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Reclaiming the Past, Queering the Present: Nghi Vo's Speculative Fiction as a Space of Narrative Hospitality

Reclamando el pasado, *queerizando* el presente: La ficción especulativa de Nghi Vo como espacio de hospitalidad narrativa

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Abstract: Nghi Vo's *Singing Hill* Series follows the character of Chih, a monk that has been entrusted with the task of collecting and preserving stories that either have never been recorded before or that have been deliberately excluded from the canon because they contradict national, hegemonic and cis-heteropatriarchal discourses. Throughout the course of the saga, Chih learns and writes down stories that have been neglected, erased and forgotten, and we, as readers, see how these acts of narrative preservation help to build a present in which those that have been casted as "other," and in particular, racialized sapphic women, are able to find and recognize themselves. My argument is that the speculative elements of the novellas help to question what is thought of as normal, as possible and as real, and thus, allow for the texts to be read as spaces of narrative hospitality where sapphic women can not only reclaim their (her)stories but can also build a home and a community through them.
Keywords: Speculative fiction; queer memory narrative hospitality; narrative representation.

Resumen: La saga *Singing Hill* de Nghi Vo sigue al personaje de Chih, une monje a quién se le ha encomendado la tarea de recoger y preservar historias que nunca han sido archivadas antes, o que han sido deliberadamente borradas del canon por contradecir discursos nacionales,

hegemónicos y cis-heteropatriarcales. A lo largo de la saga, Chih escribe y protege historias que han sido borradas y olvidadas. A través de estos actos de preservación narrativa, Chih ayuda a construir un presente en el que quienes han sido marcadas como "lo Otro" y, en particular, las mujeres sáficas racializadas, tienen una oportunidad para encontrarse y reconocerse a sí mismas. Mi argumento es que los elementos especulativos de estas novelas cortas ayudan a cuestionar lo que se considera normal, posible y real y, por lo tanto, permiten que los textos se lean como espacios de hospitalidad narrativa donde las mujeres queer no solo pueden reclamar sus historias, sino que también pueden construir un hogar y una comunidad a través de ellas.
Palabras clave: Ficción Especulativa; memoria queer; hospitalidad narrativa; representación narrativa.

INTRODUCTION

Nghi Vo is an American science fiction author who has recently gained public recognition for her writing, which often interrogates essentialist constructions of identity and centers queer possibilities instead. This popular and critical acclaim has also been extended to her *Singing Hill series*, an ongoing saga of sapphic novellas that includes *The Empress of Salt and Fortune*, *When the Tiger Came Down the Mountain*, *Into the Riverlands* and *Mammoths at the Gates*. The series follows the character of Chih, a monk that has been entrusted with the task of collecting and preserving stories that either have never been recorded before or that have been deliberately excluded from the canon because they contradict national, hegemonic, and cis-heteropatriarchal discourses. Throughout the course of the saga, Chih learns and writes down stories that have been neglected, erased and forgotten, and readers see how these acts of narrative preservation help to build a present in which those that have been casted as "other," and in particular, racialized and sapphic women, are able to find and recognize themselves.

The saga can be read in any order, as all novellas can be considered independent texts even if they share the same setting and characters, as well as a clear thematic concern regarding connections between storytelling, identity, and memory. For instance, *Into the Riverland*s blurs the lines between story and history and between person and character, exploring how the influence of the archive is less present in remote locations of Vo's fictional empire, and emphasizing a link between physical and narrative spaces that permeates the whole saga. A similar

theme is present in *Mammoths at the Gates*, technically the "fourth" instalment of the series, where readers delve into the material space of the archive. Vo examines the physical embodiment of both history and stories through not only the material space of the archive, an abbey that also functions as the largest library of all the fictional Ahn empire, but also through a speculative transformation of personal archives and stories into literal flesh to protect dear memories.

These texts, if not the entirety of the saga, explore the different ways stories are able to shape both personal and national memories, as Vo's characters deliberately embody and protect different tales to warp an exclusionary archive that leaves subaltern bodies behind—a violent form of erasure that seeks to legitimize the violent annexation of the northern territories into the Ahn empire, portray non-citizens as uncivilized and barbaric, and remove any queer experiences and stories from official history. In this way, the archive is revealed as a political apparatus that monitors and alters collective and historical memories and (hi)stories, thus becoming a "legitimizing instrument of power structures and prevailing authorities" (Manalansan 94; see also Derrida). By warping the archive—that is, by questioning its authority through the inclusion of queer racialized experiences—the protagonists destabilize national discourses of exclusion, and instead put the spotlight on different (her)stories that have been forcefully kept secret.

This allows, or rather, requires, thinking of storytelling as a double-edged sword of sorts. On the one hand, a form of social control that polices narratives that may question the legitimacy of the hegemony of the empire (Glave). And, on the other hand, a form of narrative agency, a form of justice and hope that is central to queer and racialized groups that have historically never been fully inside canonical narratives and national discourses, that do not fully pass the threshold of inclusion (Bomans). In this way, as Stone and Cantrell argue, "[a]rchival exclusions are reframed as intentional, pervasive reproductions of social order" (7) through epistemological and physical violence, rather than as accidental or apolitical.

My argument is that the speculative elements of the novellas, alongside their treatment of the archive, help to question what is thought of as normal, as possible, and as real, and thus open up possibilities for engaging with forgotten and erased stories in critical ways—reminding us of the power of the archive to reshape national myths and even embroider narratives of who can be included in the idea of the nation and the empire,

and who is a passing guest that will never be granted the right to belong. I believe that it is precisely this radical potentiality that allows Nghi Vo's fiction to become a space of narrative hospitality where (her)stories are able to both highlight and mend the wounds of the empire. In this way, Vo's fiction becomes a space in which sapphic and racialized women can not only reclaim their experiences but can also build a home and a community through them.

In "Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe," Paul Ricoeur explores narrative hospitality as "an ethical encounter that demands the story of the other to be listened to and welcomed" (Kearney 42), that is, as an ethical responsibility with the other and their stories, and as a re-examination of the boundaries between other and self (Barba Guerrero, "Vulnerabilidad y Testimonio," "Wounding the Archive"). Ricoeur's own work has been characterized as seminal in that it "that reminds us that the Other does not come alone, but has verbal and narrative baggage, and it is crucial to take responsibility" (Manzanas and Benito, 134) both "in imagination and in sympathy for the story of the other, through the life narratives which concern the other" (Ricoeur, 7). Through the lens of narrative hospitality, storytelling becomes a textual space from where otherness, and the vulnerability and violence associated with being cast as other, can be worked through and ethically shared, in an act of community that demands that the stories of the other are processed and told in whatever way is deemed necessary. In other words, narrative hospitality can be understood as a tool from which to explore the role of literature in creating hospitable spaces for social groups that have historically not been welcomed into the nation and the empire—such as the queer racialized women of these two novellas, thus establishing a connection between storytelling and dynamics of social violence and exclusion.

This is not to say that the saga offers perfect instances of hospitality. Rather, I contend that the characters' warping of the archive, whether it is by including forgotten (her)stories within the archive or by rejecting its power all together, is an act of narrative hospitality in itself that defies dominant imaginaries and discourses of otherness. That is, challenging the archive through speculation not only creates textual spaces where these women can see and find themselves, but this form of symbolic and narrative inclusion counteracts the historical discourses that leave these people behind or mark them as unwanted guests, barbaric others, or dangerous occupants. Here, the notion of narrative hospitality contextualizes Vo's work through an ethical lens and centers ideas of

narrative and national belonging, while the novellas, in turn, unsettle ideas of inclusion and exclusion through speculation and offer potentialities for "alternative worlds" (Schultermandl et al. 21) where queer lives might be rendered possible.

In order to explore the idea of narrative hospitality in the context of Vo's saga, I focus on two of the novellas: *The Empress of Salt and Fortune* and *When the Tiger Came Down the Mountain*. First, I look at *The Empress of Salt and Fortune*, which follows In-yo, a woman from the north of the empire who is forced to marry into the royal family against her will. I examine how she is presented as racialized, as uncivilized, and as inhuman, as well as the ways in which her queerness has been erased by the nationalist narratives that surround her historical figure. I focus on the mediated transmission of In-yo's story, which is told to Chih by another othered woman, and I argue that this act of sharing and transmission is a way of splitting the historical tale and historical wounds wide open to achieve an act of narrative hospitality that challenges hegemonic memory.

I then analyse *When the Tiger Came Down the Mountain* and its portrayal of three literal tiger-women who directly challenge their own representation within the archive in an exercise of agency and narrative justice. I argue that the instances of narrative hospitality present in this novella can be read as examples of what Vosloo describes as "archiving otherwise" (11), that is, using the archive "to challenge the story of the victor and the way in which it has been successfully transmitted" (13), or as a form of queering the cis-heterosexual archive (Watts)—both of them ways of warping the archive and its contents while resisting its authority.

While in *The Empress of Salt and Fortune* (Vo), Rabbit deforms the archive as an act of justice and affection towards In-yo, the narrative reparation of the tiger-women does not involve increasing the archive or belonging to it, but rather renouncing their authority directly as they confront the pain caused by the unique imperial history. Both moments are incredibly different, with Chih being invited to the space of exile and helping to remember the figure of In-yo there; while in the second text, Chih is confronted with the reality of archival erasure and alternative ways of remembering. Both stories are fragmented, mediated, and to some extent incomplete, but both involve imperfect instances of narrative hospitality. This way of sharing stories and remembering communally does not erase the pain suffered by other women, but it does allow them to

create their own alternative archives where they stop occupying the figure of object and other, where they can exist on their own terms.

Finally, this article ends with a brief conclusion that exposes the commonalities between the two texts and their different strategies of narrative hospitality and their relationship to the archive, emphasizing the critical nature of Vo's work.

1. Forgotten Places, Forgotten Herstories: In-yo and the Empress of Salt and Fortune

At the beginning of *The Empress of Salt and Fortune* (Vo), readers are introduced to the world of the Singing Hills saga, which draws its name from the religious order the protagonist belongs to—an order that serves as both a physical and spiritual archive within the empire. Its clerics, which use gender neutral pronouns and renounce their past lives before joining the order, are entrusted with the task of recording the stories and histories of the empire, its people and its places, both big and small. Acolytes are encouraged to "speak to the florists and the bakers as much as to the warlords and magistrates" and to value "accuracy above all things" (Vo, *The Empress* 17), as the only way to preserve history seems to be to record all its parts. The clerics draw from official records, yes, but also small anecdotes and personal stories, as everyday objects are considered to be fundamental parts of the fabric of history and, as such must be preserved through generations. To accomplish this arduous task, the clerics that explore the world to interview different communities or to write down undocumented historical events are accompanied by neixins, fantastical creatures that remember everything they listen to and that "need to have a place and a name for everything" (Vo, *The Empress* 16), making them great partners for the members of the order of Singing Hills.

While not every cleric judges the contents of the stories they write down, Chih, Vo's protagonist, attempts to record stories that have been deliberately forgotten and erased due to their contents and their ability to contradict national discourse and ideals. Chih's acts of narrative preservation serve to protect, legitimize, and record counter-narratives that challenge imperial discourses, counter-narratives that can be understood as "culturally-rooted aspects of one's history that have not yet become part of one's story" (Freeman 193; Herman), emphasizing once more the porous boundaries that separate history from (her)story. Moreover, I also claim that the retrieval of In-yo's story, as well as its separation from the

historical figure of the Empress of Salt and Fortune, serves to humanize queer and racialized women that have been rendered other by the fictional figure of the empire.

Vo's story begins next to the Lake Scarlet, a large body of water that is believed to be haunted due to its reddish colour—perhaps stained with the blood of In-yo, who lived in that location after being forcefully exiled from the imperial family. Next to the lake, Chih finds a house that has its own name, Thriving Fortune. Despite its name, the building seems to be in quite a bad condition, and has only one inhabitant, an older woman called Rabbit because of her prominent incisors. Rabbit welcomes Chih and their neixin, Almost Brilliant, into her home, and offers to share her life experiences and those that surround the place they stand in, since they seem to be very closely intertwined. After being told "[w]elcome to your place in history, grandmother" by her guest, she answers that she is "pleased that the *true history* of Lake Scarlet will be told" (Vo, *The Empress* 16, my emphasis). While Chih, as a monk, seems to wield the power to welcome people into official narratives, their connection to the archive rendering textual thresholds porous, Rabbit presents herself as the one that holds the true story of In-yo's life and displacement.

Rabbit begins her tale describing her humble origins, recounting how she was sold to the imperial palace at a young age, where she worked as a cleaner for several years until she was named lady in waiting of the future empress. From there, Rabbit explains the dynamics inside of the palace, and goes on to describe the arrival of the newly wedded In-yo to the court. This proves to be very emotionally demanding, and Rabbit is forced to split her account in several days, as the effort of sharing the past becomes too much to bear in one sitting. While it has been argued that "memory desires to take a narrative form" (Dragojlovic 93., referring to Sturken 234), verbalizing one's memories is often a painful process. From this point on, readers encounter a fragmented tale, one that is very much mediated, heartfelt, and told through the eyes of Rabbit, as she struggles to share with Chih the different ways in which both her and her loved ones have been erased and misrepresented within the official history.

Over the course of several days, Rabbit tells Chih of her friend In-yo, and of how she was never seen as human, but rather as "the future mother of the emperor" (Vo, *The Empress* 24), a crude woman, an intruder within the palace due to her northern ancestry. She is perceived as a barbaric womb, and, even, a necessary sacrifice to continue and expand the imperial legacy. In-yo's inadequacy is made even more prominent when

examining the attitude of the palace servants, who both care for her and spy her, always watching for the slightest hint of treason. In fact, to the imperial workers that have been raised in the courts, it was "a bitter thing" to "be sent into the wilderness with a barbarian empress" (Vo, *The Empress* 17), their surveillance justified and even necessary in their eyes. Through those same eyes, they constantly describe In-yo as uncivilized and brutish in both appearance and character. Rabbit tells Chih the following:

> History will say that she was an ugly woman, but that is not true. She had a foreigner's beauty, like a language we do not know how to read. She was barely taller than I was at then, and built like an ox drover's daughter. Her two long braids hung over her shoulders as black as ink, and her face was as flat as a dish and almost perfectly round. Pearl-faced, they call it where she came from, but piggish is what they called it here. (Vo, *The Empress* 24)

In-yo's perceived ugliness is not only physical, but also metaphorical: her presence in the empire is an ugly mark that tarnishes its beauty. As the narration progresses, it seems that everything that is associated with her is "contaminated," marked as foreign, such as one of her dresses, which "the ladies of the women's quarters could only call strange and barbaric" (Vo, *The Empress* 25). Later on, readers learn of Chih finding said dress in present day and recording it as part of their clerical duties, embedding physical and affective objects in Rabbits' reparative narrative. Rabbit's tale is, in this way, a mosaic of sorts, composed of mediated and sown together memories, physical reminders of In-yo, and private conversations with Chih about the role of stories in shaping the archive. This dress, where "every stitch bites into her [In-yo's] history, the deaths she left behind her, and the homes she could not return to" (Vo, *The Empress* 25), helps to exemplify and to further problematize the empire's othering and exclusionary practices. It also reminds readers of In-yo's status as a "barbarian" that can never be fully included in the empire's civilized spaces, both physical, such as the palace, and metaphorical, like the official imperial recordings. Here, the "true history" of In-yo is not one linear or objective narrative, but rather, a compound of small objects and stories that, through affective connections that reject the idea of objectivity and an ethical duty to share In-yo's struggle, seek to represent her humanity.

In this way, Vo's *The Empress of Salt and Fortune* offers a counter-narrative that challenges the hegemonic discourse and representation of othered women in this fictional world. Here, the exclusion and dehumanization of In-yo is not an isolated incident, but rather, is symptomatic of a larger issue. In-yo's treatment is representative of institutional discourse of otherness, national belonging and racial superiority that lay at the heart of the empire.

As the text progresses, readers learn of In-yo being sapphic, a fact that has been deliberately obscured in the historical and popular records of the figure of the empress of salt and fortune. This information only comes to light because of Rabbits desire to preserve the memory of her friend in a way that honours her whole identity and acknowledges In-yo's queerness even in the prison that was her forced marriage. This version of In-yo, who "doesn't like chains around her neck" (Vo, *The Empress* 39) and is "as little like a proper Anh lady as a wolf is like a lapdog" (Vo, *The Empress* 40), defies expectations and problematizes the relationship between the personal and the historical. This facet of In-yo can only be shared in the presence of Chih, is meant to be recorded and written down to counter painful and restrictive imaginaries that erase In-yo's queerness as yet another strategy of dehumanization. By sharing and recording this, Vo offers and highlights instances of not only counter narratives but also "counter-memory" (Foucault) that challenge hegemonic and collective discourses that directly exclude and misrepresent queer and racialized people.

As Rabbit's story continues, nearing its end, readers learn about In-yo's forceful exile, as she is banished from the empire after giving birth to her only son. Rabbit explains that "once the emperor had his northern heir, he no longer needed a northern wife" (Vo, *The Empress* 45), which leads to In-yo being forcefully sterilized so that she cannot have children outside of her marriage and threaten the throne. In-yo, still injured and incredibly weak from the obstetric violence she has suffered, is forced to leave the royal palace. In order to avoid her divulging military or political secrets, she is prohibited from returning to her home, and she is exiled to Thriving Fortune, the cabin from which Rabbit now tells her story, and also, the place from where In-yo planned her revenge. Before her death, In-yo encrypts messages to her motherland using different objects that Chih has examined and recorded, such as the dress that was described earlier. In-yo relies on clothing, tarot, salt of various colors, and a fortune teller—hence

the title of the novella—to help protect her home and free it from the yoke of the empire.

Here, Thriving Fortune is re-signified as a dual space: one of exile and of narrative justice, as the cabin is the physical place from where In-yo's memories and stories are honored and recorded. Narrative and psychical spaces blend and bleed into each other's borders, as the occupation of narrative spaces is done precisely by reclaiming physical ones, by reclaiming the material landmark of exile. Thus, a place of violence becomes one of refuge, and words fill in the silence of In-yo's story. I believe that it is precisely this overlap that allows for us to read Chih's clerical labor as an instance of narrative hospitality, since their presence is key in reimagining and reclaiming In-yo as a complex individual, rather than as an empress or as a caricature from the "barbaric North."

> The cleric looks at Thriving Fortune and sees the history they own as a subject of the empire. As a member of their order, perhaps they own it twice over, and I do not begrudge them that. The Empress of Salt and Fortune belongs to all her subjects, and she was a romantic and terrible and glamorous and sometimes all three at once. There are dozens of plays written about her, and some are good enough that they may last a little while even after she is gone. Older women wear their hair in braided crowns like she did, and because garnets were her favorite gem, they are everywhere in the capital.
>
> In-yo belonged to Anh, but Thriving Fortune only belonged to us. (Vo, *The Empress* 82)

The novella ends with Rabbit asking Chih "do you understand?", a question that has been placed after every conversation they have had regarding In-yo. Rabbit's question demands that both Chih and readers rethink official histories, and center In-yo's experience instead. Thus, Rabbit's tale emphasizes the necessity of counter-memory and counter-narratives to reclaim forgotten stories, and to remember In-yo as fully human, rather than as other, as a stranger.

2. NARRATIVE AGENCY AND ARCHIVAL DISTORTION: TIGER-WOMEN IN *WHEN THE TIGER CAME DOWN THE MOUNTAIN*

The "second" short novella of the Singing Hills saga, *When the Tigers Came Down the Mountain* (Vo), begins with Chih's encounter with three

tiger-women in their own territory, and explores the different ways in which stories can be contested and weaponized as a means of both exclusion and self-preservation. Here, the speculative elements of the text allow Vo to introduce the shapeshifting tiger-women as physical embodiments of otherness in order to further examine the treatment of marginalized women in this fictitious empire and their relation to the archive—women who, like in In-yo, have been cast as non-human and in-human, as animalistic, as beast-like.

When they first meet, the three tiger-women—Sinh Loan, Sinh Hoa and Sinh Cam—are presented as dangerous predators, but also as "civilized" and "rational." The narrative emphasizes the complex society and hierarchies between tiger-women through their formal language, forms of address and historical knowledge. In fact, Chih appeals to their civility to protect themselves and their companions, relying on their knowledge of tiger-women's customs and rank systems to appeal to their pride and their values in order to escape. Here, readers encounter an inversion of racialized and colonial expectations, where the tiger-women proclaim to Chih that "you [Chih] are a something like a civilized thing, and I suppose that I must treat you as such" (Vo, *When the Tiger Came Down* 33)—that is, the expectation of barbarity and unruliness is placed upon Chih, rather than the feline people. This reversal continues and is made even more explicit when Chih clarifies the situation to their friends: "They can talk, and now they've seen that we can. That's-that means that they'll treat us like people" (Vo, *When the Tiger Came Down* 34).

Thus, Vo asks the audience who gets to be (considered) people, destabilizing through speculation the connections the human and the animal, between the self and the other. Later on, in this encounter, Chih appeals to the tiger-women's ego and offers them the possibility of recording their stories and writing down their names for the abbey's historical records, as they fear they might be attacked. Here, Chih entices them with promises of fame and glory, an opportunity for their unknown names to be carved into history, to be included into the official archive. Nevertheless, the tiger women reject the offer and instead, question the veracity and authority of the archive, asking about the existing records of other tiger-women.

Once the tiger-women discover that Chih knows of the tale of a tiger-woman who fell in love with a human woman, they demand to be told said story. Similarly to the previous novella, Chih experiences become a frame to rescue forgotten tales and herstories. However, rather than finding a

hospitable space where Chih is invited inside, where they are offered the status of guest, as in the previous novella, here the tiger-women demand to reexamine their portrayal within the archive, as they recognize its potential for violence and its tendency towards erasure.

> "We'll tell you when you get it wrong," growled Sinh Hoa abruptly, her voice like falling rocks. "We shall correct you."
> "Best not get it wrong too often," advised Sinh Cam, her voice like dangerous water." (Vo, *When the Tiger Came Down* 35–36)

They demand to hear the version recorded in the abbey and memorized by Chih, letting them know that, while they, the tiger-women, will correct any misrepresentation of Ho Thi Thao, they will react with violence if their kin are portrayed as beastly or barbaric. While Chih's involvement in this challenging of the archive and this questioning of official memories is by no means voluntary—since, again, Chih is attempting to use their knowledge of tiger stories to protect themselves from the tiger-women after entering their territory—, I believe that Chih's role as a cleric is essential to create a narrative space where tiger women are able to reclaim their stories and their cultural heritage, putting their own version of the story of Ho Thi Thao against imperial recordings.

Throughout the novella, this inside tale is interrupted by the tiger-women, who question it and eventually include their own versions of the story and the Life of Ho Thi Thao and her role in history. Through this mediation and narrative negotiation, the three tiger-women emphasize how the canonical and recording version of this (love) story, demonizes said tiger-woman, robs her of her agency and portrays her as monstruous. When discussing Ho Thi Thao's first-time meeting with Dieu, her love interest and future wife, the official recording portrays the tiger-woman as dangerous and animalistic, as someone who dismisses Dieu's presence by inviting her to take a different route if she so wishes. And yet, the Sihn sisters see this event instead as an example of her kindness and respect for her soon to be partner.

> "No, she would have said that kindly," rumbled Sinh Hoa, who Chih had thought was sleeping.
> "Lady?"
> "She wouldn't have been mean about it," said Sinh Hoa sleepily. "It's a courtesy. It's permission. It's being nice."

> "I'll remember that," Chih said, and continued. (Vo, *When the Tiger Came Down* 49)

The tiger-women advocate for different forms of queer memory that "open spaces for messy forms of being, becoming and remembering" (Çalişkan 262), questioning cis-heterosexual expectations and defying the implicit and explicit authority of the archive. Here, my view of queerness and queer memory is meant to be an expansive one, one that not only refers to the necessity of centering sapphic stories and sapphic desire, but also, one that encompasses larger discussions regarding what kind of subjects, and what kind of communities, have the possibility of belonging and performing normalcy. Indeed, when discussing Safiya Hartman's work, Gopinath describes Hartman's texts as queer in that they broadcast the "impossibility of normativity for racialized subjects who are marked by histories of violent dispossession," arguing that "for such subjects, a recourse to the comforting fictions of belonging is always out of reach" (Gopinath 167). I believe that Vo's texts can be read as queer in this way, apart from their perhaps more obvious discussions of sapphic and lesbian desire. Thus, by questioning normative forms of memory transmission and of generating knowledge, the tiger-women create narrative hospitable spaces where epistemic justice is possible.

By centering these queer possibilities, Nghi Vo emphasizes how hegemonic narratives hurt tiger-women, and the fact that this is the first time their version of their histories, their stories, and even their herstories, can be written and archived. Nevertheless, and with reason, the tiger-women distrust the archive, and reject the possibility that both an exclusionary narrative and their own version of their ancestors may be kept together without context or explanation, and may even be rendered equal. The three sisters express this worry when Chih asks them to offer their version of the story so that they might record a version that does not harm the queer tiger-woman protagonist

> "Please tell me how it went instead, lady" Chih said respectfully. "I can only tell the story as it has been told to me."
> "Even if it is wrong and wicked?" asked Sinh Loan coldly. "Even if, as you said yourself, you knew it to be imperfect?"
> "It is the only version of the story I know," Chih said. "Tell me another, and I'll tell that instead."

> "Or you will keep them both in your vault and think one is as good as the other," said Sihn Hoa, speaking up unexpectedly, her voice gravelly with sleep. "That's almost worse." (Vo, *When the Tiger Came Down* 59–60)

After the exchange, Chih promises to honor their story, and creates, once again, a mosaic of memory, historical record and personal experience to repair the violence of the archive and create a narrative space of hospitality and healing. By protecting and revising Ho Thi Thao's herstory, the three tiger women repair queer genealogies that have been damaged by the archive, forming queer "communities across time" (Dinshaw 12). I argue that this creation of alternative connections, this warping of the archive, is an act of narrative hospitality and narrative justice. In this way, queer affect becomes "a portal through which history, memory, and the process of archiving itself are reworked" (Gopinath 165), that, in turn, weaves together institutional, collective, and individual stories and memories.

Because Chih's tale is "a story told by humans who never heard it from a tiger" (Vo, *When the Tiger Came Down* 97), narrative hospitality, in this case, can only be achieved by directly intervening and rejecting the authority of the archive. Chih and the tiger women collaborate in the creation of a new, hybrid story that showcases the experiences of othered women, as Chih offers them details that were unknown to the tiger women, and incorporates their new, hybrid text as the "real" one. This hybrid and collaborative nature not only serves to highlight the fluidity of storytelling, but it also reminds readers of its potential to render forgotten lives visible, livable, and to create new queer, narrative spaces that hold spaces for those that have been made to inhabit the margins of society.

CONCLUSIONS

All in all, I have attempted to contextualize the work of Nghi Vo through the lens of narrative hospitality, arguing that her novellas rely on speculation to make the violent erasure of archive known and to denounce the ways in which queer racialized women are dehumanized and rendered other. Her saga opens up small yet meaningful opportunities to warp the archive, to create, through fragmented and mediated stories, bridges towards epistemic justice. From a hospitality perspective, Vo's stories become, or are revealed as, a textual space from where alternative ways of existing queerly may emerge, the saga a form of narrative shelter where otherness may rest.

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