typically identified as such *only after the fact* makes obedience less a question of walking a line than of picking one's way through a field of land mines' (2011: 43). As the above scene suggests, this power is menacing because it is wielded by someone who is otherwise deeply powerless; the narrator's transgression is seeing her father 'looking sad and broken,' and his power gives him the right to punish her for this act of sight. Ninh draws on Giorgio Agamben's theorisation of sovereign power to demonstrate that filial guilt is structural and that the immigrant parent, as the sovereign in the familial structure, 'traces a threshold between that which is inside and that which is outside of the law' (2011: 15), "producing" his subject as such [the child], as well as deciding from among the activities of living what may fall under governance' (2011: 43). The narrator in lê's novel accepts her father's role as sovereign; in response to his demand to know what she saw, she narrates, 'To protect myself, I tried to forget everything: that first night at the refugee camp in Singapore; those early morning walks after we arrived in America; the sound of his voice asking a question no one could answer' (118). Her attempt at forgetting not only this but other instances of seeing her father is her response to his position as sovereign over her, and she is unable to submit fully: 'The only thing I couldn't drive away was the memory of my brother, whose body lay just beyond reach, forming the shape of a

distant shore' (118). She is unable to forget everything that she needs to forget in order to avoid transgressing her father's unspoken rules.

Significantly, the narration of the event stops as her father is poised to strike; whether he actually hits her in that moment goes unrevealed. This silence is reflective of the way the novel grapples with representing domestic abuse. A few pages earlier, the narrator describes her father's vacillating extremes:

He becomes prone to rages. He smashes televisions, VCRs, chases friends and family down the street, brandishing hammers and knives in broad daylight. Then from night until early morning he sits on the couch in the living room, his body absolutely still, his hands folded on his lap, penitent (116).

The narrator describes him chasing 'friends and family' but does not say she herself is chased; in this passage, she withholds explicitly stating whether she is subjected to his violence. This withholding can be read as holding back from addressing abuse directly, yet the withholding adds to its menace rather than diminishing it, reflecting the uncertainty experienced by the narrator. Nevertheless, the narrator's recognition of her father's authority over her remains even in the face of American structures of authority, as can be seen when he comes to pick her up from the shelter and she feels protective of him in the face of the counsellors there (118–119), a passage later discussed in greater depth.

To return to the incident of the butterfly, the narrator resolves to break the disk, choosing a portion of the wall in Mel's office to throw it against, carefully measuring it with her hand (34). Before she throws it, she listens to it one more time: 'There, very faintly, was the sound. It was like a light almost transparent curtain rippling across a window' (34). She is in a room with an open window but at this point, she re-locates a real sound – the curtain in the breeze – to a different source, one of the many times the novel shows her using her imagination to manipulate the world around her. Imagination, then, can be used to understand but also to reshape; in this instance, she is wilfully misunderstanding the physical world to support her course of action. Instead of hitting the wall, the disk crashes into a display case containing glass animals collected by Mel's parents over the years. Everything shatters, but the narrator reacts only by spinning herself in the desk chair, 'scanning the ceiling for the butterfly' (35). Her imagined sound of the butterfly wings 'shuh-shuh/shuh-shuh' is interspersed with the sound that is suggested to be her father saying 'suh-top!/suh-top!' (35), a word he has been practising reading on a stop sign while walking her to school. This moment marks her father's desire to protect her from grasping too hard for freedom as well as his understanding of why she grasps for it. It also signals the novel's questioning of whether freedom is an illusion. The narrator, of course, does not find the butterfly on the ceiling. Her attempt to free it is futile, and her imagination has succeeded only in alienating their already reticent benefactor.

IMAGINATION AS RECUPERATION

The rundown housing complex full of migrants and their children the family later moves into serves as a site of community and connection for the narrator. The novel contains paragraphs-long descriptions of the children's play. Much of their play is imaginative, reflecting both those things they lack and the circumstances that shape their lives. In terms of the former, they often use what they have on hand to pretend to have more; they make a trampoline out of a mattress and pretend to find and devour 'French fries, hamburgers, and fried chicken' in the kitchen of the burned-out house next to the complex (57). What the children can actually afford is to pool their pennies in order to buy single boxes of candy that they share among themselves, so they supplement their desires through their imagination, demonstrating once again the value of imagination for reshaping reality in active defiance of what is. In terms of the latter, the children use the neighbouring Jehovah's Witnesses church as the site of a game they call Kingdom, which goes through a telling transformation: 'At first, Kingdom was about pretending that we were in Heaven. We tried to be the people in the little books [Jehovah's Witness tracts]. We swept the stairs and kept the castle clean. We walked around smiling, waving to invisible people in our heavenly community... When we got bored, Kingdom became about having fights and waging war' (49). Many children play war games, but the war games represented here clearly draw from the experiences of the children and their parents related to actual war and forced migration. Interestingly, the children still filter these experiences through the terms of imagination: 'we made up stories about ships at sea, on the lookout for pirate ships' (49); they 'made up' these stories even though the narrator and presumably some of the other children have had this very experience. The children's game is a parody of war, satirising its consistent elements, such as its self-perpetuating nature: 'We fought over which side had killed more people and because we usually couldn't agree, we'd have to collect more eucalyptus cones and have another war' (50). Here, the novel demonstrates how children like the narrator use play to survive and even recast painful memories and histories.

The novel is constructed as an act of recuperation. It is a first-person narrative in which the narrator imaginatively inserts herself into the minds of all of those around her. She is, at the end, far from her family, yet

the very act of producing this narrative expresses a need to come to understand her family and her past in order to face her future and create for herself an identity beyond becoming her father. The unsteadiness of time in the novel suggests that when she describes her parents' feelings and thoughts and actions in scenes she has not witnessed, this is information that she might learn from them once they can speak to each other freely and be together without filling her with the need to run away. Until this is possible, the imaginative empathy she engages in maintains their connection while protecting her from the burden of her father's violence and her mother's expectations. The project of recuperation informs the text as a whole, including in how characters are identified.

Most significant is that the narrator is unnamed. The parents are given names: Minh and Ahn (82). The parents' identities are given more coherence than that of the narrator. She is not simply passively unnamed, but rather her name is wilfully withheld. She describes an interaction with another child in her apartment complex while they play: 'Upside down, you look like a boy. You look like the brother of...' And then she said my name' (71). The narrator refuses to share her name with the reader. Part of the narrator's namelessness is an act of separation. She not only declines to name herself to the reader, she also refuses to answer to her name when hailed on the street by someone from home after she has left Linda Vista. He calls her a liar for not responding, and her description of how she experiences this moment of naming is telling: 'I kept moving as the lilting syllables of my own name fell around me like licks of flame that extinguished on contact, never catching' (100). By denying her name, she becomes untouchable. Yet denying her name still connects her to her family, as she attributes her ability to do this to her father: 'It was my father who taught me how to do this, how to keep moving even when a bone in the leg was broken or a muscle in the chest was torn' (100). She has inherited her father's abilities of self-preservation but embodies them differently. She uses the lessons she has learned from him to distance herself from him; in this way, her empathy with him fuels her escape from him.

The fact that the novel foregrounds the narrator's relationship with her father, and even further, the idea of her becoming her father, is vital to understanding how it frames subject formation and familial relationships. In one of the novel's many heartbreakingly beautiful passages, the narrator asserts her childhood belief about her identity in relation to her father: 'I grew up studying my father so closely as to suggest I was certain I saw my future in him' (116). She sees herself becoming her father physically, 'I would inherit his lithe figure and beautiful smile,' as well as in action, 'I would build and break things with my hands. I would answer to names not my own and be ordered around like a child. I would disappear into every manner of darkness only to awaken amid a halo of faces encircling my body' and in emotion, 'Shame would crush me. I would turn away from the people I loved. I would regard with suspicion the bare shoulders of a woman I desired' (116). She also suggests that she will inherit his memories: 'The sight of two boys shooting marbles in a dirt yard would fill me with sadness... The sight of a young girl playing house, sweeping out an imaginary courtyard with a branch of eucalyptus and the little song she sang, about a fluttering butterfly, and the way her arm described the course of its body in flight, would haunt me' (116–117). She will not only inherit her father's memories of her brother, but even memories of herself. She will haunt herself through memories of herself unconsciously passed down from her father. I read this passing down as an example of Marianne Hirsch's idea of 'postmemory,' especially because it demonstrates the way that 'postmemory's connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation' (107). The narrator's subjectivity is formed through the layering of her own experiences with her father's experiences, her own emotions with the father's emotions, which she watches closely both for self-preservation and for prediction. She is burdened by these inheritances. Yet while the description of her father might suggest that she has also inherited his fatalistic approach to life, she develops a different approach: 'Whereas my father would disappear into himself when haunted, I would leap out of windows and run. When there were no windows, I would kick down doors. The point was to get to the street, at any cost. I would come to see running as inseparable from living' (117). The daughter of migration responds to being haunted with movement instead of stillness; for her, the outdoors feels safer than the home, but not just, or even primarily, because of the threat of physical violence: 'I would choose falling asleep on rooftops and on the lawns of strangers to lying in my own bed, surrounded by knots of memories I had no language with which to unravel' (117). For the narrator, the absence of language that can make sense of the memories, both those of her parents and her own, is a greater threat even than her father's rages. Home cannot be seen solely as a place of refuge from the world, as the conflicts of the world are embedded in the home. The narrator's stretching towards freedom is contrasted with her father's withdrawal. Still, the narrator's description of her teenage self demonstrates that she cannot escape being like her father: 'Yet exactly like my father, I would become suspicious of tenderness and was calmest when I had one hand quietly lying over the other, both ready to be raised in an instant, shattering to the bone whatever dared come too near to me' (117). This section repeatedly uses the word 'would' to indicate both possible future occurrences and common past behaviours; by framing these directions of the narrator's gaze using the same heavily repeated word, their supposed distance is questioned. The narrator can distance herself from the home space, but she carries her father no matter how far away she goes. Their physical resemblance serves as a metonym for her psychical and emotional inheritances, the weight of which threatens her survival.

As I have previously suggested, much of the symbolism and figurative language in the novel revolves around water. Indeed, water is the central symbol of the text. Its role is both life-giver and life-taker, a constant as well as something that can be missed, a marker of distance and a means of travel – in short, the very essence of contradiction. When the family lives in the rundown apartment complex with a pool in the courtyard, the narrator observes, ‘Though my parents didn’t want me to play near the swimming pool, they both liked having the pool in the courtyard. My mother said it wasn’t the sea but it was nice to open the door and have some water’ (51). The parents fear the water taking another child from them but also long to be near it. When the pool is filled with concrete because the landlord discovers children jumping off balconies into it, tension arises between the narrator’s parents. It angers her mother, but her father tries to shrug it off, another instance of his fatalistic attitude. Her father responds to her mother’s complaint by saying, ‘He’s the landlord. It’s his building’ (154). This statement emphasises the lack of control the characters have over their lives and environment and that they cannot expect beauty. The narrator does not say anything; after all, ‘What was there to say?’ (54). Her manner of coping is neither the self-inflicted indifference of her father nor the vocal complaints of her mother but rather a quiet, thorough remembering of what she saw in the swimming pool. The memory of ‘the body of a boy, gliding along the floor of the pool, sunlight streaming across his bare back...the reflection of clouds, and birds migrating...the leaves that floated to the edges of the swimming pool and nested’ (54) is her active form of preservation. She narrates, ‘But what I remembered most were the boys, flying, I remembered their bodies arcing through the air and plunging down. I remembered how their hands parted the water and how as they disappeared, the last thing I would see were the pale soles of their feet’ (54–55). This memory establishes the pool as a site of deeply embodied freedom, of escape, foreshadowing her later practice of jumping out of windows to escape her family. At this point in the narrative, her longing for freedom is established, but her attempts at achieving it have been forestalled. Her imagination, however, continues to provide her a space for this longing to flourish.

TIME, IMAGINATION, EMPATHY

The way that time functions in the novel is directly tied to the way that the narrative subtly constructs the adult version of the narrator and her imaginative engagements. This is particularly evident in the novel’s final chapter, which jumps back and forth in time. The first section, which describes a seemingly average day for the narrator’s father, is unmarked, but the next section, focusing on the childhood death of the narrator’s brother in Vietnam, starts with ‘twenty years ago’ (126), which suggests that the previous section is meant to take place in the present as told by the adult narrator. Yet later in the same chapter, her father is described as having arrived in the city of San Diego ‘more than twenty years ago’ (140). This description thus indicates that these sections of the chapter take place in the future. As such, these sections can be read as future projections, even though they are written in past tense. The repeated use of ‘more than twenty years ago’ (143) allows a vague sense of how far into the future these events could be taking place since just how much more than twenty years have passed remains unclear.

The narrator introduces information about her adult self third-hand. In describing how her parents’ apartment building functions as a village, she notes what the neighbours know about her parents’ absent daughter:

It was known that my parents had a daughter who lived on the East Coast, somewhere near New York. Some people heard that she had run away and some people heard that she had simply gone away. That was many years ago and now the rumor was she was writing stories. No one had read them and no one had met her. They imagined that her English was very good (148).

This passage sets up her life as open for interpretation; what is the difference between her having run away or simply gone away? The narrator has already revealed that she has done both. Having already run away, she calls her parents to let them know that she is going to the East Coast to go to school (119). Regardless of the nature of her departure, the real news is the rumour of her writing. Her parents’ apartment building, which it is implied is inhabited primarily by first-generation Vietnamese refugees, is disconnected from the second generation in part through language. The stories the narrator is rumoured to be writing lead them to imagine ‘that her English was very good’ – that conclusion is all they can or will make of her writing. This metatextual moment creates a doubling for the reader. The narrator is said to write stories and the text is ostensibly a story of the narrator’s, as indicated by the times that the novel directly addresses the reader (99). Of course, the narrator herself is the creation of the author. The reader is thus asked to imagine how these subjects of the story, who are fictional, might react to the way they are portrayed in a story they will never read and would not read, even if they were not fictional. This is a demand for a very particular form of empathy. The disconnect between the writer and the community about which she writes is foregrounded here, but even more so is the paradox of audience for this type of text. The narrator is telling her own coming of age, but she is also telling the story of her parents because that story is necessary for her self-representation. Yet working-class Vietnamese migrants to the United States are unlikely to choose leisure

reading that chronicles their own suffering. Thus, an exercise in better understanding and empathising with the first generation is also a site of further alienation. The slippage between author and narrator, reinforced by the narrator's lack of name and identity as a writer, is a challenge put to the reader, demanding that the reader consider how subjectivity is constructed narratively. The narrator is like the author but is not the author, and the novel asks that one engage in the imaginative empathy displayed by the narrator towards the narrator, without having to know what is 'true' in the story, despite the common desire among readers to read this text and others like it as autobiographical (Pelaud, 2015: 99). Describing herself as a 'fellow traveler' with her narrator (Pelaud, 2015: 99), Lê uses a designation that stresses the kinship between author and character as well as the novel as reflective of a journey: the process of coming of age but also the process of imaginative empathy.

The tension between the narrator's empathy for her father and her need to be distant from him is the heart-breaking centre of the novel. She feels the need to shield him from institutions even as she needs to run away from him. When he comes to pick her up at a shelter after she has run away, two counsellors speak to her and her father. The narrator says her father 'apologized for what his hands had done,' and while the counsellors take this to mean that he is 'taking responsibility for his drunken rages,' the narrator understands that something else is going on; he 'spread his hands wide open, and said, in Vietnamese, to anyone who could understand, there were things he had lost a grasp of' (118). The narrator casts her father's statement as a plea for understanding from anyone, but the only one there who can understand what he is saying is her, in terms of both the language he is speaking and what he is talking about. The narrator states, 'I thought [the counsellors] had no right to frown at my father' (119). While she wants to escape him, she cannot bear to see him scrutinised by those who cannot understand him, especially those who are representatives of government or social systems with which she and her father both have an ambivalent relationship. In this moment, the narrator is demonstrating Ninh's argument that

while there is no question that the losses of immigration matter, that institutional racism and media representation figure into the second-generation experience, so too does power in the most intimate, vulnerable, and formative social contexts – one which may demand that the subject compensate for familial losses by successfully navigating hostile social and political waters, and which may very well redouble the stakes of 'racial' failure (2011: 5).

The narrator finds herself protecting her father from systems that are, at least nominally, meant to protect her from him; his powerlessness in the wider world is an aspect of his power over her. Her empathy towards him is a burden that shapes her behaviour even in moments when her own safety is in question. The final line of this section is telling: 'I remember crossing the parking lot, my hand in my father's hand, the two of us running to the car as though we were escaping together again' (119). The shared experience of escaping together from Vietnam has produced an us-versus-the-world dynamic between them that survives even their conflicts. The next section makes it clear that she runs away again, however, and eventually does so for good. Her desire to shield him from the counsellors does not negate her need to escape from him. She cannot or will not depend on the state in her quest for freedom and selfhood, but that quest continues.

The narrator's imagining of her estranged father's empathy towards others is one of the most interesting aspects of her imagining of him. She describes him as watching a news report on mute of a woman crying in a field somewhere in Europe (126) and, after thinking about it for hours, realising that the woman is indicating that bodies are buried in the field (152). Her father's fixation on this scene continues to re-emerge throughout the chapter until it culminates into a fully realised desire to show solidarity. He imagines that the woman 'would not be able to rest until she had dug, with her own bare hands, through that field' (156) and consciously connects this to his own wartime experience: 'Thinking of the bright green field she stood in, he remembered the bodies that floated through rice paddies during the war' (156–157). His reaction to this connection is to want to help her in the task he has imagined for her: 'Sitting on his porch in Linda Vista he thought about loading all his gardening equipment into his truck. He would drive to wherever she was and offer her his help, his hands' (157). The very next paragraph reminds the reader of the estrangement between the narrator and her father, drawing attention to the degree to which the narrator puts herself into an omniscient role when imagining her father's life without her. She narrates, 'Often when he said a word in English, he would think of how his daughter might say it' (157). He can only imagine how she 'might' say it because they rarely speak. This reminder of the narrator's distance from her father even as she imagines his feelings of closeness to a person far away from himself is one of the ways that the novel ambivalently constructs the idea of the narrator becoming her father; she has been formed by him and this means that she has inherited his capacity for empathy. However, that is not his only legacy in her. Another is a feeling of being trapped; in earlier portions of the novel during which Ba takes a fatalistic approach to life, his lack of control over his life is central and the narrator frames herself as a daughter who simultaneously relates to and tries to push back against such helplessness. Near the end of the novel, her father's lack of agency is symbolically conveyed by his reaction to the phone ringing: 'though my father didn't feel he could answer it, he also didn't feel he could disconnect it' (139). This description of powerlessness is one of the many moments in the text where the narrator

demonstrates an empathy for her father that is in contrast to her actual actions. Research suggests that ‘close and secure family relationships (a major component of environment) also contribute to individuals’ feeling responsive to others’ (Keen, 2007: 3); this novel complicates this notion by contesting what closeness looks like as well as questioning its relationship to security, and by demonstrating how the particularities of migrant family life might produce empathy through means that defy expectations. The novel produces a compelling sense of empathy while resisting any suggestion that it is wrong for the narrator to separate herself from her father. Thus, Lê’s novel is a relevant text to consider when responding to Ninh’s critique that ‘Asian American studies has thus far shown itself, nevertheless, to be mainly invested in a defense of immigrant parents against their reproachful daughters’ (2011: 122); this novel offers critics an opportunity to consider how both the reproach and the defence might be already embedded in narratives and in fact inextricable from one another. Rather than defend immigrant parents, critics might consider how second-generation reproaches nuance interpretations of immigrant positionality. In texts like the ones that both Ninh and I analyse, the desire to understand is deeply interwoven with the desire to reproach.

The imaginative empathy of the narrator extends far beyond her parents, even to the man who comes to tell her mother that her husband knows of his son’s death. She describes the man’s interaction with her mother, imagines how he feels: ‘He looks at the young woman. She is probably the same age as his wife was when they first met. He wants to tell her there is nothing to do but to bury her son and be patient’ (136–137). This section of the text emphasises that the war, though officially over, still shapes their lives; her father cannot return because he is in a re-education camp. Their tragedies and traumas are layered, connected to the war in ways both direct and indirect. But the narrator’s exercise in understanding the perspective of the man sent to tell them her father cannot return is also an exercise in solidarity; she narrates, ‘How many times has he seen this? He looks away. He doesn’t say anything’ (137). He looks away from the family, but the narrator does not look away from him; she acknowledges that her family is among many who have lost things to the war. This practice of projecting herself into the past, piecing together not just events but emotions, signals an investment in understanding and representing how being born into the context of war is a fundamental factor in who she becomes, even if her direct experiences and memories are minimal or non-existent. Espiritu identifies this turn as common among those she refers to as the ‘postwar generation,’ arguing that their

practice of looking to their present conditions in order to understand their parents’ past corroborates one of the strongest and most enduring premises of Walter Benjamin’s conception of history: the belief that it is not history that enables us to understand the present but, conversely, the present that enables us to understand the past’ (2014: 170).

The narrator’s present understanding of herself and her parents informs her reconstruction of the past, which she then uses to further construct her vision of her present.

IMAGINATION, EMPATHY, THE SELF

The narrator comes to understand herself through her family. By reaching outside of herself, she accesses herself. When her father returns from the re-education camp, she describes his arrival, noting that she was staring into the family well and did not notice him arrive. She narrates, ‘I stood leaning over the mouth of the well. The stillness of my body led Ba to understand that I had just lost something in the water, something I could not see much less retrieve’ (144). They have, of course, both lost something in the water – his son and her brother. This loss is communal. She processes her loss through him. Until this point, the narrator has described her child self as unable to accept her brother’s death. She reanimates her brother, imagining him laughing at them at his funeral and hiding behind gravestones in the cemetery (141–142). Her loss can only be acknowledged through the conduit of her father.

The central mystery of the text – what happened to the narrator’s brother – turns out to be not directly related to war or migration. Her brother’s death by drowning demonstrates that the events that define the family’s life are complex and cannot be solely equated with the primary narratives associated with refugee life. As Espiritu argues, personal secrets and traumas are tied up with war secrets and traumas so that the personal cannot be extricated from the social and political (2014: 154). The loss of the narrator’s brother haunts the entire family and contributes significantly to the intergenerational tensions that crackle through the text, as well as shapes the narrator’s understanding of herself. Her brother’s death is not directly caused by the war, but it takes place in the aftermath of the war, and the events that follow, including the father’s absence during the time of the boy’s death, are a direct result of the war even though it has ended. The narrator’s feeling that she must become both herself and her dead brother is not unrelated to her experience of migration, as the loss of her brother is also tied to her loss of Vietnam, but it is also not solely a product of it.

Although in the present, the narrator is estranged from her parents, the novel's emphasis on their interiority along with that of the narrator conveys a hope of future reconciliation or at least a longing for continued familial investment, even from a silent distance. The novel's ending vividly illustrates this longing. Rather than ending in the present, the novel concludes with a past event that simultaneously points to the future. 'One night during [their] first spring together in California' (157), the narrator's father takes her and her mother to the beach, where they see 'small silver fish whose bodies gave off a strange light' (158). These fish are being washed ashore, but the narrator describes them from the perspective of a child: 'Up close, their little mouths moved busily, as if they could not get enough of the cool salt night air' (158). The narrator's father 'pointed at the fish as if we knew them' (158), establishing the family's kinship with creatures who are washed ashore, left gasping on the beach. This image calls back to the very first sentence of the novel, in which the family, at that point an unexplained 'we,' 'eventually washed to shore' in Linda Vista (3). Yet Ba is 'smiling broadly' (158) as he gestures, not casting this shared condition in a mournful light. Most significantly, this final scene exemplifies the novel's theme of the complexity of belonging to family. This is a happy memory. The parents' connection and mutual dependence is emphasised, but the narrator is described as being separate. This separation is represented both in memory and in action. She describes how each of them remember this event:

My father remembers stroking my mother's face.

My mother remembers wearing my father's coat.

I remember taking off my sandals and digging my heels into the wet sand (158).

Her mother and father remember each other, while the narrator remembers her physical connection to the ground, not the solid ground, but wet sand. She grounds herself in instability. She is connected to place even as that place remains unsteady.

The last sentence of the novel demonstrates that this separation takes place in action as well, mirroring the narrator's earlier reflection on her need to run in comparison to her father's stasis: 'As my parents stood on the beach leaning into each other, I ran, like a dog unleashed, toward the lights' (158). This moment indicates the narrative's turn to futurity; here the narrator sees herself not as running away from her parents but as running towards something. That these lights are dying fish on the seashore does not make her running in vain. By ending the novel on this solitary yet strangely beautiful note, the novel completes its coming-of-age story in a space where past, present, and future converge. The adult narrator's aloneness is active and her simultaneous need to understand and love her family and to be distant from them reaches a delicate balance. The recuperation that the novel has been enacting opens up a space for a future responsive to but not overcome by the past.

The novel centres a complex view of love – that it can coexist with violence, that a couple can fight constantly physically and verbally and also eventually settle into happy mutual dependence, that despite this, the past is not changed and its effect on the narrator remains. This theme is present in many second-generation texts that deal with the afterlife of migration. Especially in texts concerned with the coming of age of protagonists, the familial ruptures that result from migration pose a specific set of obstacles for the development of selfhood. In lê's novel, how the children of migrants come into being while navigating the dangers of both the home and the outside world, physical and psychological, is explored. Rather than casting the family home as outside of the world, the novel demonstrates how deeply embedded it is in the world and, significantly, the multiple communities that have made up and continue to make up the narrator's social world, from Vietnam to the particular world of the boat and the ongoing community it produces, to the family's various homes in California, to her own eventual home in some unspecified part of the East Coast, from the imaginative world of working-class children in the apartment complex to the seemingly lonely but resolute life she builds for herself away from the physical space of her parents. The narrator's imaginative empathy towards inanimate objects, her father, and strangers allows her to both understand herself and her life better, and at times to manipulate her experience of the world for that same purpose. In this way, seeing her future in her father may not be a sentence to a life of powerlessness and rage but rather a means by which she can embody empathy and reach for freedom.

REFERENCES

- Chen, B. G. (2017). Walking and wandering: Reconstructing diasporic subjectivity in T. C. Huo's *Land of Smiles* and lê thi diem thúy's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*. *Asian American Literature: Discourses and Pedagogies*, 8, 62-80.
- Elliot, R., Bohart, A. C., Watson, J. C. and Greenberg, L. S. (2011). Empathy. *Psychotherapy*, 48(1), 43-49. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022187>
- Engelen, E.-M. and Röttger-Rössler, B. (2012). Current disciplinary and interdisciplinary debates on empathy. *Emotion Review*, 4(1), 3-8. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1754073911422287>

- Espiritu, Y. L. (2014). *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and militarized refugees*. California: University of California Press. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520959002>
- Gsoels-Lorensen, J. (2008). lê thi diem thúy's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*: The ekphrastic emigration of a photograph. *Critique*, 48(1), 3-18. <https://doi.org/10.3200/CRIT.48.1.3-18>
- Hammond, M. M. and Kim, S. J. eds. (2014). *Rethinking Empathy through Literature*. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315818603>
- Hirsch, M. (2008). The generation of postmemory. *Poetics Today*, 29(1), 103-128. <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2007-019>
- Kase, Y. (2018). Guests of empire, ghosts of dispossession: Traumatic loss and the subject without a proper name in *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*. *Journal of Literature and Trauma Studies*, 7(1), 71-94. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jlt.2018.0003>
- Keen, S. (2007). *Empathy and the Novel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195175769.001.0001>
- lê thi diem thuy. (2003). *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Liu, Y. (2015). Articulating the exodus: Place and memory in Vietnamese-American women writers' novels. *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée*, 42(1), 69-80. <https://doi.org/10.1353/crc.2015.0000>
- Murray, P. (2005) Editor's note. *Imagination: A study in the history of ideas*. London: Routledge.
- Ninh, e. K. (2011). *Ingratitude: The debt-bound daughter in Asian American literature*. New York: New York University Press.
- Pelaud, I. T. (2015). War, gender, and race in lê thi diem thúy's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*. In B. M. Boyle (ed), *The Vietnam War: Topics in contemporary North American literature* (pp. 95-114). London: Bloomsbury.
- Schmetkamp, S. and Ferran, I. V. (2020). Introduction: Empathy, fiction, and imagination. *Topoi*, 39, 743-749. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-019-09664-3>
- Veprinska, A. (2020). *Empathy in Contemporary Poetry after Crisis*. New York: Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-34320-0>
- Whitehead, A. (2017). *Medicine and Empathy in Contemporary British Fiction: A critical intervention in Medical Humanities*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. <https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9780748686186.001.0001>

Citation: Jeffers, A. (2022). 'I Was Certain I Saw My Future in Him': Coming into Intergenerational Empathy and Escape in lê thi diem thúy's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 6(2), 26. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/12349>

Copyright © 2022 by Author/s and Licensed by Lectito BV, Netherlands. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.