

**Pro-Aesthetic Feminist Connection:
A Chicana Reading of Nguyen Thi Am's "Sleeping on Earth"**

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I. Under The Auspices of Globalization

In the summer of 2000, I sat in the Silver Dollar bar on Whittier Boulevard in East Los Angeles. Along with a roomful of others, I watched a theatrical re-enactment of Ruben Salazar's killing by a tear gas shell shot by Los Angeles police during the Chicano Moratorium, in 1970. Salazar's death occurs in the final scene in the bar, where throughout the day, the sounds of the Chicano Moratorium, filter in, sparking political conversation among the bar goers. The central character of the play is a Chicano veteran of the Vietnamese War, afflicted by horrifying flashbacks of battle. In one of these flashbacks, the Chicano soldier aims his gun at a Vietnamese soldier who emerges, wearing a conical hat that both obscures his face, and marks him as target. The Vietnamese character moves to center stage, faces the light, and is revealed to be a child. Paralyzed by the sight of the boy, the man's face contorts with terror and shame. He sways under the anguish of his situation. His knees weaken. He lowers his gun and falls to the ground, which signals the end of the flashback.

The Chicano soldier who refrained from shooting in the battlefield became, historically, an agent for resistance to the war in Viet Nam. In a paper delivered at the

University of California, Jorge Mariscal¹ described how Chicano soldiers reported feeling compassion for their Vietnamese counterparts. And the Chicana/o movement interpreted internal subjugation of the Mexican population as a function of the same brand of American imperialism that aggressively, ideologically, warred against a sovereign Viet Nam. Serving more often at the front than white soldiers, Chicano soldiers died and suffered injury at an atrociously higher percentage for this group's population.

Chicana/o compassion for the Vietnamese people comprised a cross-global cultural awareness and resistance to war. The recognition of the plight of these two populations, both sustaining destruction and carnage by U.S. imperialism, constitutes a global paradigm for politicization. This politicization generated liberation movements with activation on multiple fronts. For at the same time that the Chicana/o movement protested the war abroad, it demanded social, educational, and political reform in the United States domestically. Political analyses gauged the national vis-à-vis the international, one catalyzing the other.

Currently, complex cultural forces such as diaspora and reconstruction present similar opportunities for a continued exercise of compassion and mutual identification among Vietnamese, Vietnamese-American and Chicana/o and Latina/o groups. U.S. scholars in the humanities, aware of how global capitalism impacts inter-ethnic affiliation, through mechanisms of commerce, war, and migration, for example, articulate rigorous theories of ethnic subjectivities that the nation-state purportedly no longer shapes. Globalization theoretically de-emphasizes national identity formation. However, it is under the allure of the global that scholars become politically inert.

Globalization captivates an awestruck intelligentsia that is busy adjusting its lens, as if on a horizon cast by a new sun.

In a recent, special topic issue of the PMLA, entitled, “Globalizing Literary Studies,”² Edward Said argues that the “fragmentation and self-cancellation of the humanities,” does not offer resistance to the hegemony of the United States—“a state still willing to project, military, economic, and political force all over the globe.” Said astutely identifies that the “gravity of history has been excised” from the new fields of ethnic and postcolonial literary studies, and he urges scholars to seek such connections that, I herein argue, the historical Chicana/o resistance to the war in Viet Nam exemplifies. Said argues that scholars who, although very fluent in the new languages of subject formation, do not link these renovations to extant political crises spurred by U.S.-driven global economic, military, and environmental policy-making, to name a few.

Feminists of color clearly emerge amid such inaction, as agents engaged in cultural exchange and resistance to global economic oppression.³ Cultural dialogue, for example, among Chicana and Vietnamese women, constitutes a feminist critical praxis with an earlier point of conversion, in these two populations’ histories, during the Viet Nam War.

Having been born in the late 60’s, I experienced the war in Viet Nam by watching television footage that I could not process intellectually, but certainly absorbed visually. I attended school with students whose fathers were soldiers in the war. But I had no family members who had done so. So, although U.S. military aggression in Viet Nam did not directly affect my life, Chicana/o resistance to, and the political activism surrounding the Vietnamese War, did influence my consciousness as a Chicana, and a literary scholar. The Chicana/o movement does not excise the history of connectedness

between Viet Nam and East L.A., for example. The play that I watched at the Silver Dollar bar re-stages this history. Today, Ruben Salazar Park, on Whittier Boulevard, memorializes this resistance and connectedness; as it was Salazar, the journalist, and now martyr, who gave voice Chicana/o resistance to the Vietnamese War.

Furthermore, Cold War U.S.-sponsored military campaigns of aggression in Central America, during the Reagan-Bush years, simulated the same, alleged *raison de etre* as that invoked to justify the war in Viet Nam. Anti communist military campaigns, in Central America prompted alliances between Chicana/o and Latina/o communities that sparked further discussions about how to retain difference, yet build coalition within and among, these U.S. immigrant populations.

The Chicano movement needed to address the political histories of Central Americans, as well as represent itself as a gendered constituency. These dialogues result in such new taxonomies as Chicano/Latino (denoting coalition and dialogue between Mexican-Americans and other groups from Central and Latin America); and Chicana/o or Latina/o (denoting gendered identity-formation). These newly-coined categorical possibilities impact what Said argues is the orientation of the new generation of scholars who are “much more attuned to the non-European, genderized, decolonized, and decentered energies and currents of our time.” (64) However, as these identities become more and more the highly refined, esoteric, and malleable subjects of elite academic study, de-politicization results.

In important departure, Chicana and women of color scholarship resists enchantment with globalization to offer paradigms for connecting the humanities with women’s activism. In this paper, I aim to bridge Chicana and Vietnamese women’s subjects by a practice of sentiment, of *feeling*. When taken in this vein, the globalization

dance of antimony provides through its selfsame thematic, a methodology for an international resistance that global feminism incorporates and projects.

In this paper, I specifically examine the globally-reaching and gendered, resistant aesthetic of Nguyen Thi Am's short story, "Sleeping On Earth;"⁴ and do so with little regard for the requirements of intellectual, historical, or sociological validity, veracity, and authority. As a Chicana scholar, I wish to impede the de-politicization of identity and literary studies, borrowing from each field to construct a linkage of aesthetic sense and potentially convergent sentiment between Vietnamese and Chicana female subjectivity. I hazard a critical footing to argue a felt comprehension for a Vietnamese female subjectivity. In doing so, I am risky with sentiment. I do not disallow its invocation in an academy I want to impact.

In "Sleeping On Earth," a decidedly anti-romantic and female morale emerges from displacement and destitution. I feel particularly able to imagine this aesthetic of femaleness and abjection, contrived through the authoring of a narrative of poverty, displacement, and jeopardized motherhood. I discover a mutual affinity with the text because it shows me that its characters know, as I do, that gender, family, and social roles are performative, and highly contingent on material status, political power, and belonging. This affinity entices me to understand the aesthetic junctures between this story, which takes place in Hanoi, and a Chicana feminist aesthetic.

Before proceeding, in Part II of this article, with a close reading of "Sleeping On Earth," I specify my position as a reader who is a Chicana, a critic of color, and an ally to other women resisting global oppression. My personal apprehension of the history of Chicanas/os' opposition to the war in Viet Nam coalesces with my proclivity for reading international women's and oppositional literatures. For a more specific and traceable

apologia I cite the influence of cultural wartime compassion, Chicana/o history, and global feminism, as informative for my reading of “Sleeping on Earth.”

How I came to “Sleeping On Earth” matters to me. Though my transport to it obscures its compass, its map, its own chronicling, and lies outside of literary paradigms. Indeed my interest in the story goes beyond the scope of literary jurisdiction which would minimally require, for example, my ability to read the story in the original language, something I am unable to do. My analysis of the text relies on factors removed from the scope of my academic credentials, yet I will set out to construct a bridge between contemporary Vietnamese women’s literature and Chicana feminism, based on a non-belonging that is common to both subject positions.

I understand non-belonging in complex ways that impact the aesthetic. To designate aesthetic kinship as an inviolable realm not be imagined severely limits our ability to develop mutually and politically relevant topos for resistance to global structures of oppression. Although the work of a scholar such as Grace Chang⁵ helps us to actualize global women’s oppression, and documents the quantitative causes and effects of global policy-making for women around the world, literary and humanities scholars need to follow in her direction.

But by doing so, humanities scholars will certainly encounter the institutionalized, archaic, French concept of cultural *difèrence* that underpins much of the liberal theorizing on ethnic identity. Preserving *difèrence* in a time of acute global violence and enforced poverty against women, however, hampers compassion and precludes sisterhood. In this paper, I claim the space of female non-belonging as aesthetic, resistant, and inclusive of homeless and country-less women subjects.

Female subjects experience non-belonging in “Sleeping On Earth.” Chicana feminists delineate non-belonging as an ontological precept of Chicana subjectivity. In “Sleeping On Earth,” women are homeless. Thematically, this disconnectedness results from and equates with a lack of political, economic and, moreover, aesthetic power. Of these areas, I focus on the aesthetic. Nguyen poeticizes aesthetic non-belonging through characterization, narrative tone, and an inversion of the moral story.

The aesthetic of disenfranchisement, occurring in “Sleeping On Earth,” calls to me, as a Chicana reader and critic. Chicana feminism inherently encompasses global perspectives and a cosmopolitan orientation. The Chicana writer, Ana Castillo, for example, describes the status of Chicanas as one of belonging to no country at all:

The Chicana continues to be a countryless woman. She is—I am, we are—not considered to be, except marginally and stereotypically, United States citizens.⁶

Gloria Anzaldúa also expresses a sense of non-belonging:

As a mestiza I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman’s sister or potential lover.⁷

Disconnection, emerges not merely as a theme of Vietnamese and Chicana texts, but as a structuring aesthetic and sentiment of narration, experience, and feminism. Feeling and evoking and nurturing the knowledge of this disconnection, despite the circumstances that separate otherwise isomorphic feminisms, amounts to a shared liberatory feminist perspective and a base for politicking against globalization structures.

In their introduction to *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*,⁸ Chandra Talpade Mohanty structures solidarity as a thematic grouping of resistance to common problems:

What seems to constitute “women of color” or “third world women” as a viable oppositional alliance is a *common context of struggle* rather than color or racial identifications. Similarly, it is third world women’s oppositional *political* relation to sexist, racist, and imperialist structures that constitutes our potential commonality. Thus, it is the common context of struggles that determines our potential political alliances. (7)

In Mohanty’s, as well as my own Chicana feminist perspective, contemporary, feminist alliances bridge female populations in the United States with women in other nations. And global feminist alliances adhere through what Mohanty terms “relationality”:

What I want to emphasize, however, is the urgent need for us to appreciate and understand the complex *relationality* that shapes our social and political lives. (13).

Although much of Mohanty’s very valuable work proposes a conceptual “relationality,” I propose an investigation of the aesthetic realm of female disenchantment. In other words, I transfer the structure of Mohanty’s paradigm for critical perspective to the aesthetic.

II. **“Sleeping On Earth” and Chicana And Vietnamesea Disconnection: A Pro-Aesthetic Connection**

Nguyen communicates women’s disconnection, as well, in “Sleeping On Earth.” Disconnection is a universal affective experience of poor women’s subjectivity. Whether she is Vietnamese or Chicana/Latina, she negotiates her life within the structures of globalization economics, projected normative gender and maternal roles, and disproportionately labors to care for her children, her community, physical environment, and culture.

In Nguyen's story, an indigent single mother and her child live among other homeless people, under public view, in an alley of the back streets of Hanoi. The alley exists as a tertiary, peripheral, and remote moral space in the presumed order of the city. In its physical dimension the alley occupies a very small part of a larger society that has sustained successive wars and costly reconstruction.

Yet, the alley functions, in the civic sense, in total contrast to sites of "honesty," in this story. The alley's inhabitants do not possess a private life. The narrative gaze obviates their internal lives, flattening human emotion, intellect, and spirit. The narrative gaze cannot access motivations other than those most manifest in the lives of street people, now naturalized as dishonest and deviant persons. The narrative gaze incorporates only the externalized machinations of the homeless who become literary spectacle.

Aesthetic beauty does not accompany the spectacle of the destitute. Here, the principal character is a pockmarked gambler, a disinterested mother of the baby boy who dies at the end of this very short story. The narrator designates her alternately as, "the pockmarked woman," or "the woman with the pockmarked face." She is one of the "losers" who, I argue, elude the reaches of conventional critical and feminist models. There are no putative signs of anti-colonial protest, feminism, or humanism in this alley environment.

Nguyen's alley is a sector of the city in which immorality and idleness fester. Nguyen narrates this urban enclave with a tenor that is plain, ironic, and haunting.

It was in the back streets, near the train stations,
that the homeless gathered. They earned their living
there, honestly, dishonestly.

(Sleeping, 227)

Here, the homeless take up one of two lifestyle choices: to live “honestly, as dockers, carriers of buckets of water, and cyclo drivers” or “dishonestly.” And, “the dishonest professions are too numerous to mention.” (227)

However, the appearance of choice between honesty and dishonesty dwindles. For just as Nguyen presents these two options, she effectively blurs the boundaries between them; swiftly moving toward a near-biological determinism that always overshadows free will, by identifying *and* universalizing the category “human being”:

Wherever they live, human beings are human beings.
God, in creating them, gave them the same right to love.
So dirty kids accompanied the wanderings of the homeless.
(*Sleeping*, 227)

Having identified the alley’s milieu, Nguyen introduces the pockmarked woman and two other gamblers. They are nameless women who emerge in a syncretism with their abject environment:

One evening, in a deserted alley near the bus station
three middle-aged women in rags were playing cards.
(*Sleeping*, 227)

Each facet of this description performs a more and more acute demoralization of femininity.

These middle-aged women do not perform the expectations for wisdom, grandparenting, or cultural endowment. They shatter traditional matronly stature from the onset, and subsequently violate social, sexual, generational, and cultural norms throughout “*Sleeping On Earth*.” In an argument over the outcome of their gambling, they wake the child sleeping among them:

The quarrel between the players woke him up, and he
howled. He was no angel. Between his little thighs, black
with filth, nestled a tiny penis that, furious, shot a stream

of urine in an arch. His bawling bothered the players.
(*Sleeping*, p. 228)

The scream here foreshadows the child's death at the end of the story. Nguyen writes: "Screaming like that—you would have thought it was an ambulance siren." (228) What is here a metaphor will be actualized at the end of the story when the ambulance will drive the dead child away from his mother. Here, however, the invocation of the ambulance signals a downward turn in fortune: "The pockmarked woman had just lost." In reaction to her losing, she "stretched out a thin, filthy hand," and "slapped the baby's bottom." (228)

Nguyen's portrayal of a baby boy, whose mother gambles with her friends, marks a departure from traditional Vietnamese culture. We see the devaluing of the male child in the initial portrait of him:

He must have been a year old. He was sleeping. The quarrel between the players woke him up, and he howled. He was no angel. Between his little thighs, black with filth, nestled a tiny penis.
(*Sleeping...228*)

In Nguyen Huyen Chau's report, entitled "Women and Family Planning Policies in Postwar Viet Nam."⁹

Pregnancy and birth have generally been seen as a divine blessing bringing prosperity and happiness. The following traditional expression seems an accurate description of these values: "Happy is the man who has a large family. Even happier was the man who had many sons."

The mother in "Sleeping On Earth," decidedly does not represent the progenitor of culture and society. She is wretched, lusty a back street gambler and physically maligned in the narrative. She has a "filthy hand with long, flamboyant nails painted

the scarlet color of ten o'clock flowers." (228) Her fingernails are a performative element.

The two other gamblers tell the pockmarked woman to "rent him out." They threaten the mother that, "If he keeps screaming like that, we're going to have to stop the game." (228) So the pockmarked woman calls out, "Hey, Thuy, come over here, I'll rent him to you..." (228)

Thuy takes hold of the baby. She asks the mother to supply a sleeping pill then takes him to the public fountain.

The girl pulled open the kid's jaw violently and dropped the pill in. With her hand she scooped up water from the puddle under the spout and poured it into his mouth. The baby swallowed the pill, choking.

(Sleeping, p. 228)

The mother is unaware of the treatment of her baby in the hands of the young woman, for she is "deeply absorbed in her card game (228)." The only instructions the mother gives to the young peasant is that she pay the rent for the use of her child, bring him back before midnight, and feed him a bowl of rice gruel when he wakes up. The baby falls into a drugged sleep, "slumping over the young girls' arm like a wet towel." (229)

Thuy then proceeds with the child to the Hanoi train station. Nguyen depicts scenes in the Hanoi train station, as performative:

A young peasant in rags with a baby in her arms: nothing like it if you want to move the hearts of men.

(Sleeping, p. 229)

In opposition to the fixed composition of the alley, the train station unites otherwise separate social milieus, housing, for example, prostitutes and peasants alongside the businessman.

Nguyen depicts the Hanoi train station with an unstable veneer, barely concealing social, historical, and political forces.

The train station is a conglomeration, of motives, behaviors, and encoded references of politics, history, and war. City and country people intersect here. Nguyen details the young girl's performance—"her act"--and its effect on others in the station:

Hanoi train station...The young girl wove through the waiting passengers. She cried as she walked. Her tears flowed slowly, silently. From time to time she would stop in the middle of the crowd. An old man turned away, unable to bear the sight of her. A few well-dressed city dwellers smiled knowingly. She didn't bother stretching her hand to them. City dwellers lived in their civility. They didn't belong to her world. They might denounce her act.

(Sleeping, p. 229)

By the end of the evening, Thuy earns 30,000 dong, six times the cost of the rental, inspiring envy in the prostitutes, also working the station.

Two young prostitutes wandered in vain inside the station. Jealous, they smoked and bitched. "What a dog's life! That little peasant is making a fortune!"

(Sleeping, p. 230)

After successfully working through the night, Thuy realizes that it will soon be midnight. And she had been warned by the pockmarked woman to return the child, already fed, by midnight. However, "time goes fast when you're involved in what you're doing." (230) And Thuy decides that she won't risk being fined by the pockmarked woman for being tardy with the child:

The young girl jumped up and hurried back. The kid woke up. He was weak with hunger, exhausted by the sleeping pill. He stared up at the girl, wide-eyed. She thought of taking him to a rice stall, but she was afraid of being late. The woman with the pockmarked face would certainly demand a late fee if she took time to feed the baby.

(Sleeping, p. 230)

Thuy returns to child to his mother, assuring that he has eaten. The boy looks one final time into the face of his mother, now lying next to a strange man whose “face of a hired killer” works as an omen presaging the child’s imminent death:

The little one looked up at his mother. A vacant look, neither sad nor happy. A man lay next to her. The face of a hired killer. He grumbled at having been wakened. The woman with the pockmarked face took the baby under her arm. She placed it between the two of them. The kid fell asleep between its mother and the man.

(Sleeping, p. 230)

III. Vietnamese Literature of Disenchantment

In “Sleeping On Earth,” debased femininity and maternalism index gender formation, and the hampered lives of women. The death of the baby boy at the end of the short story reveals meanings and sentiments that include: the mother’s mourning, and the wider ramifications of free will, brittle familial, cultural and political structures, and the commodification of women’s and children’s bodies.

Vietnamese critic, Hue-Tam Ho Tai,¹⁰ argues that changing gender roles, political discourse, and Vietnamese women’s subjectivity culminate most recently in the “The Literature of Disenchantment.” For example, Nguyen’s construction of a detached narrator is shocking, disenchanting, and disturbing. The subject of Nguyen’s story “requires irony, detachment, and a strong sense of alienation (Hue-Tam Ho Tai 90).”

This tone shockingly understating reality. Sentences are brief and unadorned, even as the child meets his end. The narrator is inappropriate, as if poetically depleted, in reporting the child’s unnatural death:

And time passed. One hour...two hours...three hours... five hours. The sky grew lighter. The woman with the pockmarked face shifted about for a moment under her raincoat and then woke up. She lifted the baby. His body

was blackish. He was dead.

(Sleeping, p.231)

Nguyen desists from altering this tone, even when describing extreme, emotional torment:

A mother always suffers from the loss of a child. She let out the cries of a mad dog.

(Sleeping, p. 231)

In fact, Nguyen resumes the counting device that we see above, in the passing of time, to describe what is yet another spectacle in the alley:

One human being...two human beings...three human beings... people crowded around to see the unusual incident. Two policeman approached, curious. They dispersed the crowds. They called a cyclo and ordered him to drive the mother and the child to the hospital.

(Sleeping, p. 231)

The lack of narrative affect in “Sleeping On Earth,” becomes heightens in the closing scene of the story, when the mother cries like a “mad dog.” Nguyen draws a likeness between the pockmarked woman and a “mad dog.” The bestial element here resounds within the sphere of disconnection, invokes again the biological determinism noted earlier, and, in general actualizes what the narrative has all along been leaking through its naturalism. The homeless woman in this story becomes reduced, as all poor women are, to a biological essentialism, through global capitalist structures that render women’s lives, bodies, and sentiments into commodities. With this in mind, I consider “Chicana and Vietnamese Pro-aesthetics,” in this paper, as a narrative tampering with women’s affect that foregrounds and provokes global feminist alliances. In previous work, I examine the deployment of affect and performance techniques for women’s liberation movements in the United States and Latin America. Women’s suffering, though often debased in academic spheres, generates narrative and aesthetic agency.

The popular Vietnamese writer Duong Thu Huong says of her first novel that she was driven to become a writer because of the personal suffering in her own life. She goes further on to state that “the war left women only tainted, maimed, and scarred men with whom to spend the rest of their lives.”¹¹ Hue-Tam Ho Tai cites the writings of the literary critic Le Ngoc Tra:

Is it too sad, the portrait of the individual during this period? Yes, it is sad. Revolutions and wars cannot always be like a day at the festival. When a country and a people are suffering, whose private life can be whole?¹²

A historical purview of Vietnamese literary development highlights women’s presence in this cultural production. Vietnamese literary history can be viewed through a feminist perspective over three epochs: the Eastasian classical, the French colonial, and the 20th century. Similarly, Chicana literature is a heterogeneous production, sometimes identified as a tripartite system that includes: pre-Colombian literatures, Spanish, Spanish-American, and Anglo-American, generally.

Written in the early 19th century by Ngyuen Du, the Eastasian classicist, *The Tale of Kieu*¹³ is the classical masterpiece of Vietnamese Literature. In the introduction to the Yale University Press edition, Alexander Woodside (xi-xviii) plots the historical background of this long narrative poem that incorporates Chinese traditions.

To some extent, Nguyen Du’s relationship to the East Asian classical world was really somewhat like the relationship of many of his Western literary contemporaries to their Greek and Roman classical traditions.

The Tale of Kieu, is revered as the epitome of Vietnamese classical literature. It is stylistically important, combining forms from the Chinese novel with Vietnamese proverbs and folk sayings. The work endures as an influential classical and popular literary text.

Writing during the period of French colonialism is dialogic, and imbued with anti-colonialism, as well as feminist critique. Hue-Tam Ho Tai describes the literary practice of using the female personage to comment on life under colonial rule.

Gender acted as a coded language for debating a whole range of issues without overstepping the limits imposed on public discourse by colonial censorship. The Vietnamese woman stood like an emblematic figure against the canvas of tangled meanings and crumbling institutions that colonial society.¹⁴

Hue-Tam Ho Tai explains that, through the ages, going back to the 15th Century, an important body of literature consists of morally-instructive texts for women written in verse. This literature expounds the Three Submissions and the Four Virtues¹⁵. The Four Virtues include: housewifery, appearance, speech, and conduct. The Three Submissions required that a woman always remain a minor.

When young, they were under the authority of their fathers; when married, they came under the authority of their husbands; when widowed, they were required to acquiesce in the decisions of their sons.”¹⁶

Women are central to the literary history of Viet Nam which is genetically related to Chinese traditions in the pre-colonial time; and was subject to strict regulation by the French authoritarian state during French colonization.

Native writers, producing uniquely Vietnamese artistic forms and themes emerged importantly in the 1900's. Hue Tam Ho Tai states: “Only with the appearance of native fiction in the 1920's did literature truly become a vehicle of cultural discourse (102).”¹⁷ However, Nguyen's contribution to contemporary literature reflects what Hue-Tam Ho Tai argues is a literature that “focuses on the individual pulled between the traditional and the modern, rural values and urban desires.”¹⁸

For example, in “Sleeping On Earth,” a scene takes place in the Hanoi train station wherein differing gender values, combine with country and city attitudes. Thuy’s appearance triggers male desire for traditional gender norms:

A mature man, graying at the temples, in uniform, looked over in her direction, bothered.

(Sleeping, p. 229).

He asks Thuy, “where’s your husband?” She answers, “he sacrificed himself in Cambodia.”

(229) The inference to Cambodia (whether true or not) prompts him to give her money.

He admonishes her to clothe the baby. He inquires about her condition, suggesting that she change her clothes,

...go buy some dry clothes for the baby. Give him something to eat, or he’s going to come down with pneumonia.

(Sleeping, p. 229)

The man gives her money and the narrator, significantly, dwells on his feelings which correspond with economic agency in this interaction: “He felt gripped by a strange sadness.”

(230) The rupturing of his idealization of the peasant triggers a rare exhibition of sadness in the otherwise emotionally monotone narrative.

The peasant woman with an infant son is an icon; symbolizing the matrix of the cultural practice and continuity. But, the ideal makes way, disastrously, for the real as cultural foundations are dashed apart on the city streets.

The young girl carried the baby through the rain.
Her conical hat protected her head and her breast;
further down, her body and the baby’s thighs
streamed with rain. People who had taken shelter on
the sidewalk called to her, worried.

(Sleeping...229)

In “Sleeping on Earth,” specifically, Ngyuen Thi Am achieves an inversion of the moral story. The final paragraph of the story, a place normally reserved for moral instruction in the parable, for example, is, on the contrary, light-hearted, yet ironic. The baby boy comments on his life:

Souls who have suffered down here on earth go to heaven. When he arrived, the little one told his friends:
“During my stay on earth, all I did was sleep. Life down there is just one long sleep.”

(Sleeping, p. 231)

Nguyen deconstructs the moral story that, by definition, does three things: teaches a moral, depicts moral choices, and comments on social injustice. “Sleeping On Earth” then works in multi-dimensional ways: to underscore the exhaustion of gender and cultural norms in the lives of contemporary female subjects; and to structure a feminist literary aesthetic that collapses the moral story.

Sustained narrative stoicism combines with the singular suppression of a mother’s emotional response at the death of her son, in Nguyen’s deconstruction of the moral story. In “Sleeping On Earth,” narrative and generic mechanisms disjoin and tear asunder aesthetic wholeness in what becomes a praxis of Pro-Aestheticism that translates readily to Chicana feminism. In recognizing how Nguyen makes meaning for a Chicana audience, through a poetics of disruption, disenchantment, and disconnection, I hope to have answered Said’s challenge to build frameworks for resisting global oppression by offering a work that connects “with ongoing and actual processes of enlightenment and liberation in the world.”¹⁹ Nguyen’s story, “Sleeping On Earth,” teaches me about its power as an aesthetically progressive and remarkable feminist, literary production.

Notes

¹ See Mariscal, Jorge, *Aztlán y Viet Nam*,

² Said, Edward, "Globalizing Literary Study," in Alonso, Carlos J., ed. *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, v. 116, n. 1, January, 2001, pp. 64-68.

³ See for instance, the following global feminist anthologies, wherein the collaboration of women across regional divisions evidences a practiced linkage of struggle.

Global Critical Race Feminism: An International Reader, edited by Adrien Katherine Wing; foreword by Angela Y. Davis. New York : New York University Press, 2000.

Frontline Feminisms: Women, War, and Resistance, edited by Marguerite R. Waller, Jennifer Rycenga. New York : Garland Pub., 2000.

Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism, edited by Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, Russo, Ann, and Torres, Lourdes. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991.

⁴ Nguyen Thi Am, "Sleeping on Earth," transl. by Phan Huy Duong and McPherson, Nina. *Grand Street*, New York: Grand Street Press, vol.12, number 4, 1994.

⁵ Please see for her reportage of women's conditions in : Chang, Grace, *Disposable Domestic: Immigrant Women Workers in the Global Economy*, Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000.

⁶ Castillo, Ana, "Massacre of Dreams: Essays on Xicanisma," *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings*, edited by Alma M. Garcia, New York: Routledge, 1997, pp. 310-312.

⁷ Anzaldúa, Gloria, "La Conciencia de la Mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness," *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings*, edited by Alma M. Garcia, New York: Routledge, 1997, pp. 270-274.

⁸ Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, Russo, Ann, and Torres, Lourdes, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991, pp. 1-47.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Hue-Tam Ho Tai. "Duong Thu Huong and the Literature of Disenchantment." *Viet Nam Forum* 14 (1993): 82-91.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.* (Primary source not available)

¹³ Du, Nguyen, *The Tale of Kieu*, transl. Huynh Sanh Thong. New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press.

¹⁴ see 10.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ see 2.