

“The Recounting”: Artist’s statement

“The Recounting” as an entire project explores the gaps, spaces, and lapses in memory that occupy stories as they are counted — and recounted — over generations. It is a multifaceted project that incorporates quoted texts within visual art, but it centers around an original poem titled “The Recounting.” I landed upon this layered, fluctuating form as a means to illustrate how stories evolve, both in content and form, each time they’re old.

The origin of this project centered around my emotional gravitation toward Nam Le’s short story, “The Boat.” There was something profoundly potent about the story — the intense characterization of love, the liminality of the boat, the seemingly imminent atmosphere of death. Moreover, the story hit me hard because it was the first to introduce me to the broader, collective story of the boat people who had fled Vietnam in one of the largest mass exoduses in modern history. I was fascinated, and in tandem, heartbroken, by the fact that I had known essentially nothing about this tale: nothing about the nearly two million Vietnamese people who left their homes by boat. I imagined, then, the story of “The Boat” as paint, and Nam Le as a painter drawing a brushstroke over society, spreading this narrative to the world. I imagined, also, my former self as existing in a gap — in a place on the canvas unexposed to the colors, textures, and contents of this history.

As I looked further into this moment of global history, I stumbled across an opinion, published in CNN in 2021 by Nina Trieu Tarnay, titled “[We left my little brother and a world behind us when we escaped Vietnam by boat.](#)” Tarnay, whose family left Vietnam by boat 48 years ago, recounted a story nearly identical to Mai’s. She was given a time and location to meet a “smuggler who trawled along the coast picking people up under the cover of night,”

she was at sea for almost six weeks, and she was separated from her brothers and father when she left on the boat. In reading the opinion piece, I realized just how universal and how *real* Nam Le's "The Boat" was. I grew fascinated with not only how a collective's shared story can be told in countless ways, but how *one story* can be told in numerous ways depending on time, weather, day, memory, human error, etc.

Indeed, Matt Huynh's adaptation of Nam Le's "The Boat" presented to me a thrilling avenue to examine how one particular narrative can evolve as the speaker, or beholder, of the story changes. As mentioned, I previously felt that *I* had existed in a gap of knowledge due to my ignorance about Vietnamese history, and I transferred this preoccupation with *not knowing* into the question of what elements of a story disappear as it is told over time. What gaps emerge in the story as parent tells it to child? As one recounts the story aloud, as opposed to over paper? As generations pass by?

Huynh's adaptation of "The Boat," which was published seven years after Le's short story, diverges from the original story in numerous formal ways — namely, adding visual and audio elements alongside the text. As an English major, though, I could not help but remain preoccupied with the changes to the language, especially as I considered how refugee stories are so often passed down through voice. There is something striking about the fact that Huynh managed to tell the same narrative as Le, despite including less than fifty percent of the original text. To me, this raised the question of what those subtracted texts added to "The Boat" in the first place.¹

¹ *What is the value of the word if it can be replaced by a painting? What does the word offer specifically in comparison to visuals or sounds?*

To first quantify the amount of texts that overlapped between the short story and interactive graphic novel, I highlighted in Le's version every word that appeared in the latter. To my surprise, Huynh scarcely, if ever, changed Le's syntax. Even more, he often copied Le's full sentences, almost never eliminating a word from the middle of a phrase. In turn, the changes to language that Huynh did make took on all the more weight.

The first shift occurs four pages in, when Huynh alters the pronoun "he" to "Truong." It's a change so minor I scarcely noticed it, but the second change stands out more; when Le introduces the old Vietnamese folk song, he writes, "Two nights later, as Mai had been trying to sleep on deck, the song began" (5). Huynh, however, alters the temporal descriptor, writing, "Four days ago, as Mai had been trying to sleep on deck, the song began." The change evidently exists in context of the larger alterations within Huynh's adaptation, such as the elimination of certain passages describing Truong as well as characters like Ann Phuoc. Still, the rephrasing from "Two nights later" to "four days ago" indicates a tremendous repositioning of the speaker's temporal viewpoint; such amendments to the text reflect the widening position that is the "speaker" as stories are passed down over time.

Likewise, I was most struck by an alteration on page six that shifts the tense. Nam writes, "Here was how it began." The adaptation instead writes, "Here's how it began." The slide into the present tense produces proximity between the audience and the narrative, but even more, it signals the potential for a story to widen in temporality with just a minute change in language. Moreover, these changes are only rendered legible *by* the removal of texts, which provide space to the reconstruction of time and place. I am fascinated by such implications in the context of stories that originate during moments of widespread violence,

when millions of people experience a collective story, and each individual possesses the agency to alter the words, the grammar, and the structure of the one they wish to tell.

To visualize such alterations between Le's and Huynh's "The Boat," I pasted the entirety of Le's story into Adobe Indesign, then deleted all texts that were left out in the latter version. I also repeated the process but inversely, deleting everything that *was* included in Huynh's adaptation. Still, it wasn't until I placed these texts within the shape of a boat that I produced a visual form that both captured the story of "The Boat," along with the story of what it means to *recount* "The Boat."

Indeed, by turning the "The Boat" — with all of its empty spaces — into the shape of a boat, one is confronted with the embodied nature of a story. The tales of Mai, of Truong, of Tarnay and millions of others all took place on the boat but they only survived because someone made it off the boat. Stories, then, persist through transit, whether from one end of the ocean to another, or from one mouth to another.

Of course, however, just as not all refugees survived the boats, not all parts of the story survive a recounting. The visual gaps in the transcript of Huynh's "The Boat" offer an immediate exhibit of this. While Huynh's adaptation ultimately fills these gaps through art, sound, and archival work, my portrayal of his transcript reveals the spaces of blankness that one carves into a story as they retell it: the spaces that allow for shifts in time, attitude, atmosphere, perspective, tone, or, of course, content.

I was faced with countless creative options with the transcripts. I played around with a white background and then the background of an ocean, but I landed upon a black screen behind white text, as the pure blackness most intimately reflects the potential of the ocean to

swallow bodies, as well as for silence to swallow history. At the same time, the blankness of the screen gives room for imagination, for one to re-fill the space with the words, images, or colors that make the most sense.

Finally, my project centers itself upon my poem, “The Recounting,” which is an example of a narrative I produced within the empty space I found within Huynh’s adaptation. By staring into the visual gap between “Here’s how it began” and the subsequent sentence, “In the yard,” I found myself imagining the story of how “it began” not only for Mai but for her mother. “The Recounting” is thus a contrapuntal poem, with the left column reading as a direct excerpt of Le’s “The Boat”² and the right column as a re-envisioning of the story through Mai’s mother’s perspective, beginning with the act of birth. Read horizontally, the poem weaves two perspectives together into one, demonstrating how the recounting of a story intimately connects two individuals.

As Mai and her mother come into contact in the narrative, so too do the pronouns designating their individuality, causing an abrupt clashing — and combining — of two selves, two stories into one. “The Recounting” thus illuminates the element of a mother’s sacrifice that allowed for the story of Mai’s escape in the first place. With its two columns, it depicts two bodies that ultimately come into one in the end as the mother hands the money off to the daughter, the only things holding them together being fear, and the recounting: for the mother, recounting money, and for the daughter, the recounting of the story. Through this project as a whole, I convey to the audience the profundity of the act of recounting stories through generations, and even within generations, and particularly how there is value in re-envisioning parts of a narrative that are lost to memory or time. The final three slides

² It was fun to mirror Huynh’s endeavor to eliminate words while preserving the core of Le’s narrative

speak to these same questions and ideas, offering visuals that play with dark and white spaces that illuminate certain parts of Le's and Huynh's "The Boat," thus portraying the possibility of numerous stories to arise out of one, depending on context and speaker.

Works Cited

Huynh, Matt. "The Boat." *SBS*, 2015, www.sbs.com.au/theboat/.

Le, Nam. *The Boat*. Vintage Books, 2009.

Tarnay, Nina Trieu. "Opinion: We Left My Little Brother and a World behind Us When We Escaped Vietnam by Boat." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 30 Apr. 2021, www.cnn.com/2021/04/30/opinions/escape-from-vietnam-after-saigon-our-american-story-trieu-tarnay.