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Finding a place in the world- Vietnamese-Australian diasporic writing

“Ethnic literature’s hot. A writing instructor told me at a bar. And important too.” (Le 11)

What is specifically marked about Vietnamese diasporic writing is the overlay of interpretation offered by the host country’s involvement in recent Vietnamese history, specifically the involvement of Australia and America in the Vietnam/America War. Vietnamese diasporic writers are generally aware of the proliferation of writing and media attention on American and Australian war veterans, and, by contrast, the invisibility of Vietnamese war veterans and survivors. Writing about their experiences, then, becomes a political act (Nguyen; Pelaud). In Australia, Vietnamese-Australian diasporic writing has gained a transnational feel, especially with the international success of Nam Le. His work, and that of Chi Vu and Dominic Hong Duc Golding, has been included in mainstream educational curricula and anthologies of Australian writing. This essay will touch briefly on works by these authors, demonstrating how they provide a counter narrative to the dominant discourse of the Vietnam/America War in Australia, and, further, how they might pave a central place for Australian diasporic writing in general.

Vietnamese diasporic writers are actually compelled to write counter narratives by virtue of their lived experiences and their place in history. In the act of writing, Vietnamese diasporic writers of 1.5 and 2nd generations give voice to the South Vietnamese experience, and representations beyond colonial stereotypes of the passive oriental flower or the yellow peril. More postmodern Vietnamese diasporic artists, such as Nam Le and Chi Vu, subvert and play with Western assumptions and the expectations of mainstream readers. The South Vietnamese perspective of the War and the American withdrawal, which many see as a betrayal, is not part of the normative history of America (Pelaud 2010) nor Australia. Hence, representing and telling the Vietnamese experience of the war politicises Vietnamese diasporic writing as a form of resistance against the mainstream consumption of American

veteran war stories (Pelaud). This counter narrative is “a political and ethical act involving choice” (Nguyen “Speak of the Dead” 8).

It is unsurprising that coming to terms with this relatively recent aspect of Vietnam’s history, which was the catalysing event for the mass migration of the Vietnamese diaspora, is a feature of many Vietnamese diasporic writings. Indeed the creative act of writing and sharing this work with a witness has a role in transforming the war-time trauma experienced by both Vietnamese and host communities. As numerous trauma theorists have discussed, writing can be a healing act in its capacity to stage a negotiation with the ghosts of the past, often through the journey-story of the main protagonist. As Judith Herman (1994), Isabelle Thuy Pelaud (2010), and Viet Nguyen (2002, 2006) have all written, the empowering potential of the writing process can give voice to the unspeakable and thereby enable writers to process histories of which they or/and their families were a part.

The struggles of Vietnamese diasporic writers follow a familiar pattern of other migrant or refugee writings: they commonly use the autobiographical form, explore transgenerational issues in the host country, and map the experience of returning to the land of origin, which, most commonly, is no longer home (Brook and Nunn; Cole; Pham and Brook; Nguyen). Nguyen has characterised the work of these writers as identifying a spiritual dimension to Vietnamese diasporic writing. She writes:

much of the writing, art, and politics of Vietnamese refugees, is about the problem of mourning the dead, remembering the missing, and considering the place of survivors in the movement of history. This problem is endemic to refugees, for whom separation from family and homeland is a universal experience. When civil and revolutionary war causes that separation, the imperative to remember becomes more than nostalgic. It becomes, as Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong (2005) argues, a "political and ethical act involving choice" (Nguyen "Speak of the Dead" 8).

So, too, there are many texts that feature literal and metaphorical hauntings of the protagonist’s past. The process of acknowledging and/or exorcising these ghosts often forms both the structure and focus of Vietnamese diasporic writing.

With this preoccupation to the fore, I’d like to turn now to works by Dominic Huc Golding, Chi Vu and Nam Le in which the protagonists are reaching out for the spiritual dimension Viet Nguyen has identified.

For general Western spectatorship Vietnam does not exist outside of the war[...]The more Vietnam is mystified, the more invisible she becomes (Minh-ha 100).

Shrimp by Dominic Hong Duc Golding is an autobiographical tale of Golding's upbringing as an Australian adoptee from Operation Babylift - the mass evacuation of children from South Vietnam from April 3–26, 1975 on the fall of Saigon - and his return to Vietnam to discover his past. This play was listed on the Victorian Curriculum Education Drama list in 2007, has toured regional Victoria, and was published by Currency Press in 2007.

Golding explicitly compares and contrasts his experiences in contemporary Vietnam with what he knew from Hollywood renditions of the war. This engagement with prior discourse of the war is overt in *Shrimp* and the play offers a self-conscious counter narrative. The play's protagonist is also called Dominic and for the purposes of preserving a distinction between character and playwright – despite their evident closeness – I will call the character Dominic and refer to the playwright as Golding.

The play opens with Dominic enacting scenes from Vietnam War movies. As he states: “It was Hollywood's war and my reality”. He is determined to find traces of his history: “not America or boat people but mine”(3). In and by this formulation Dominic positions himself within and against the popular media consumption of the America/Vietnam War. Ironically, the very wounds in the American and Australian psyche produced by the War, pressure Vietnamese-Australian and Vietnamese-American authors to write refugee boat people stories. Dominic's statement rejects this pressure, which renders individual stories invisible. His journey is to reclaim his own personal history, to specify his individual story rather than be rendered invisible by the genre - as yet another boat people story. In so doing, Golding performs in very literal terms what Nguyen identifies as the ethical practice by Vietnamese diasporic artists in which they negotiate new spaces that enable more complex and diverse representations. Specifically, Golding's play re-negotiates the public sphere of performance and the intensely personal act of differentiation from the real and perceived mass of the 'typical' boat people narrative and from Hollywood reality.

In this complex public/private space *Shrimp* can address the ghosts of Golding's culture of origin as a healing process that makes possible the creation of a meaningful identity in the present as well as serving as witness to the past.

Initially, when he arrives in Cholon, he finds himself at home. He says: “I can feel it. Home....A place where I can look like everyone else and eat like everyone else” (13). Being able to pass as just another Vietnamese by virtue of his skin colour at first is a novelty. However this feeling of home is accompanied by the sense of its loss, as he states in the monologue: “ I have lost my culture, I soak it up hoping that there is something that will tell me who I am” (23). This hope, which reaches out for external validation to construct an authentic sense of self, is common to many *Viet Kieu* (diasporic Vietnamese), who are described as *mat goc* (rootless) by Vietnamese people.

Alongside this perception of the *Viet Kieu as mat goc* Golding’s play redresses numerous pre-perceptions of Vietnam and Vietnamese culture that circulate in the West. Nguyen (2006) argues that the ethical diasporic artist has to think about how their work is received in view of historical background and Western assumptions. *Shrimp* disrupts many Western assumptions in the complexity of its characterisation of figures familiar from Hollywood films, such as the female bar worker, Mimi, and Mai, a woman from a traditional hill tribe family. Mimi drops her bar girl facade with Dominic and explains her situation:

DOM: “How do you come to work in this bar, Mimi?”

MIMI: “Ah, yes, my mother is old and my father is sick. They are still at home in the Mekong. Very wet there. Water up to your knees in the monsoon. My sister and me, we don’t have big brother to help us, so we come to Saigon to make money for mother and father.” (Sc 11, 33)

Dominic first meets Mai when she tries to sell him photographs on the street but this conventional scenario, a fleeting street encounter, is complicated when Mai takes Dominic back to her village where he stays for a month. The play’s strategy of fleshing out individual lives, precisely the caricatures of Vietnamese ‘types’ that circulate in Western representations, overturn the clichés and disrupts narratives that serve Western views.

Dominic does not find what he is looking for in Vietnam in literal and personal senses: he is unable to locate the orphanage he was adopted from, and he does not locate an authentic self. His feelings and reactions are contradictory and in competition. Early in the play he declares:

“Me in Vietnam

I’m having a war with the Banana inside

And the yellow is winning” (19)

But later, going to a nightclub in Saigon, he confesses:

“I desperately wanted a conclusion

Be the nice American... Be a yuppie Viet” (30)

The closure of the play, of the quest and the character is troubling and inconclusive – not a Hollywood ending in any sense:

“Vietnam history was on display. It isn’t the story I came for but it’s the story I got.....In Saigon I found only ghosts of the past...I cannot help thinking that life is love at war...It started in ’75 it ends in the heart. The war will never be over for me it eats me like a leech”(39-40).

Dominic/Golding is not able to move on from the war that led to his adoption but he is able to look forward to a future that is defined by himself rather than what others expect. Golding’s final image of himself is as one of many soldiers trudging through a collective history realising that “the question is not what others see of me but who I want to be” (39). Unlike Pelaud’s suggestion that storytelling can bring healing by making sense of the emotionally incomprehensible past, Golding comes to an uneasy acceptance of the unknown – which may be a part-healing of sorts. Golding is still haunted by his unknown past; his latest play *Umbilical* (2009) explores the role of the absent Vietnamese mother in contrast to his Australian adoptive mother.

Vietnam: A psychic guide by Chi Vu was written as a short story (2001) and produced as a bilingual play some years later (2009). It is another return home narrative, consisting of postcards written by Michelle, a *Viet Kieu* tourist in Hanoi. The story opens with an aphorism from Picasso: “Art is a lie that makes you realise the truth” (35), and both the story and the play conclude with Michelle’s own take on Picasso: “I tell you a lie, I tell you a truth”(“Vietnam: A Psychic Guide” 49). This bookending of the narrative signals to the reader that this postmodern work is open to interpretation, and the reference to lies makes us wary of the validity of Michelle’s observations.

Vu plays with reader/audience expectations and assumptions, destabilising Michelle’s viewpoint and extending the stories about Vietnam from realism into the fantastical, such as the story Michelle tells about Hanoians conversing by tying pieces of string to one another.

Like Golding, Vu engages with Western expectations of Vietnam directly, with Michelle asking a local what she thought of *Three Seasons*- an American film starring Harvey Keitel featuring romantic stories about Vietnam. The local replies that the film portrays rural Vietnam but Vietnam is modern now. Michelle describes Hanoi as a snake shedding skin, with the old skin next to the new reflecting the modernity of Vietnam. Also akin to Dominic in *Shrimp*, Vu's narrator comes to no firm conclusions about her return journey to Vietnam. On the contrary, she builds increasing complexity with every encounter. In one section, for example, Michelle converses with a taxi driver about the different Vietnamese words for war, and the taxi driver states: "It's not anyone's fault which side of the war they fight for. Where you live is who you fight for" (45). This pragmatic judgment is at odds with Western conceptions of patriotism and simplistic assumptions about which side Vietnamese people fought on in the war. Michelle concludes this section by declaring that she "entered the museum of sadness today" today (45), for she has encountered the impossible sadness of war.

The reader is left with tantalising glimpses of Hanoi and reflections from Michelle – who comments that she could not take pictures because she does not know "who the person pressing the button was." (45) This self-alienation is a shared dilemma of the 1.5 and 2nd generations who return to Vietnam to find their sense of self. Vu elsewhere describes the 1.5 generation, of which she is a part, as translators/traitors Vu (Vu 2010). For, as she recognises, 1.5 generation writers need to reinvent themselves with each work and monitor what cultures they are translating and for whom. In using English, a colonising language, to write Vietnamese diasporic stories, 1.5 generation authors are translating their experiences into a more common frame of reference for the non-Vietnamese reader. She writes that "the aphorism "translator, traitor" applies more to [the 1.5] generation than the first or second generation" (144) because "bilingual awareness" is "an ontological condition of the 1.5 generation writer" and means that authors of this generation "can be deeply ambivalent about language itself because as cultural translators they invariably come up against limitations in Standard English to fully convey their post-colonial identity -- one which is constantly shifting" (Vu 2010, 144). The character of Michelle reflects this ambivalence and translates what she sees to the audience without much narrative commentary leaving the reader and audience to make up their own mind, not just about Vietnam but also about Michelle.

The text of *A psychic guide* teases the reader with its flights of fancy, and leaves more questions than it attempts to answer. It has been included in the *PEN Anthology of Australian*

Writing (2010) and in in English secondary curricula. These inclusions demonstrate the repositioning of Vietnamese-Australian writing within the broad category of Australian literature; they are no longer just stories of ethnic margins. This broader reach and recognition is demonstrated most powerfully by the international success of Nam Le whose short story “Love and Honour and Pity and Compassion and Sacrifice” has been anthologised both by anthologies of Vietnamese-inspired writing (*The Perfume River*) and mainstream Australian Writing (*The Australian Long Story*).

Nam Le’s short story “Love and Honour and Pity and Compassion and Sacrifice” positions itself as an “ethnic story” and plays with dominant non-Vietnamese audience expectations. Le sets up readers’ expectations by teasing them with allusions to the narrator’s father’s story which is never shown in full in the text. In interviews Le has insisted that this story is not autobiographical, though the narrator has his name “Nam” (Pelaud). Like many 1.5 generation Vietnamese-Australian artists, the narrator/author figure Nam is coming to grips with his family history in this story, but the story is constructed around post-modern twists: self referencing the popularity of “ethnic stories”, confusing the categories of author and narrator; and rendering the narrator Nam unreliable. Le has stated in interview that he understands writing as a performative act and these postmodern ploys are in keeping with that view (Cunningham 2009).

The story recounts Le’s wish to have some understanding of his father and to earn his pride through writing about his father’s experience in the re-education camps: “I would write the ethnic story of my Vietnamese father. It was a good story. It was a fucking great story” (19). He comments about the market currency of ethnic stories and titles his first attempt at his father’s story “Ethnic Story”: “Maybe he didn’t tell it exactly that way. Maybe I’m filling in the gaps. But you’re not under oath when writing a eulogy and this is close enough” (19).

Nam’s search echoes with the common desires of 1.5 generation Vietnamese diasporic writers to come to grips with history. Nam wrestles with the ghosts of his father’s past and tries to come to terms with their estranged relationship. He writes:

“He had been buried alive in the warm wet clench of his family, crushed by their lives. I wanted to know how he climbed out of that pit. I wanted to know how there could ever be any correspondence between us. I wanted to know all this but an internal momentum moved me further and further from him as time went on” (23).

The narrator/author Nam has survived transgenerational trauma through his father's physical abuse and tries to understand the legacy of violence by imagining what it was like for his father as a 14 year old to survive the My Lai massacre: "A past larger than complaint, more perilous than memory" (28).

Nam's technique of connection and understanding is writing, the writing of his father's story. Nam is depicted as representative of the generation who write to heal and to work through trauma. But his father only sees writing full of mistakes, and Nam informs his father that it is fiction. The writing cure is not recognised by the father, nor does it render his son visible to him according to Nam's wishes:

"He would read it...and he would recognise himself in a new way. He would recognise me. He would see how powerful was his experience, how valuable his suffering- how I had made it speak for more than itself. He would be pleased with me." (29).

But the details of his father's story are obscured and the reader is never shown the story, which Nam's father destroys. This story has no resolution for Nam the narrator, nor for the reader. It is written with the non Vietnamese literary audience in mind, with Le acknowledging their assumptions and expectations directly in the text. The work is a tease and yet more powerful for what it alludes to, even without the gory details of his father's experiences.

These three examples of contemporary Vietnamese-Australian writing demonstrate shared concerns including history, family and identity. So, too all three deploy a range of self-conscious techniques to overturn the dominant views of the history and identity of Vietnamese and *Viet Kieu* peoples. Now that Vietnamese-Australian writing has been included in mainstream curriculum and has been tagged as "Australian" there is the very real promise that Vietnamese diasporic writing may occupy a more visible role in the literature and culture of Australia.

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