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Mediating Traumatic Memory

The Potential of Interactive Digital Migrant Fictions

Introduction: Memories of Migration in a Global Age

Memory and migration are closely intertwined phenomena. Memories travel around the globe due to migration, and they need movement in order to live on. This has effects for both individual and collective memories. In their book *Memory in a Global Age*, Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad argue that under the impact of globalising processes, both the sites of memory and the composition of memory communities have been fundamentally redefined (ASSMANN/CONRAD 2010, 1). Whereas previously the dynamics of collective memory production used to unfold primarily within the bounds of social groups or nation-states, under the impact of global mobility and migratory movements, “[m]emories are carried across national borders and they enter a global arena through all available channels, starting with human carriers” (ASSMANN/CONRAD 2010, 2). Reasons for these dynamics of voluntary and involuntary migratory movements can include “wars and genocide, natural disasters, famine, financial crises and economic decline”, which may have the effect of breaking up communities, and disrupting and dislocating cultural traditions and personal memories (ASSMANN/CONRAD 2010, 2). “As migrants carry their heritage, memories and traumas with them, these are transferred and brought into new social constellations and political contexts” (ASSMANN/CONRAD 2010, 2).

In order to embrace this transcultural flow of heritage and memories, Astrid Erll argues in her article “Travelling Memory” that the study of memory should shift from a focus on the ‘sites of memory’, which are often bounded by territorial frameworks such as regions or nation-states, to the ‘travels of memory’. In this way we can appropriately interrogate how memory is produced through circulation, entanglement, networks, and movement. Rather than simply accepting “what social groups may claim as their *roots*: the alleged origins of a cultural memory”, she advocates that memory should be studied “through the reconstruction of its *routes*: the paths which certain stories, rituals and images have taken” (ERLL 2011, 11; original emphasis). She further points out that “a transcultural perspective also implies questioning those other grids (territorial, social, temporal), which we tend to superimpose upon the complex realities of remembering in culture” (ERLL 2011, 8). The transcultural lens allows to see “the many fuzzy edges of national cultures of remembrance, the many shared sites of memory that have emerged through [...] cultural exchange; second, the great internal heterogeneity of national culture, its different classes, generations, ethnicities, religious communities, and subcultures”,

which “will all generate different, but in many ways interacting frameworks of memory” (ERLL 2010, 311–312).

The ‘reconstructions’ of travelling memory, which Erll claims are vital for memory to stay alive, may come in many forms.¹ It can thus be asked, “how do memories spread and travel around the world? How are memories changed when they transcend their former habitat and move into the framework of global spectatorship, traffic, and commerce? What role do the new media play in the construction and transmission of memories in a world of growing interconnectedness and intervisuality?” (ASSMANN/CONRAD 2010, 6). Further, how can personal memories undergo a recontextualisation – by processes of fictionalisation and/or digitisation – to engage in the transcultural perspective proposed by Erll and contribute to the constructing of collective memory and public awareness.

The translation of boat migrants’ memories into fictional and mediated forms – the main issue to be explored in this chapter – provides a good example with which to foreground the multidirectionality and transcultural perspective of memory. Moreover, the mediation of memory implies a democratic potential, with media operating as memory agents: various narratives that depict the same event sprout and induce multiple voices that spread within a saturated media environment (NEIGER/MEYERS/ZANDBERG 2011, 18). Digitisation and remediation keep memories alive, since repeated representation and circulation over decades and centuries in different media are exactly what create a powerful new ‘site of memory’ (BRUNOW 2016, 45).

Mediated representations and news coverage of boat migration play a vital role in constructing discourses of the situation of refugees and asylum seekers at large, often in generalising ways. Whether as an image of potential danger and hostile threat or as one of vulnerability, danger, and disaster, the iconic refugee boat evokes ambivalent and emotionally charged associations with notions of transoceanic migration. This potentially shifting positive and negative emotional investment in the image of the boat informs representations of ‘boat people’ in contemporary media. But what about those individual memories, often traumatic, that are carried with the peoples on these boats? How can the fictionalising of these personal migrant memories open up new possibilities to engage with the traumatic refugee experience? The following section will address how these fictionalised reconstructions of such memories are further transformed by artists into digitised and interactive forms, thereby creating an experience of (intangible) collective memory in order to “synchronize the witnessing of worldwide events for a global spectatorship” (ASSMANN/CONRAD 2010, 4).

In this chapter I compare two contemporary interactive web-based graphic stories, adaptations of Khaled Hosseini’s *Sea Prayer* (2018) and Nam Le’s *The Boat*

1 For a problematisation of blank spots in migrant biographies, see Marijke VAN FAASSEN and Rik HOEKSTRA: *Storytelling, Identity, and Digitising Heritage*, pp. 155–174 in this volume.

(2009), to discuss how web-based interactive forms of narration not only bridge the gap between print and digital, but allow for a large spectatorial investment and engagement with global issues such as migration. By making a 'second' translation from novels and short stories into interactive (digital) drawings and webcomics on the internet, the original, personal migrant memories these stories are based on transcend their former frameworks and advocate for the productive global entanglement and public awareness proposed by ASSMANN/CONRAD and ERLI. "Under the impact of the digital as a forceful accelerant, memories themselves have become more mobile, ephemeral and fluid, undergoing constant transformations" (ASSMANN/CONRAD 2010, 4). Assmann and Conrad argue that transformations of local events into global images and platforms (provided by e.g. the world wide web) allow new forms of participation, as the broadening of meaning towards global status has the potential to form a cosmopolitan collective memory around human rights (ASSMANN/CONRAD 2010, 4). Interactive digital fictions explore these possibilities for addressing memory and trauma in a mediated form that produces ethical participation. The digital migrant fiction shifts away from personal trauma and towards a public and political effort to think about collective life stories and shared experiences (IRR 2014, 29). I therefore argue that the translation of such narratives into interactive digital forms provides particularly productive ways to represent the absences and gaps inherent to *traumatic* memories.

Remediated Traumatic Memory in Interactive Migrant Fictions

Trauma is a confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge. The core of trauma is the inability to work through or process traumatic experiences by grieving and to integrate the events into one's own life story. Hence, unlike other memories, traumatic memories are largely inaccessible to conscious recall and control (CARUTH 1996, 151). Trauma is known by its symptoms: phobias, flashbacks, hallucinations, and nightmares. "The flashback or traumatic reenactment conveys, that is, both *the truth of an event*, and *the truth of its incomprehensibility*" (CARUTH 1996, 153; original emphasis). Trauma thus requires integration of an event into one's own knowledge of the past, and the transformation of that event into a narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalised and communicated (CARUTH 1996, 153). Subsequent generations can inherit and display the effects of generational and historical trauma if "not publicly acknowledged and honoured in story" (EPISKENEW 2009, 9). Unprocessed traumas continue to be a burden for subsequent generations, reappearing in dreams, emotions and behaviours. How can the narrative form then represent something which is inaccessible and evades any representation? Caruth argues that "by carrying that impossibility of knowing out of the empirical event itself, trauma opens up and challenges us to a new kind of listening, the witnessing,

precisely, of *impossibility*” (CARUTH 1996, 10; original emphasis). Trauma, therefore, demands a mode of representation that textually performs it and its incomprehensibility through, for example, gaps and silences, the repeated breakdown of language, and the collapse of understanding (SCHÖNFELDER 2013, 31). Below, I discuss how adaptations of fictional migrant stories into digital formats explore possibilities of how to witness, translate, and visually ‘perform’ initially inaccessible traumatic migrant memories into representable forms. The artists do not refer to their own memories and experiences, or do so only implicitly; however, they clearly reference the individual migrants these traumatic memories are inspired by.

In 2018, Khaled Hosseini, best known for his bestselling novel *The Kite Runner*, published a short, powerful book, *Sea Prayer*, composed in the form of a letter from a father to his son. The night before a potentially fatal boat journey, a father reflects with his son on their life in Syria before the war – and on their unknown future. Impelled to write this story by the haunting image of young Alan Kurdi, the two-year-old Syrian boy whose body washed up on a beach in Turkey in September 2015, Hosseini hopes to pay tribute to, and dedicates the book to, the thousands of families like Kurdi’s who have been forced from home by war and persecution (HOSSEINI 2018, n.p.). The text is accompanied by haunting watercolour images painted by Dan Williams that take up the majority of the space on each page. Before the publication of the print version, an interactive version of this text was released, which is now accessible via YouTube (Media 1).

This interactive adaptation of *Sea Prayer* is the first animated virtual reality narrative created using Tilt Brush, a tool for painting in a 3D space with VR. It was commissioned by *The Guardian* and UNHCR, and *The Guardian*’s in-house VR team worked in collaboration with the acclaimed VR artist Liz Edwards. The film is narrated by the BAFTA award-winning actor Adeel Akhtar, who takes the role of the father, and is accompanied by a score composed by Sahba Aminikia, an Iranian-American contemporary classical music composer (THE GUARDIAN 2017b).² It is a 360° clip, which asks its audience to scroll to the right as the story progresses. An already intermedial form, namely the illustrated book by Hosseini, becomes even further mediated by the artistic choices made in the clip. Firstly, the clip adds a soundscape: the voices of the riots and sounds of bombs in Homs, the sounds of the sea, and the incorporated music all have an immediate, surrounding effect while the story unfolds. Colour is another added feature: the darkness of the beach – “impatient for sunrise”, as the father muses – is contrasted against the bright colours of the beginning, and thus the search for a new home is bleak and sombre. Most importantly, I would argue, this clip engages with traumatic experiences and addresses, through the narrated memory of the father, the impossibility of remembering ‘as it is’. The father speaks to his son of the long summers of his childhood

2 Performed by the US-based string musicians Kronos Quartet and the musical saw player David Coulter.



Media 1: "Sea Prayer: A 360 Illustrated Film by Award-Winning Novelist Khaled Hosseini" (THE GUARDIAN 2017a), see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LKBNEEY-c3s>.

in Homs, recalling his grandfather's house, the olive trees in the breeze, his grandmother's goat, the clanking of her cooking pots. And he remembers vividly, too, the bustling city of Homs before the war, with its crowded lanes, its mosque and Old Town, in the days before the bombs and before they had to flee. "I wish you hadn't been so young", the father says to his son; "I wish you remembered Homs as I do", before the war and city's transformation from a home to a dangerous place of conflict. But, as the father concludes, "that life, that time, seems like a dream now, even to me, like some long-dissolved rumour" (THE GUARDIAN 2017a). The father uses these memories of former happier times to soothe his son before their dangerous sea-travel, but concedes that these "are only words", "a father's trick" in the face of his powerlessness in protecting his son from the unforgiving sea journey.

The drawings of these imagined memories progress as the clip continues and the spectator moves the video to the right. The clip thus foregrounds remembering as a *process*. In the opening, we witness how the father constructs a home once known to him, which in its fragmented sketchiness remains a makeshift memory – for the boy one maybe even forgotten entirely. On the other hand, due to the 360° nature of the clip that links the later images of the sea back to the opening, the transformation of Homs and the family's escape remains always connected with this memory of the beginning; as a spectator, one may even return to it or stay with these early images while listening to the text. In this circular 360° representation all the events happening remain connected to the centre of the memories: home.

The digitised graphic novel proves to be a medium which can effectively express the traumatic nature of these imagined memories because of the association of drawing with intricately connected mental and bodily processes. The use of

drawing, in particular, can forge a connection between the migrant story and trauma's precarious position in between the body and the mental life:

For the act of drawing foregrounds the relationship between meaning and its material base differently from photography, as the line is a material trace of physical gestures. Drawing highlights the interplay between recording subjectivity as a fully intentional act and as the contingent material effects of contact, a peculiar, partly unconscious relationship between mental processes and embodied actions that was central to the concept of psychic trauma from the start. (ORBÁN 2020, 317)

Variations in technique and texture can also refocus the spectator's attention. The incomplete, unpredictably spreading watercolours in *Sea Prayer* similarly create this heightened awareness of the physicality of image-making: "a graphic narrative can foreground its embodied making, engage tactility through its format and alterations of texture and thereby aid the reader's imaginative investment in a fuller sensory recreation of memories" (ORBÁN 2020, 325). In accordance with Erll's argument that memories must travel in order to stay alive, *Sea Prayer* foregrounds the process of remembering as a way to regain agency over the traumatic events. The narrated and performed memories travel further with everyone who watches this clip, since the spectator engages with the images while they are being drawn and materialising on the white space. The surrounding interactive 360° experience of the characters' escape includes the spectator in the events and makes them reflect on the father's statement that "these are only words", since in fact the clip provides so much more than words.

According to Michael Boatright, graphic novels and graphic representations accompanying stories of migrant journey experiences are a "provocative resource for engaging the complex issues surrounding immigration and immigrant experiences" (BOATRIGHT 2010, 468). They position critical readers "as active participants in the reading process and [invite] them to move beyond passively accepting the text's message to question, examine, or dispute the power relations that exist between readers and authors" (MCLAUGHLIN/DEVOOGD quoted in BOATRIGHT 2010, 470). The *Sea Prayer* further allows for a wider dissemination and an international audience, as the enhanced accessibility of a YouTube clip may activate a larger audience to engage with the global issue of migration.

Representing the Boat in Mediated Migrant Fictions

Digitised and mediated stories such as *Sea Prayer* challenge the audience to reconceptualise the conflicting connotations of refugees fleeing by boat. This applies especially to the context of Australia, where images of boat refugees are

usually designed to encourage the public to feel a sense of invasion and violation: “the images of flotillas of the unwanted, the undesirable, the supposedly hostile” (KENEALLY 2016, 231). Wenche Ommundsen comments on Australia’s relationship to boats as follows: “From the First Fleet to the ‘children overboard’ affair, from the ‘dream’ or ‘ghost’ ships observed by indigenous Australians at first encounter to the recent film *Ten Canoes*, boats have haunted the cultural imagination of the island continent” (OMMUNDSEN 2011, 507). Elsewhere, Suvendrini Perera has similarly argued that “This is a country full of boat stories”, “[s]ome are commemorated in museums. Some live on in jubilee voyages and lovingly crafted replicas. Others are unspeakable passages to be relived only in dreams” (PERERA 2002, 24). The boat, a highly valued image in the European history of migration at different times and in different contexts, has in the wake of current refugee movements turned into a symbol for anonymous ‘boat people’ conveniently objectified as ‘Others’. The celebration of the boat as a marker of the success stories of explorers and settlers, evident for example in migrant and maritime museums worldwide, turns into an ironic reference to the treatment of migrants and refugees today – from a symbol of the success of the refugee endeavour into a symbol of crisis. Representations of the boat often stand in for the discussion of refugee crises, and function, to quote Olivia Khoo, “as a metonym for the bodies on the boat that are rarely shown, and for multiple personal histories only partially told, eclipsed by the affective force of this overdetermined image” (KHOO 2014, 605).

It is in the context of this increasingly dehumanising and sanitising potential of the cultural preoccupation with refugee boats that I would like to discuss Matt Huynh’s webcomic “The Boat”. Particularly in the engagement with the Vietnamese refugee experience, which is inevitably linked to the indistinct notion of ‘boat people’, images of the boat “have haunted the cultural imagination” (OMMUNDSEN 2011, 507) and are emblematic of the experience of migration and resettlement of Asian Australians generally. It is therefore not surprising that contemporary authors and artists have sought to shift the focus from generalising images of boats back to personal stories of the boat refugee.

The original short story “The Boat” by Vietnamese-born Australian writer Nam Le was published in 2009 as part of the collection *The Boat*, which contained seven migrant short stories set in places such as Colombia, New York City, Iowa, Tehran, Hiroshima, and small-town Australia. The story “The Boat” is one of the stories most closely linked to Le’s own biography as a boat refugee from Vietnam. It tells the story of sixteen-year-old Mai, who is on a boat headed away from Vietnam in the late 1970s. The boat is filled with Vietnamese refugees – 200 people squashed into a space meant for fifteen, going on two weeks at sea, hit by a storm, racked by thirst and hunger and illness, the quarters below awash in vomit and human waste. The bodies of those who have died are thrown overboard into the shark-infested waters. After days on the boat, Mai realises that she now understands why her father, who spent five years fighting in the war against the Communists and two years in a

re-education camp from which he returned blind, never spoke about his traumatic experiences, never looks ‘inward’ or ‘backwards’, as the memories that will stay with Mai when she leaves the boat will likely be horrific ones, too:

Because beneath the surface was either dread or delirium. As more and more bundles were thrown overboard she taught herself not to look – not to think of the bundles as human – she resisted the impulse to identify which families had been depleted. She seized distraction from the immediate things: the weather, the next swallow of water, the ever-forward draw of time. (LE 2009, 257–258)

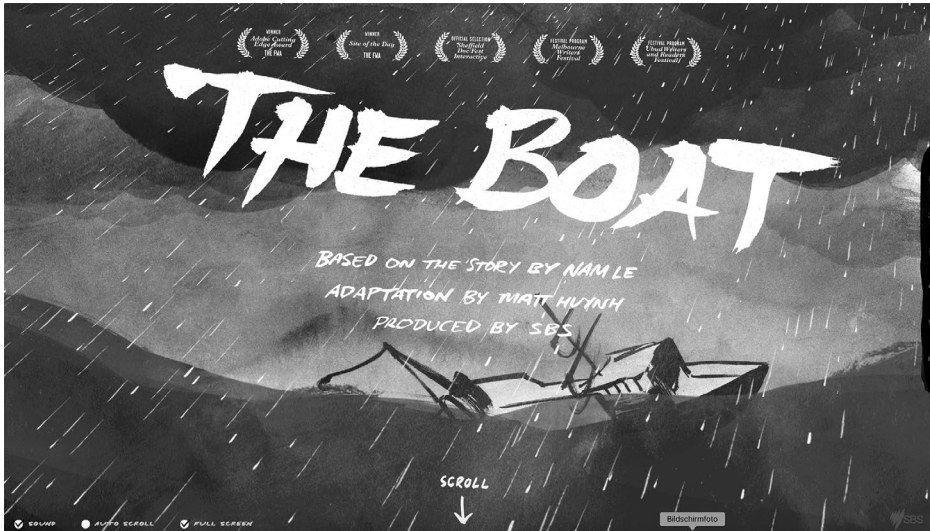
This story describes people in moments of extremis, confronted by death, loss, and terror. The traumatic experience as a shock event that overwhelms the victim’s cognitive mechanisms is here represented as an experience that is repressed and replaced by immediate observations – a silent and forced ‘looking forward’ until time, as it says, further “merge[s] with memory, until it seemed as though everything that had ever happened had happened on the boat” (LE 2009, 251).

In 2015, in recognition of the fortieth anniversary of the fall of Saigon and the Vietnamese resettlement in Australia, the Australian broadcaster SBS commissioned a graphic adaptation of Le’s short story. Matt Huynh, a visual artist based in New York City, took one year to complete the illustrations that would translate this story into an interactive medium (GEORGE 2015). They combine brushwork, animation, text, sound, and archival material, and present an artistic convergence of Japanese Sumi-e ink style illustrations and WebGL animation and interaction (WEI 2016). The interaction version is an approximately 20-minute experience, freely accessible online. While *Sea Prayer* offers the viewer only limited control, as the text is read out in a particular pace and can only be scrolled into one direction, the webcomic “The Boat” allows for a larger spectatorial investment and decision-making. By scrolling down, the reader decides on the pace of the story (Media 2).³

The text remains mostly faithful to the original short story, with only minor cuts and edits; the textual elements, however, fade more into the background as the black-and-white illustrations and the sound design dominate the experience. The story’s text is presented in little snippets that slide up over the screen as the viewer scrolls down, or pop up as speech bubbles inserted into the illustrations when characters talk.

The story begins *in medias res* with the boat rocking from side to side in a storm, accompanying the text “a body collides into hers, slammed her against the side of the hatch door. [...] She was crammed in by a boatload of human bodies” (LE 2009, 230–231). The perspective zooms in from an outside view of the boat to the girl Mai’s

3 I would like to thank my students in the seminar “Memories of Migration” (2020/21) at the University of Cologne for the inspiring discussions and their thoughtful reactions to the webcomic “The Boat”, which have been of great value in the development of this paper.



Media 2: “The Boat”, based on the story by Nam Le, adapted by Matt Huynh (HUYNH 2015), see: <https://www.sbs.com.au/theboat/> (accessed 1/3/2021).

perspective inside the boat, thereby transforming the potentially generic outlook indicated by the title “The Boat” to a framework that acknowledges the ‘personal’ frame of reference. This does not mean that the spectator is put into the position of the refugee, looking through Mai’s eyes, but they are put into one that approximates and humanises Mai’s individual story. The webcomic thereby refuses the reader an auctorial view or establishing shot overseeing the events that are about to unfold, but puts them right in the middle of it. Jarring motions that jerk the illustration panels to the left and right on the screen while the sound of a thunderstorm roars in the background make the impact of the waves and the storm more immediate to the reader.⁴ The constant shaking and rocking of the images and text panels force the reader to move their head from one side to another in order to be able to read the text. The style of drawing is unclean, with rough brush strokes and washy shades creating a distorted and chaotic picture. The lines between different people are blurred; no clear features are distinguishable.

The suddenness of the webcomic’s opening chapter, for which the reader is left unprepared, relates to the intrusiveness of trauma. In accordance with Cathy Caruth’s understanding of trauma as an event that “is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time” and that cannot be fully “witness[ed]” “as it occurs” (CARUTH 1995, 4: 7), this opening evokes a traumatic experience that emphasises Mai’s (and hence the spectator’s) inability to gain control over the situation and make sense of it. The sketchy drawings of the bodies, the sudden rocking of the text panels, and

4 The sound effect’s importance is emphasised by the website’s instruction to use headphones for a more immediate, hermetically sealed experience.

the agony represented by the sounds “make use of the conjunction or disconnection between words and images to represent the absolute or relative unavailability of an experience to consciousness and narrative memory” (ORBÁN 2020, 319).

The traumatic experience inside the boat during the first chapter, “The Storm”, is what triggers Mai’s memories of her family in Vietnam and how her journey began. This is the main content in the following chapters. In various moments the rocking of the boat prompts the characters on deck to find themselves adrift in memory, and thus the traumatic memories of the past are always linked to their present traumatic experiences on the boat. Mai’s memories are shown in flashbacks; the flashback to the start of her journey in Chapter 2 (“A Good Child”) is triggered by a folk song she hears in the present, which reminds her of her mother, who has sent her away to escape war-ridden Vietnam. The linkage to this memory and hence to a new narrative plotline can be seen as a kind of dissociation that Mai experiences. In this case, trauma not only “*disrupts and hinders* narration”, but also “has a strong tendency to *produce* narration” (SCHÖNFELDER 2013, 33; original emphasis). This oscillation between traumatic experience and traumatic memory is further indicated by fragmentation. The faces on the boat dissolve and overlap with one another; at other times they become fragments themselves when they break down into the parts of the sense organs. This is in line with what Katalin Orbán regards as a characteristic treatment of trauma in graphic fictions: “divisions of form and selves, frozen images, transformation as a representation of the overwhelmed self and drawing as a physical gesture tied to sensory memory” (ORBÁN 2020, 317). The repetition of frozen images of faces in “The Boat” “may be seen as intrusive, belatedly experienced returns of the moment as flashbacks or nightmares that break into consciousness and cannot be placed in a sequence” and these images tied to the overwhelming traumatic event are “frozen moments abstracted from a flow that would have normally proceeded had the subject not been forced to dissociate him- or herself from the event” (ORBÁN 2020, 320). They therefore serve as “a site of the difficulties of satisfactorily recollecting and representing the experience, of the ultimately unverifiable truth of an experience that proved profoundly disorienting, and of establishing the traumatic nature of an unacknowledged experience” (ORBÁN 2020, 321).

At the centre of Mai’s flashbacks are memories of her father. She recalls visiting him in hospital for the last time before her refugee journey begins. Once the reader meets the – after two years of re-education camp – blind and traumatised father, the interactive webcomic offers a side story, separated from the main plot and indicated by arrows. It is the reader’s choice whether to click those arrows; however, once inside the side story one has to scroll all the way down to the end of it to be able to return to the main story. Inside the side story, the reader learns more about the background of Mai’s father, a story he himself is unable to communicate to his daughter in the main thread. In this way, the webcomic pays attention to the way memory and narration can be hindered and disrupted by trauma and foregrounds

the difficulties in mediating and visualising personal memories under traumatic experiences.

The side stories integrate archival black-and-white photos of actual refugees and images of a refugee camp to contextualise Mai's voyage as part of Vietnam's history. This offers the reader two different types of memories. On the one hand, we have Mai's flashback within the main story, which represents an involuntary remembering of her personal traumatic past. The reader has to necessarily pass through those memories in order for the story to continue. On the other hand, there are the voluntary, clearly indicated memories and historical information of the side stories, which create a pause in the flow of the main story. This is a strategy unique to graphic fictions, which have the potential to "spatialize time (shapes, gaps, distances and sequences showing pace, succession, etc.) while also expressing temporal relations verbally, [therefore] can create a uniquely complex sense of contemporaneous or retrospective articulations and integrations of what happened" (ORBÁN 2020, 319). The side stories are traumatic memories that are literally not integrated into Mai's life story.⁵ However, they also appear as side stories with background information meant for the reader only; it is no longer Mai's flashback that the reader follows. They represent, I argue, the silences and gaps of the traumatic events that remain unspoken by the protagonists who have experienced those events themselves. "Certain images of trauma slow down or halt narration, completely replacing or overwhelming words" (ORBÁN 2020, 320). The incorporated arrows amplify a strategy employed throughout the text: "the closer the narrative comes to a traumatic event it recounts, the more it relies on the relative delay between word and image, rendering the reader a party to misrecognition and retroactive understanding" (ORBÁN 2020, 320). At the end of Chapter 2 the text says "the street *like a wound* had closed over the space where it [the mother's face and the memory of it] had been" (HUYNH 2015; my emphasis). The notion of trauma, literally Greek for 'wound', as an injury inflicted upon the mind is here represented in a mix of mediated memories, with their absences, silences, sometimes bridging and sometimes unrelated movements through Mai's memory. These mediated and digitised responses to the representation of migratory movements by boat make the 'wound' of these experiences more tangible, and might encourage greater imaginative investment and empathy by the spectator.

The webcomic foregrounds the generational effect of the migrating families' experiences of crisis. Mai has been majorly influenced by her father's traumatic years at the re-education camp, in which she lacked a father's role in her life, and is drawn to Quyen and her son Truong, whom she meets on the boat, to protect him

5 One can also apply a psychoanalytic reading in this context and argue that the reader's scrolling down inside the story is a way to enter a person's unconscious and access repressed memories, a notion that plays an important role in Freud's model to analyse trauma.

from what has happened to her father. She feels empathy for Truong as she sees something in him that reminds her of her traumatised father: “She finally understood, with a deep internal tremor, what it was that had drawn her to the boy all this time. [...] It was his face. The expression on his face was the same expression she had seen on her father’s face every day, since he’d returned from re-education. It was a face dead of surprise” (LE 2009, 254). The connection of Mai’s father to the little boy Truong foregrounds the fact that no person, no generation, and no age group can be safe from the aftermath of traumatic events, especially when it comes to escaping from and fighting in wars. Moreover, the intimate bond between Mai, Quyen, and Truong is based on their interdependency. This social structure mainly comes into being due to the traumatic situation they are all in, yet it resembles a family structure like the one that Mai has left behind. The story concludes with an aural sensation: the splash of the sea surface when Truong’s dead body is thrown overboard. Everyone, including Mai and Quyen, looks away, as the moment is too terrible to witness, “the spray moistening their faces as they look forward, focusing all their sight and thought on that blurry peninsula ahead, that impossible place” (LE 2009, 272). The splashing sound has been included in the webcomic at previous points, implying that Truong’s fate is more than singular and individual, but a collective and shared experience. Following this, the webcomic ends with contextualising information on how many people fled Vietnam and how many probably died while doing so. This ending may seem strangely abstract, given the previous narrow focus on Mai’s story, but it also reminds the reader that this fate is one among many potentially similar ones.⁶ And in the end, Truong’s death ultimately withdraws the hope for a renewal of the family Mai has lost. The webcomic therefore underlines the psychological need for a socially safe environment, which Mai is missing in the context of her boat journey, yet also challenges us to regard shared trauma as an instrument with which to form a sense of community and identity.

The artist Matt Huynh himself has commented on the communal aspect and continuous urgency of this story:

The Boat is the most urgent and immediate comic I’ve ever made – a work of a kind I’ve never quite seen before and a unique chance to engage an issue so entangled with my own life. It’s a work that deals not in metaphor or analogy, not exclusively fiction or history and impossible to segment artist from subject. This resulting work is proof of my life, luck, of a country’s compassion for people in the most vulnerable of circumstances over 40 years ago and our urgent, unavoidable connection to today’s asylum seekers and refugees.” (HUYNH in MACDONALD 2015)

6 The concluding statistics state the estimated numbers of Vietnamese refugees to Australia in the 1970s. More than the short story by Nam Le, the webcomic therefore contextualises its personal narrative within a larger, particularly Australian political debate.

Conclusion

This chapter started by asking how memories of migration – the intangible heritage of people moving in a globalising world – travel across the seas. Two examples were presented of fictional traumatic journeys that explore the inevitable interconnectedness of the traumatic experiences before and during the journeys. Each protagonist carries the trauma of an old life, of loss and of crisis along with them – memories that are triggered by new traumatic experiences during the journeys. The interactive digitised format, which gives control to and at the same time shocks the reader, reinforces the juxtaposing of memories of the past with current events, and in line with Matt Huynh’s statement above, discloses how refugee stories of the past link with those of today’s refugees. Consequently, “even when a graphic narrative focuses on traumatic events as hidden, unknown or silenced, its medium often yields a counter-discourse to traumatic absence” (ORBÁN 2020, 319). The unspoken traumatic events of the past are triggered by present events and vice-versa; hence there is no definite absence, but an acknowledgement of the traumatic memory. The graphic fiction transforms “the silence modulated into a partial retrospective voicing and visualization through the interactions of verbal and visual narrative tracks [...and engenders] the integration of a previously unknown or silenced traumatic experience through listening, secondary witnessing, and subtly or thoroughly transforming one’s own life in the process” (ORBÁN 2020, 319).

Mediating traumatic migrant stories which are based on personal memories into interactive digital formats is a means of challenging the hegemonic national discourse which sidelines or silences migration. Through their participatory outset, these digital stories are inclusive and globally accessible, while at the same time highlighting that these experiences are not universal but specific.⁷ In their fictionalised framework they make use of the ‘secondary witnessing’ inherent in travelling memory and take part in the construction and dissemination of collective memories on human right issues on a global scale. Moreover, the interactive digital format permits innovative ways of engaging with medial representations of trauma, since “[t]rauma theory continues to evolve through new ways of understanding the process of traumatization and recovery, as our knowledge of the traumatic process inevitably changes with advances in cognitive science, while profound changes in media exposure and use and the shifting dynamics of a global exchange of information shape what counts as trauma and how it can be voiced and acknowledged” (ORBÁN 2020, 326). By exploring the importance of memory and remembering, *Sea Prayer* and *The Boat* shift the focus from oversimplified images of the boat back to personal stories of the individual asylum seeker. The 360° YouTube adaptation of *Sea Prayer* has thereby provided an example of how traumatic migrant memories

7 For another means of interactive auditive access to memory, see Romany REAGAN: *Unlocking Heritage Stories*, pp. 73–89 in this volume.

and images such as the photograph of the little boy Alan Kurdi undergo a recontextualisation in the form of the fictionalised letter by a father like Kurdi's. The web-comic adaptation of "The Boat" more explicitly links to the author Le's and visual artist Huynh's own memories, yet employs similar means of reinterpretation, adding, omitting, and reformulating a personal migrant experience in order to make a formerly inaccessible traumatic experience virtually tangible. It sets its narrative inside the refugee boat, makes the boat's movements and sounds palpable, and thereby humanises the protagonist's individual refugee experience. While I in no way want to understate the power of the original literary texts, it is particularly in these digitised, interactive forms that notions of memory and trauma are strongly explored and experienced. Since the digital interactive format expects an active, involved spectator, it may also produce an ethical response and engagement with the topic of boat migration at large.

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Media Credits

- Media 1** THE GUARDIAN 2017a.
- Media 2** HUYNH 2015.