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Southeast Asian Writing in Australia: The Case of Vietnamese Writing

Literatures in languages other than English produced by migrant or diasporic communities pose intriguing questions for both matters of cultural sustainability and national literatures. Dan Duffy, in his article on Vietnamese-Canadian author Thuong Vuong-Riddick's *Two Shores / Deux Rives*, begins by describing a visit to the Boston Public Library where he chances upon a surprisingly substantial collection of Vietnamese-language publications. Among the twenty shelves of books, he finds not only fiction published in Vietnam before 1975, American editions of post-1975 Vietnamese literature and translations of American novels into Vietnamese, but also a large number of creative works in Vietnamese both written and published in the United States. He pitches this opening as an 'arrival scene', borrowing the rhetoric of ethnography to refer to the arrival of the researcher among the subject of his or her study. Duffy is, in fact, an American literary scholar whose area of expertise is Vietnamese literature, and he was in Boston to attend a conference on America's multilingual literatures, so his encounter in the library is not quite the chance event that it first seems. Nevertheless, he uses it to imply that for most Americans such a collection would be surprising — that few would consider Vietnamese-language works to be American literature — and to make the claim that 'Vietnamese-language literature in the United States is a great untold story' (322). A similar claim could be made with regards to literature in Asian languages in Australia. How many Australians would be aware of the number of literary works written in Vietnamese in their country? Are English-language readers at Wollongong City Library aware of the numerous works in Vietnamese on their library's shelves? Would they think of such works as Australian literature? Transferring Duffy's claim of an 'untold story' to an Australian context, I would like to bring a part of Australia's Vietnamese writing into focus.¹

From the outset I need to qualify my expertise in this area by acknowledging that I neither speak nor read Vietnamese. Yet as a researcher with the AustLit database responsible for the documentation of Australia's multilingual literatures, I am aware of the vibrant and diverse literature produced by a wide range of Vietnamese writing communities in cities across Australia. My awareness of writing in Vietnamese in Australia began at a Sydney Writers' Festival event held at Liverpool in Sydney's south-western suburbs in 2007. The event was attended by a sizeable audience, drawn from the Australian Vietnamese community as well as from the Lao and Philippine communities, as literary production from

all three groups was featured in the day's proceedings. As one of the editors of four recent anthologies of Southeast Asian diasporic writing, Hoàng Ngọc-Tuấn detailed his involvement over more than two decades with Vietnamese-Australian writers who, following their migration to Australia, have continued to write in the language of their birth. At Hoàng Ngọc-Tuấn's talk, I heard for the first time of the literary magazines *Tap Hop* and *Việt*, and of the website *Tien Ve*, which I have since learned is the most significant platform for new Vietnamese writing not only in Australia, but globally across the Vietnamese diaspora.² In the weeks following this event, as I traced Vietnamese writing through Australian library catalogues and in particular the holdings of the Mitchell Library in Sydney, I also came across the magazine *Integration*, published over ten years in Bankstown, another suburb in Sydney's south-west. Carrying current affairs reporting and literary work, often in both English and Vietnamese, this magazine provides hundreds of narratives, both autobiographical and fictional, as well as poetry, allowing me some insight into the experiences of the Vietnamese-Australian communities. I contacted the magazine's editor, Xuan Duong, and he put me in touch with Boitran Huynh-Beattie, an art historian and researcher who has extensive contacts amongst the Vietnamese-Australian artistic and cultural communities. Crucially, as well, she has the linguistic skills necessary for the documentation of Vietnamese-Australian literary work that AustLit was then lacking. Thus, my access to and understanding of the wealth of Vietnamese writing in Australia has been made possible through Huynh-Beattie's ongoing work in documenting this literature for the database and making it available to the wider research communities of Australian literary studies. What follows is not a comprehensive survey or analysis of writing in Vietnamese in Australia, but rather a gesture towards a field of writing that awaits detailed critical readings and histories. In this present article I only hope to indicate something of this writing's presence in the Australian literary landscape.

Scholarly work in English on Vietnamese-Australian writing has only recently begun to appear, in a few scattered articles that mainly discuss writing produced in English. Hoa Pham and Scott Brook's article 'Generation V: The Search for Vietnamese Australia' (2009), for example, provides a survey of five Vietnamese-Australian writers and their works. With its focus, however, on writing in English by generation 1.5 writers — those who came to Australia at a young age and who mostly grew up speaking and writing English — the article does not include writing in Vietnamese. In their opening paragraph the authors refer to 'a large number of *tho* (poems) and *van* (prose/stories)' produced by the Vietnamese community in Australia for over thirty years, and they indicate that despite this substantial literary output, writing in Vietnamese remains "invisible" in mainstream Australian literary culture' (311).³ In another article, 'Vietnamese Return Narratives in Australian Public Culture' (2010), again co-authored by Scott Brook, this time with Caitlin Nunn, the works of two generation 1.5 Vietnamese-Australian writers are analysed in terms of 'return narratives' — that is, narratives

in which, following the Vietnamese government's policy of Đổi Mới and the easing of relations with Western countries, members of the Vietnamese diaspora return to visit Vietnam, either to reunite with family, or on business, or simply as tourists. One of the plays discussed, *Vietnam: A Psychic Guide* by Chi Vu has developed from a short story written in English into a bilingual dramatic work, with a Vietnamese translation subsequently published on the Tien Ve website. Few Vietnamese-Australian works make the journey in the other direction, however, with translation of Australian writing in Vietnamese into English a rare occurrence.⁴

This is what makes Hoàng Ngọc-Tuấn's translations of poetry by Uyên Nguyên, Nguyễn Tôn Hiệt, Trần Lộc Bình and Phan Quỳnh Trâm in this issue of *Kunapipi* so important. In recent years, Australian readers and viewers have had greater opportunity to encounter Vietnamese narratives and other forms of cultural production that circulate in English — with a growing number of autobiographies, anthologies, films, and exhibitions — but those many Vietnamese-Australian writers whose work has appeared in *Dân Việt* or *Việt Luận*, two Sydney-based Vietnamese-language newspapers, or whose work is self-published and sold in bookshops in Cabramatta or Liverpool, remain unknown outside the Vietnamese-Australian community.⁵ Amongst all forms of cultural expression, poetry is particularly valued by Vietnamese readers. Californian-based Vietnamese author Võ Phiến writes: 'Poetry and prose, especially poetry, constitute the forte of the Vietnamese people' (108). In his essay on the Vietnamese language and its maintenance amongst the communities of the Vietnamese diaspora, Võ Phiến underscores the concreteness of both the language and its poetry. By this he means its connection to orality or, as John Schafer remarks, its rootedness in 'the daily language of ordinary people' (283). Võ Phiến writes: 'In Vietnam, there is no need to be literate to compose a poem; one can be the worst kind of illiterate and a poet. Poetry is spreading everywhere, in the narrowest of alleys, and obviously it is flooding the print medium' (108). He goes on to write of the importance of encountering poetry in newspapers, of its accessibility, and of the sense of connectedness, of community, that daily engagement with such poetry provides its readers. In Australia, poetry in Vietnamese continues to circulate readily, with new poems appearing in almost each weekly edition of *Việt Luận*.

Uyên Nguyên's poetry sequence 'Hai biến khúc từ mục kết bạn và nhắn tin' (Two Variations on the Columns 'Making Friends' and 'Short Messages') finds its inspiration and its raw material in both Vietnamese oral narrative and literature and the daily language of ordinary people. The first of these variations, 'Giáng Kiều', draws upon the traditional Vietnamese story of a young man who falls in love with a woman in a portrait, only to find that the woman is a fairy, able to move between her world of the painting and that of the young man who loves her. The story uses the common folk motif of the fairy bride, in some cultures the swan maiden, who leaves her world above to live with her lover in this world below. The second variation 'Reading Kieu' refers to the nineteenth-century epic

poem *The Tale of Kieu*, a well-known work of Vietnamese literature, by Nguyễn Du. American-Vietnamese scholar Huỳnh Sanh Thông, in the introduction to his translation and bilingual edition of *The Tale of Kieu*, comments that for the Vietnamese who left their homeland following the end of the war in 1975, this epic poem has particular resonance, as it is a story of a young woman who, in order to ransom her father from false imprisonment, sells herself and subsequently experiences exile, betrayal and years of trial and hardship. Huỳnh Sanh Thông claims that for diasporic Vietnamese, *The Tale of Kieu* reads as an account of their own travails. ‘They know most of its lines by heart, and when they recite them out loud, they speak their mother tongue at its finest. To the extent that the poem implies something at the very core of Vietnamese experience, it addresses them intimately as victims, as refugees, as survivors’ (xl).

Both poems in Uyên Nguyễn’s sequence speak to the experience of displacement and loss shared by so many of his readers amongst the Vietnamese communities in Australia. The first is a meditation upon an imagined return to a home long left behind. Each stanza opens with a variation upon the line ‘Tomorrow when I come back to the old alleys’. Through successive stanzas, the narrator finds that change has overtaken everything once known and that now ‘the ancient fiddles / sing to the folds / of a lost life’. The poet knows that ‘Tomorrow / when I come back to the old cities / I won’t be able to recognise / Hanoi / Saigon’. He then realises: ‘perhaps when I stop searching / I will / meet / again / the old acquaintances’ and this leads him to conclude: ‘Tomorrow / when I come back to my home town / I will burn all the books / draw a new portrait / feel a reminiscent fragrance from remote paths’. He knows that the paths of the past may provide one with direction only when one lets go of the words and images that attempt, but fail, to fix and hold that past. With the final stanza’s reference to ‘a fairy / stepping down to earth’ the reader is returned to the story of Giáng Kiều and of her separation from home as she steps down from the painting. The second variation works upon the repeated lines ‘Who are you’ and ‘Where are you from’, addressing one who has ‘emigrated / from your rural or suburban home’ and is now a ‘lonely walker’. The line ‘a flower straying into the brothel’ reminds readers of the situation of Kieu, forced by circumstance into prostitution and exile. And yet, although the poem is filled with references to exile, it ends with the claim that poetry and music do not depend upon returning one’s heart to the homeland. ‘Poetry and music can blossom within / a talented man who sits alone under the misty moon’.

Although my reading is obviously limited to the English translation of the sequence, my inkling of the poems’ beauty and wonder results from knowing that the sequence has been constructed entirely from ‘found’ or ‘recovered’ words taken from a single page of classified ads appearing in a Vietnamese-language newspaper from Sydney. The ‘Making Friends’ and ‘Short Messages’ of the sequence’s title refer to the Personal Columns and Classified Ads of *Dân Việt*, appearing on the week of the 7th of July 1998.⁶ The poetry sequence then is

more than an exercise in nostalgia by way of literary allusion. Uyên's poems situate the work of memory and engagement with the past in the context of the everyday and literally using 'the daily language of ordinary people'. Readers of the literary journal *Việt*, where Uyên's poems first appeared, can move from his verses to the page of advertisements from *Dân Việt* which is reproduced next to them. The poems seem, in one sense, a performance of quite magical transformation, their appearance from the classified ads as astounding as the fairy Giáng Kiều stepping out of the painting. They may also demonstrate, however, Võ Phiến's contention that, for readers of Vietnamese, the space of the everyday, encountered in newspapers, and the other world of poetry are not that far apart; and that engaging creatively with language — one's first language — is, for many Vietnamese migrants who grew up and were educated in Vietnam, an integral aspect of maintaining cultural identity.⁷

Moving to another quite remarkable publication, Trần Đình Lýõng's book of poetry *Hải Đảo* (2005) illustrates the complexities that arise when one considers Vietnamese literary work written in Australia from the perspective of national literatures. Following the defeat of the South Vietnamese government in 1975, Trần Đình Lýõng escaped by boat with his wife and daughter, eventually settling in Australia. His first poems were published in the magazine *Integration* in the 1990s, some in bilingual format, others in Vietnamese only. He then had a number of poems in Vietnamese appear in several issues of *Việt*. In recent years he has been able to travel back to Vietnam and in 2005 he published *Hải Đảo* in Ho Chi Minh City. The book comprises twenty-two poems and a song, accompanied by an introductory essay by Hoàng Ngọc-Tuấn. Of these twenty-two poems, fifteen are in Vietnamese-only; seven are in bilingual format. The setting and content of the poems moves between Vietnam and Australia, as the title of one of the Vietnamese poems, 'Từ sông Tiền Đờng đến Jindabyne Lake' (From Tiền Đờng River to Jindabyne Lake), indicates. One of the bilingual poems 'Sydney, mùa xuân hoa tím' or 'Sydney in the Purple Spring' opens with the lines 'Have you come back, Jacaranda? / The purple haired Giang Kieu! / The city in sunset has been transformed with your colour. / Now that you have stepped out of the painting (16). The poem goes on to reflect on the experience of displacement and the 'sorrowful memories' of the poet since leaving his home country. Having lived in Sydney for seven years, he says, he has 'only the love of this lone flower', and the poem ends with the line 'Jacaranda, / You are disappearing in the sky with a final murmur: / The violet' (17).

Again, my access to and appreciation of this work is limited by my monolingual reading but what I find intriguing here is not only the evocation of the Giáng Kiều story transposed to a Sydney setting, but also the question of how this book fits into or contests current assumptions of what constitutes Australian literature. Although over the past three decades multicultural writing — works by writers of non-Anglo-Celtic background — has gained acceptance and attracted

substantial scholarship as an integral part of the nation's literature, reflecting the histories of migration and the diverse cultural heritages of Australia's population, multicultural writing in languages other than English remain mostly unnoticed. Australian literary studies continues to manifest what Michael Cylne has referred to as Australia's 'monolingual mindset' (21), or what J.J. Smolicz has more harshly characterised as 'monolingual myopia' (250), in its ongoing neglect of literature produced in Australia in languages other than English. What else can one conclude when more than twenty years of Vietnamese literary endeavour from dozens of writers living in Sydney, Melbourne, and across other Australian cities, whose work circulates and is critiqued internationally amongst the Vietnamese diaspora, remains practically unknown to Australian literature researchers? Uyên Nguyễn's work has been included in a major two volume anthology from the United States, *Hai Mýđi Năm Văn Học Việt Nam Hải Ngoại 1975–1995* (1995), whose title translates as *Twenty Years of Vietnamese Literature in the Diaspora 1975–1995*. Trần Đình Lýđng has had work published in the American literary journal *Hợp Lýu*, as have a number of other Vietnamese-Australian writers. Other Vietnamese-Australian writers have had novels and collections of short stories published by Lang Van, a literary magazine and publishing company in Toronto, Canada. And recently Trần Đình Lýđng and other Vietnamese-Australian writers are able to publish in Vietnam while living in Australia. Does this writing only enter Australian literature when it is translated? It seems that this is the case, and if so, Hoàng Ngọc-Tuấn's translations in this issue are an important step towards the inclusion of this significant field of writing amongst Australian literary work.

Vietnamese writing in Australia is not alone in this regard. The Lao and Philippine writing communities profiled at the literary event in Liverpool mentioned at the beginning of this article comprise but two more Southeast Asian writing communities active in Australia over a substantial number of years, and whose work circulates in ways yet to be documented by Australian literary infrastructure, and certainly yet to be included in studies of contemporary Australian writing. The editor of an anthology of Philippine-Australian writing, Jose Wendell Capili, writes in his essay 'Southeast Asian Diaspora Writers in Australia and the Consequence of Community-Based Initiatives', '[q]uite often, literary cultures across Australia will not appreciate works by community-based Southeast Asian diaspora writers'. Yet, Capili maintains, 'community-based Southeast Asian diaspora writers continue to persist in Australia' (8), and he goes on to argue:

Many of those who are living in non-Anglo-Celtic and non-European communities all over Australia are also Australians... The creative works of community-based Southeast Asian diaspora writers in Australia allowed these writers to express their identity while recording the specificities of their communities' respective narrative of migrations. There may be occasional grievances in these writings. But these should also be negotiated as integral manifestations of what needs to be done in any society to move forward. (18)

Australian literature is as multilingual as the society from which it is generated. Australian literary studies needs to be more attentive, and more receptive, to the enormous varieties of literary work that have been, and continue to be, produced in languages other than English, including the work in Vietnamese canvassed in this brief article. When Nguyễn Tôn Hiệt writes in ‘Speech of a Poet’ that he does not ask his audience to understand, that he only requests that they listen to his voice, he is in fact proposing a basic starting point from which those with an interest or investment in Australian literature and its study might begin to acknowledge the presence of other literatures, in other languages, from Vietnam, from Southeast Asia, or from elsewhere, as they contribute to the literary life of Australians of many heritages.

NOTES

- ¹ This article has developed from a paper co-authored with Wenche Ommundsen and first presented at ‘Cultures of Sustainability; Sustainability of Cultures’ an international workshop held at the University of British Columbia in July 2010, and is based on research undertaken for the AustLit database by the author and Boitran Huynh-Beattie. I am indebted to Boitran Huynh-Beattie for her linguistic and cultural expertise, and her commitment to the documentation of Vietnamese-Australian literary works.
- ² See Hoàng, 2007.
- ³ Quotations follow the original text, in which diacritics are not used. With diacritics, tho and van would be *thõ* and *vãn*.
- ⁴ Quỳnh-Du has translated into English a novel and a collection of short stories by Phạm Thị Hoài, a Vietnamese writer who lives in Germany. It should be noted that these are not works by an Australian-based author, though the translator is Australian. Quỳnh-Du is also the translator into Vietnamese of Chi Vu’s *Vietnam: A Psychic Guide*.
- ⁵ For examples of Vietnamese narratives circulating in Australia in recent years see Hoàng, Ngọc-Tuấn, 2004; Huynh, Kim, 2007; Nguyen, Pauline, 2007; Huynh-Beattie, Boitran, 2009; Do, Khoa, 2009; Do, Anh, 2010, Cole, Catherine, 2010.
- ⁶ The sequence is reproduced on the *Tien Ve* website, along with an image of the classified ads page from which the words were taken. See <http://www.tienve.org/home/viet/viewVietJournals.do?action=viewArtwork&artworkId=208>
- ⁷ This is not the situation, of course, for those Vietnamese-Australians identified as Generation 1.5 — those who arrived in Australia at a young age and grew up with English as a first language. See, for example, Hoa Van Stone’s autobiography *Heart of Stone* (2007), in which he writes of his experience of returning to Vietnam as an adult and not speaking the language.

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