

Works of Memory: dilution, connection and remembering by Vietnamese in Auckland's
Vietnamese Cafés

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*we are fragmented shards
blown here by a way no one wants to remember
in a foreign land
with an aching familiar wound
our survival is dependent upon
never forgetting that Vietnam is not
a word
a world
a love
a family
a fear
to bury*

*let people know
VIETNAM IS NOT A WAR*

“shrapnel shards on blue water” (Lê Thi Diem Thúy 1994)

Introduction

Though the country knew the bombing of north Vietnam was “brutal and wrong” and the “United States [wa]s fighting to uphold a hated reactionary dictatorship in Saigon,” New Zealand continued to send troops, committing nearly eight-and-a-half years to the war effort (Durdin 1965). Perhaps the War’s widespread unpopularity and condemnation among New Zealanders translated to an absence of Crown recognition for the soldiers who began returning to the country in the late 1960s and early 70s—a silence that lasted thirty-three years until Tribute 08, an official acknowledgement of the New Zealanders who participated in Vietnam (Barber 2019). In New Zealand, the particularities of Vietnamese people and cultures are not remembered except in certain places: cafés, restaurants, bakeries, nail salons. Outside of these defined spaces, Vietnam continues to be reincarnated and remembered as a War.

For us, for Vietnamese people as a whole, we have to continuously contend with what Connerton (2012) defines as *humiliated silence*—a wide-reaching, collective silence that “may be an attempt to bury things beyond expression and the reach of memory” (47). Stories told of

and for the Vietnamese—the entangled and divisive forms of representation created—produce a silence that continuously “shuts down” and peripheralizes our voices. Novelist and performance artist, Lê Thi Diem Thúy, generates in her poem that expression of frustration of identity many of us have had to confront in our diasporic, hyphenated, post-1975 citizenships. It’s an identity that has defined us deep enough to mark us as products of a wound, yet still denies the full calamity of that wound. Vietnamese peoples have had to stand at that point of tension... and survive it.

This work invites Stanley’s (2009) readings of the Canadian landscape and the role language and imagery play in silencing and perpetuating particular memories. It calls for a deeper conversation on the role the United States plays in writing the Vietnamese story, and how this story has been (re)interpreted by Vietnamese Aucklanders. Over the course of nearly two weeks of participant observation in central Auckland’s Vietnamese cafés and conversations with Vietnamese Aucklanders, I’ve begun to realize that Vietnam is a continuous act of assemblage—a product open to change, constantly adding in peculiarities of a place, constantly constructed by Vietnamese. As Strom (2018) notes, diaspora shapes identity and our creations. But in New Zealand, memories of the country’s relationship with Vietnam are layered on those created by the United States, giving rise to new forms of forgetting and remembering the Vietnamese. And so, I argue that displacement from and within Vietnam for Vietnamese people lives in the very ethos of their being. But memories and modes of remembering articulated by Vietnamese Aucklanders, by Vietnamese people broadly, to refute and transcend the silences created by New Zealanders are specific to the conditions of their diasporic experiences.

New Zealand’s Vietnam War: Pākehā, Americans, and forgetting the Vietnamese

In conversations with, predominantly, pākehā in Auckland's public spaces (e.g. parks, libraries, the bus), the subject of Vietnam was frequently described to me through American military-dominated war narratives. One young pākehā told me corruption in north Vietnam started the War. Another explained how the War started and lasted because the United States and France prevented talks between the north and the south. I was even described as anti-communist by an older pākehā because I was born in Saigon. War has become the hallmark of many narratives about Vietnam—a country often framed as two separate entities trying to stand independent of the other, even today. Yet, it's complicated. There are three sides to New Zealand's stories of Vietnam: the north Vietnamese side, the south Vietnamese side, and the American side. Writing on the destruction of German cities from continuous WWII bombing campaigns, Connerton (2012) writes how “the desire to forget may be an essential ingredient in th[e] process of survival” (46). Blaming America and its perpetuation of stories concerning communism might be New Zealand's rhetorical ‘shield’ against its own complicity, against its participation in another colonial narrative.

With this, memories in New Zealand of Vietnam center on guilt and deflection. “We [New Zealand] should never have been there...we were talked into it by America,” one pākehā bitterly expressed to me. The War is essentially reduced to a narrative about whether or not New Zealand should have been involved. By emphasizing the American line of argument—its insistence on the spread of what Truman (1947) considered the “misery and want” of communism—and diverting their culpability, pākehā resist inclusion in the imperialist discourse. But if the broader discourse in New Zealand is sharply focused on its involvement in the War, the political context and significance of warfare for the Vietnamese, on both sides, become nothing but small matters.

For the Vietnamese, the war from 1955 to 1975 was just one of many battles in their struggle for independence. It was one of many wars fought to end a long series of outsiders laying claim to the land—a struggle instigated since 111 BCE when Chinese invaders arrived in northern Vietnam and reinvigorated when the French, under the leadership of Napoleon III, colonized the country in 1858 (Moss 2018). The fierce desire for independence through war, the degree of patriotism that gives “to some an almost unimaginable will to survive...that encourages people of the same forefathers to kill their compatriots,” is too frequently absorbed into the familiar script: that there was *the* War and it was about communism (Nguyễn 2012, 66). In this internal conflict over New Zealand’s participation, Vietnamese voices—soldiers and civilians alike—serve as nothing more than background in a story for which they played a key role. In other words, shifting the discourse of Vietnam away from Vietnamese realities discourages the articulation of Vietnam’s “larger story.”

However, questions of scale—the scale of New Zealand’s involvement and loss in Vietnam—lends itself, too, to silencing Vietnamese subjectivities and agencies in Auckland. For instance, there’s a long, brightly lit area on the third floor of Auckland’s War Memorial Museum that can be accessed after a walking through a series of winding halls and dark galleries. Blending with rows of marble slabs, its presence nearly miss-able, was a single panel with the word “Vietnam” and the names of the thirty-seven soldiers who died in the War deeply etched into the stone. New Zealand’s longest and most unpopular military conflict of the twentieth century is encapsulated on the only material acknowledgement of the War in the country’s largest urban area. New Zealand historian, Ian McGibbon, in a 2008 interview on *Tribute 08*, tied Crown silence to the fact that “[New Zealand] had a small force in Vietnam.” Dominy (1995) argued that, “in ‘writing worlds,’ place is...constituted rhetorically” (370). I find that

highlighting *New Zealand*'s limited body count, cementing it into a space called "The Hall of Memories" and placing it into the recesses of a museum implicitly force Vietnam—as place and people—from official and public recollection. In particular, the memorial "mediates our remembering" in two important ways (Stanley 2009, 145). It appropriates spaces of memory to engender the invisibility of Vietnamese veterans—and civilians—and their implied inferiority to Western military forces. But more damaging, it minimizes the event that frames the modern-day experience of Vietnamese people who live in New Zealand.

Since Vietnamese started arriving to New Zealand in large numbers in the late 1970s, Vietnamese cafés arose as a successful means through which many families have forged a life in the country. There are many reasons for why this has been so. "Not many here can speak English very well. The kitchen is the only place where we can speak our mother tongue," Huyen, the cashier at Eat Mi Ponsonby, articulated. Following the April of 1975, more than four million Vietnamese have left Vietnam, spread out and scattered, all over the globe. Being part of the Vietnamese diaspora, displacement into spaces where English is the language of public discourse, necessitates contending with the isolation of not sharing a language. For Vietnamese, language "was a means of finding one's place within a larger societal and political organization...of providing a definition of self and realizing community identity" (Hunkin and Mayer 2006, 63). In essence, language is an arena for family consolidation. For those who had to go through the diasporic passage, the kitchen has become an essential space enabling a community, distanced from their land, to reunite and reconnect with Vietnam, and each other.

In many family-owned Vietnamese cafés in Auckland central, the kitchen consisted of half family and half friends. Vietnamese cultural life and kinship configurations are most visible in these spaces of food creation and consumption. The imagery of "Vietnamese in kitchen" can,

in itself, shape Vietnamese representation in the Western imagination and in the so-called “history” of being Vietnamese in another land. However, for the remainder of this paper, there will be greater focus on how Vietnamese Aucklanders have used these spaces, and food, to show the processes of remembering, the points of rebellion, and the embodiments of a diasporic identity.

Recollection and reinvention of Vietnam in spaces of consumption

In Bao Ninh’s (1993) *The Sorrow of War*, Kien—the novel’s north Vietnamese ex-soldier and protagonist—reflects on the legacy of his nation’s conflict with the United States and south Vietnam. “The tragedies of the war years have bequeathed to my soul the spiritual strength that allows me to escape the infinite present...the will to live that remains stems not from my illusions but from the power of my recall,” he observes (47). Remembering is a refusal to accept the imperial, “single master accounting of the past, ... [colonialism’s] continued domination over the stories that are told about race, place, and nation” (Walsh 2018, 176). For instance, the green painted on the walls of Luna’s is the same faded green worn by the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. The color is an aesthetic necessity in cementing south Vietnamese soldiers into a history of warfare that has long been narrowly imagined and recollected. It signifies how “people [today] value what previous generations have done for them,” the twenty-four-year-old owner of Luna’s Express, Malisa, told me.

For most family-owned Vietnamese cafés, naming the café is also a work of memory. Naming is not a public project aimed at canonizing victors’ memories of particular moments in time. Instead, for the Vietnamese, it’s a private project of memory work that is intersubjectively produced as a result of their day-to-day experiences in a post-war society—it’s a means to discourage, outright refuse, articulations of the dominant narratives that have bracketed their

lives. Saigon ‘60s, for example, resists the idea that 1960s Vietnam can be understood entirely by the violence of war or struggle against American invasion. For Chi T., the café focused on the 1960s because it was “the time when the blend of Vietnam, American and French was most prominent.” Here, naming complicates and recognizes a certain cultural inheritance. It invites us to understand how Vietnamese have pulled from their histories of foreign occupation—rather than condemn and reject this past—to *continuously* create something new and singular. “[*Minh*] *không muốn giữ cũ* ‘theme’,” she continues. We don’t want to keep/hold/carry the old ‘theme’. It’s the theme that connects Vietnamese with Western meanings of traditional, struggle and vulnerability, peasant life and poverty. But this also acknowledges that there’s been much work done by imperial powers to inscribe notions of either inevitable change or abrupt cleavages in the Vietnamese past—that supposes that time and realities can be distinguished by such things as “pre- and post.” Naming, here, subtly troubles the problematic teleology that sees time as linear, that imposes inflexible definitions of old and new, which renders the active, ongoing processes of creativity and creation among the Vietnamese invisible.

These cafés are also important interstitial experiences and spaces—spaces that recognize their existence within multiple realities and interpretations of histories. “This is not Auckland,” Malisa told me as she described her café. Likewise, these spaces draw heavily from Vietnam through acts of naming, décor, the use of particular cooking methods. But they’re also not Vietnam. Instead, the Vietnamese café materializes as what Taussig (1993) calls *second contact*, something neither New Zealand nor Vietnamese but which comprises of their reciprocated ‘co-implicatedness’. For example, through the use of New Zealand’s pasture-raised beef, *phở* becomes a product of intercultural innovation. Flavors become elevated or enriched, rather than changed, through the use of local ingredients. In this vein, cafés emerge as sites of multitudes.

They're sites where Vietnamese can reimagine and revisit what Vietnam means, what being a Vietnamese Aucklander means, through acquiring and combining materials from the country they live in with memories from the country they remember.

Nước mắm: diluting, compromising and remembering a country

In some contexts, what is remembered and what is transformed are *entirely* modulated by environmental and social contexts. Across Auckland, from “formal” restaurants such as Café Hanoi to fast-casual eateries such as Hello Mister, ingredients are the means through which Vietnam is presented as legible and accessible to kiwis—familiar enough to be accepted into Auckland, foreign enough for diners to leave with the sense of just having had an educational experience on Vietnamese culture.

In a sense, Vietnamese cafés might be approached as a scaled-down version of what Crosby (2004) describes as Neo-Europe. Unlike urban areas in the United States where pockets of “Vietnamese-ness” exist (e.g. “Little Saigon”), Vietnamese cafés are interspersed throughout Auckland central—placed between and below law firms, grocery and liquor stores, the Sky Tower, among other forms of business. It's often the urban wealthy and office workers lining up for spring rolls or *bún*, rice noodles tossed with, or more frequently, drenched in *nước mắm*—a pungent sauce considered “the lifeblood of Vietnamese cooking” (Nguyen 2017, 86). But the process of making the sauce in Auckland has become a series of dilutions—a process of Europeanization. To keep their cafés open, Vietnamese Aucklanders had to ensure visitors wouldn't return to their offices carrying the potent scents of fish sauce and raw garlic—crucial markers of *nước mắm*.

“It's the one thing we need to compromise on...we have to use lemongrass...we have to water it down,” Malisa explained. As such, the smells essential to the rich sensory experience of

Vietnam—smells that include freshly baked bread rolls, incense, grilled meat—are replaced with either an absence of odor or, in most cases, those associated with New Zealand’s strong coffee culture. Silencing odor through dilution reduces the harshness and foreign-ness of Vietnam for Aucklanders. But using the subtler fragrance of lemongrass—an herb harvested and used regularly in Southeast Asia—rather than the powerful aroma of raw garlic also allows for a degree of cultural distance, of cultural intrigue, that “multiplied [*Vietnam*’s] attractiveness to the pakeha” (Crosby 2004, 235).

Despite the challenges of dilution and inauthenticity, there’s an important reason why *nước mắm* is included in nearly every space that sells Vietnamese food across Auckland and, I might venture, the world. It’s why those at Luna’s Express would spend twelve-hours *every day* making different forms of broth, why most Vietnamese Aucklanders I met referenced *nước phở*, rather than simply *phở*. *Nước* carries in it a multiplicity of meanings; it simultaneously stands for “water,” “nation,” and “country.” In a country where rivers run across it like veins, a coastal country whose economic and cultural viability depends on access to water, water is, as Nguyen describes, the lifeblood of Vietnam. For Vietnamese people, for those who have had to travel the diasporic passage, water evokes home. As such, our food revolves around water. It centers around preparing, seasoning, incorporating it into dishes using the knowledges that have been learned through family, and adapted, with each passing generation. In this way, home and national identity are positioned not in land, or within geopolitical borders, but in the liminal space of seas and oceans—a space that is always changing, moving, becoming. Water is a current that connects Vietnamese to the land they reside in to the land, the people, the country they, we, left.

Conclusion

Since 1975, a single war has orchestrated the present-day lives of Vietnamese—both those who live in Vietnam and those who don't. As in the United States, the battle for independence from a long history of imperialism has been written and read as a political struggle against communism by most pākehā. In the diversionary move to preserve both American and New Zealand power and international repute, Vietnam and its people have been presented as symbols for a mistake. The insistence on *this* narrative, *this* collective memory, spans Auckland and, likely, New Zealand. When stories of Vietnam center on Western motives and mistakes, judged within a Western gaze, and repeated by more and more people, some perceptions of the past begin to look plausible, compelling and intelligible, even to Vietnamese. These stories threaten the ability of recall, consigning certain memories to the deepest shadows until time fades them into oblivion. But this project shows how Vietnamese cafés are sites of connection, invention and remembering. For the particular Vietnamese Aucklanders whom I came to know, making Vietnam visible, remembering it, means being part of an uneven and ongoing process of negotiation with their past and their present. Each Vietnamese voice, choice and rendering of the past, collapses the homogenizing narratives perpetuated throughout the West. In this, the heterogeneity and complexity of Vietnamese Aucklanders—of Vietnamese, in general—become increasingly understood. When past and present are reconceived through Vietnamese voices and creations, it renders certain schemas of memory and representation unreasonable or, as Stuart Hall puts it, uninhabitable (Connerton 2012).

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