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History and Postmemory in Contemporary Vietnamese Writing

Abstract:

In this paper we argue that there are many ways in which history is embedded in a country's fiction—many of them offering questions rather than answers about a country's creative practices. In Vietnam it seems inevitable that the war against America and her allies would shape the nation's creative writing. But is this the case? And what of the ways in which later generations have reacted to the war? In Vietnam and Australia this shared history has played out differently, not least in a postmemory dialogue between a generation who remembers too much and a generation who remembers too little.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Vietnam – postmemory – history – war

How different are writers in Vietnam from their Australian counterparts or is writing practice a form of creative ‘common’, which transcends national barriers, language and culture? Regardless of country, creative practices are influenced by history and cultural expectations as well as economics. Writers write because it’s a creative imperative, a drive that leads them on a creative journey regardless of the realities of the writing life—the uncertain publication opportunities, critical responses to their work or poor economic returns.

Few countries in the past century could claim greater disruption to their creative and cultural lives than Vietnam. It could be argued that the Vietnam War lasted from the 1940s to the mid 1970s and was followed thereafter by a period of economic disaster. How might a writer resist such seismic shifts? Australia was relatively unscathed in the same time period and this is reflected in its social and cultural infrastructures including those associated with the arts. In Australia, many writers are assisted by government grants or prizes, support that isn’t on offer in Vietnam. Attitudes to such opportunities also are viewed with some ambivalence in Vietnam. Vietnam’s older generation of writers, for example, argues against the notion of the writer who does nothing but write. To older, socialist Vietnamese, a writer may have a special vision but they must also ‘work’ for the good of society. In Australia, writers who receive literary grants can remove themselves from these constraints, for the term of the grant at least. There is not the same political moralising about ‘worthy’ work versus creative work that pushes traditional literary boundaries, as often happens in Vietnamese discourse about the country’s literary trends. What might these different attitudes and the circumstances of cultural production tell us about the ways in which both countries’ authors approach their writing and how do they colour their writers’ fiction? And in Vietnam’s case in particular, what role has the Vietnam War played in shaping the country’s contemporary writers, their fiction and writing practices?

One of the key observations of writers in Vietnam is just how much Vietnamese fiction writing can be viewed generationally, from that of the older generation aligned to the State to the work of younger writers who refuse to mark the war temporally as the social and cultural watershed it was for their parents. This may be interpreted as a reaction against the tendency of postmemory, derived from a collective traumatic history to overshadow the importance of contemporary concerns. Marianne Hirsch (1996: 659–686) coined ‘postmemory’ to describe the psycho-cultural phenomena experienced by the children of survivors of collective cultural traumas such as the Holocaust, where the places and events experienced by survivors haunt subsequent generations. Contemporary experiences and events are read against the epic past and pale into insignificance. Her theories can be applied specifically to the writing of the children of the Vietnamese diaspora.

Postmemory also can be described as a form of memory that is powerful ‘because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through imaginative investment and creation’ (Hirsch 1996: 662). Thus, it is associated with exile and diasporas. Hirsch’s focus (2001: 5–37) is on the Holocaust, however, she herself states that she does not ‘want to restrict the notion of postmemory to the remembrance of the Holocaust, or to privilege the Holocaust as unique or limit experience beyond all others’ (11). Postmemory discourses and aesthetics are

predominantly concerned with the Holocaust; however, others have departed from the Holocaust to explore the American War in Vietnam (Hagopian 2006: 201–22).

Postmemory work is often idiosyncratic, yet when placed together incorporating both mass trauma survivor generations and those who come immediately after, forms a collective agency that facilitates the creation of cultural memory. Places and people are marked by the memories of what happened during the war. ‘Returns’ to the way things were before traumatic events such as a war are impossible: there is no going back. Throughout the 1960s millions of people in America, Australia and Europe were exposed to graphic footage and photographs documenting the Vietnam War. These visions help constitute collective memory and postmemory including a shared repertoire of images. For example, Malcolm Browne’s photograph of the self-immolation of Thich Quang Duc in protest against the anti-Buddhist stance of the Diem government horrified the world and raised uncomfortable questions about the role of the photojournalist. A few years later, Nick Út’s photograph of Phan Thị Kim Phúc, the little girl burned by and running from napalm, drew the horrors of the war to millions around the world.

Contemporary Vietnam carries the burden of such defining images and this plays out in its literature as well. The texts and writing practices of contemporary young authors such as Ho Chi Minh City’s hip-hop ‘Open Mouth’ writers, and Hanoi’s post-modernist Phan Huyen Thu, mark a sharp contrast to those of earlier writers who grew up during the trauma of the Vietnam war, such as Tran Dan Khoa and Bao Ninh, whose 1991 novel, *The Sorrow of War: a novel* (Ninh 1993), provides a narrator so defined by the war he is unable to escape the novel he writes.

To understand the wider impact of the past more fully, especially the ways in which discourses such as those about the war are embedded in Vietnam’s texts and how they subsequently have informed the writing practices of authors in both countries, it’s important to examine the ways in which loss and exile are given voice in Australian Vietnamese diaspora fiction. This also plays out generationally, especially the ways in which writers born in Australia after 1975 renegotiate and understand their relationship with Vietnam, comparing their work with the fiction of first generation Vietnamese refugees.

Recent writers such as Nam Le resist the locating of their work as ‘Vietnamese’ writing (Le 2010). While Le’s short story collection, *The Boat* (2008), is wrapped around with narratives about the war and its aftermath, the collection’s significant central stories are international and cosmopolitan in their outlook. In examining the relatively small number of non-Vietnamese Australian fiction writers who have written about Vietnam, it is significant to explore how the impact of the war played out in Australia’s contemporary fictional texts on Vietnam.

Literary analysis is an important means of understanding the impact of the war on Vietnamese texts and cultural practices and how contemporary Vietnamese writers, from the soldier-scholars of the conflict to the current generation of writers seeking to escape the artistic constraints of Vietnam’s political history, capture or repudiate the past in their work. But conducting any study of Vietnam’s writers poses problems and questions for a researcher, not least of which is the reader’s access to contemporary

Vietnamese fiction through translation. When works are available, the nuanced relationships between writer, reader and translator impose their own layers on the text. This is particularly the case when examining aspects of culture and place. Writers negotiate history through a complex engagement with memory, history and narrative, and the manner in which this plays out in a creative work requires more than a translation of one language to another—rather a repositioning and ‘translating’ of historical memory.

A key question in this process relates to how a reader responds to the ways in which place and nation play out in a text, particularly the manner in which countries define themselves through their historical and cultural narratives and how their past is remembered and constituted. Historians such as Inga Clendinnen (2006) have argued that a writer’s creative imagination changes or usurps the veracity of history, but the imaginative process, it could also be argued, adds a new layer of historical memory to a text—a creative blend of the remembered and the forgotten. Indeed, the manner by which countries connect with their history may also require an understanding of how our remembered past is informed by what is forgotten as much as what is remembered. Paul Ricoeur (2004), whose past philosophical writings have addressed notions of time, memory and selfhood, asks whether historians can truly break with all dependence on memory—including, or even especially, memories that may resist representation.

Unlike America, where the Vietnam War has been a potent source of writing across all genres, it could be argued that a dearth of fictional texts about the war in Australia reflects more a desire to forget the past than to commemorate it. Vietnam has found its way into Australian novels by Hugh Lunn, Robert Allen, Peter Corris and Mary-Rose MacColl, poetry by Lachlan Irvine, Steve Keren and Pam Brown and plays by Siobhan McHugh and Tony Briggs, but are these works sites where our histories are worked out, becoming both reflective and constitutive of collective memory, and as such do they form counter-memories (Murray 2001: 41–52)? Brigg’s semi-biographical play, *The Sapphires* (2010), for example, locates Vietnam as an indigenous site of cultural memory in which Aboriginal women transcend racism and segregation. How have writers who fought in the conflict written about the country, and how do Australian writers who protested against the war or those for whom Vietnam holds no personal history represent the country in their work?

While Australian cultural theorists and academics with an interest in Vietnam, such as the Nathalie Nguyen, Mandy Thomas and David G. Marr, have significantly advanced our understanding of the kind of cultural practice that results from a diversity of experiences, Vietnam is in a constant state of flux and Australia’s cultural relationship with it shifts with these developments. In books such as *Dreams in the Shadows: Vietnamese-Australian lives in transition* (Thomas 1999) and *Consuming Urban Culture in Contemporary Vietnam* (Thomas & Drummond 2003), Thomas has explored the relationship between the Vietnam and the Australia of the post-war Vietnamese diaspora and continues to examine the manner in which the subsequent generations of Vietnamese Australians engage with their former country (Thomas 1998a, 1998b, 2001). In *Vietnam 1945: the Quest for Power* (Marr 1995) and *Concepts of ‘Individual’ and ‘Self’ in Twentieth-Century Vietnam* (Marr 2000a: 769–

96) and *History and Memory in Vietnam Today* (Marr 2000b) Marr has examined the continuing relationship with the ‘colonial’ in Vietnam’s past. While more conventional historians have a wealth of material from which to draw, other accounts found in fiction, film, travel guides, protest pamphlets, letters, memoirs and oral histories, offer serious reassessment of postcolonial, postwar views. By examining the cultural texts of a country it is possible to learn all about memory and forgetting, those essential elements of national narrative. Through studying literary texts it is also possible to learn how places are transformed into landscapes for cultural memory and how the tensions of postmemory are played out in such places.

The historian and art critic Simon Schama promotes the view that any landscape is read and appreciated through the cultural and historical memory the people bring to it (Schama 1996). But exactly how is this cultural and individual memory to be ‘read’? And what role does a country’s literature play in determining this ‘reading’ or interpretation? If a country’s landscapes reflect the actions and ideas of people, society and thereby culture, how best can we understand the manner by which a study of the literary landscape can enrich our understandings? Whilst acknowledging that landscapes are never static, using Schama’s terms we not only inhabit the landscape, we construct and often re-construct its essence, thereby giving meaning to its form. He also makes the point that ‘landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock.’ (Schama 1996: 6). Further, interpretations of landscape are intrinsically connected to culture as originally suggested by Carl Sauer (1925: 19–53) and later developed by pioneers of landscape study: Hoskins (1955), Jackson (1970) and Meinig (1979: 1–3) amongst others. Contextualised by the historical images of the past, fiction offers a re-examination of the landscapes of contemporary Vietnam, enabling an exposition of embedded memory and culture. The novel thus challenges notions of the landscape as a repository of human meanings, belying the potential for the landscape itself to, in Schama’s terms ‘carry the freight of history’ (1996).

Literary texts therefore become the ‘cultural documents’ (Thomas & Drummond 2003) that portray the contested power relationships between a community and its emergence as an independent nation. The changes in the fabric of individual understanding interpreted through the landscape, inform the shared histories of individuals, of communities and of nations. In so doing, the landscape itself becomes a marker for the transference of historical context and meaning for Vietnam’s next generation—a generation that in the vast majority has been born since the war years. If, as Cosgrove (1998) suggests, ‘[l]andscape is a way of seeing the world’ (13), then a study of literary texts and the creative practices that shaped them is well placed to unearth its meaning.

The American geographer P. F. Lewis has established a series of axioms for doing just that. Among the seven axioms he puts forward (1979: 11–32), three seem directly relevant to a study of place in the literature of other countries such as Vietnam. They are that:

- (i) ordinary run-of-the-mill things that humans have created and put upon the earth – provide(s) strong evidence of the kind of people we are, and were, and

are in process of becoming;

(ii) nearly all items in human landscapes reflect culture in some way; and

(iii) elements of a cultural landscape make little cultural sense if they are studied outside their geographic (i.e., locational) context.

Lewis offers new ways of ‘reading’ historical and cultural representation through literary texts by suggesting the reader in the process of reading is ‘seeing’ the country through the writer’s narrative. In novels about the Vietnam/American war, such as Bao Ninh’s *The Sorrow of War*, writers’ personal memories are embedded in individual experience that is reinterpreted to become part of collective identity. Rediscovering and redefining Vietnam as a site of memory, and re-enactment through creative work such as this, provides useful creative and discursive insights into the ways in which Vietnamese society has changed as a result of the war. By re-contextualising the war into an artistic relationship, it becomes possible to create a newly enriched dialogue between the present—through the contemporary reader—and the past—through the writer who lived it. Such a reading, informed by Pierre Nora’s *Lieux de mémoire* (1986), offers the premise that a country’s fiction provides an important site of memory from which to renegotiate the meaning of the past in order to imagine a future. Thus cultural practice, through the manner in which writers research, imagine and write, holds a mirror to the understanding of nationhood and cultural identity and is a key aspect informing this.

Such literary studies also offer a topology of place—as both an ever-present ‘silent witness’ and as a physical platform and stage for events that formulate individual existence and shape collective histories. Informed by Michel Foucault’s privileging of space as the pre-eminent focus of our era (1986: 22–27) fiction writing adds further to Lewis’s view that ‘Our human landscape is our unwitting autobiography’, (1979: 11). The urban and rural landscapes in novels, for example, become imbued with the memories of a nation and the memories of individuals who have played a role within them and are re-examined and contextualized within the creative, textual work. The interplays between place and memory then are critical to creative identity.

A novel’s linear or non-linear narrative offers a process of engaging with identity—the writer’s, the readers’, the characters’—and this engagement explores time and its role in the relationship between identity, remembered events and the stories of our lives. Memory and the representation of chronological events through the use of narrative add to the spread of shared stories and the re-interpretations of remembered events. By contextualising the creative interchange between the Vietnamese writer and non-Vietnamese reader, a transnational study is enacted, making it possible to examine ideas of memory, place and the creative interconnections between them through the three-way dialogue of writer-reader-place. Such dialogue extends shared understandings, particularly important in a climate of global uncertainty and a context defined by a conflict such as that between Vietnam, America and her allies.

Making Vietnam’s literature accessible at a time when Vietnam is celebrating significant social, economic and cultural changes, including 2010’s one-thousand-year anniversary of the foundation of Hanoi, is also important. Increasing numbers of

Australians travel to Vietnam, yet despite these developments, few Australians are familiar with the creative practices of Vietnamese writers. By supporting new scholarship in these areas the communities in both countries are drawn into a dialogue that allows their ideas to ‘speak to each other’. Further, by the very nature of creative practice, the outcomes that are the ‘voice’ are made readily viewable and intellectually accessible to many people in both Vietnam and Australia—and especially to a population that may not otherwise readily engage with these debates.

Thus the question of how the American/Vietnam war had an impact on Australian and Vietnamese culture and identity can be answered in part through an examination of the creative practices of the two countries. To understand the wider impact of the past more fully, a reader needs to engage with literature that focuses directly on the war. But what of the other works—those that are shaped by, but make no reference to, the conflict? How are these texts informed by memory and how are these memories embedded in the work, what do these textual landscapes offer and how has this ‘memorialising’ subsequently influenced the Vietnam’s creative voice?

Literary studies such as this offer a range of different methodological approaches, combining the notions of memory, cultural context and creative practice across national and cultural boundaries. Previously, this approach has been difficult as the formation of relationships with Vietnamese cultural institutions has not been as accessible as it is today, and also because the primary focus of Australian research has been on either the Vietnamese diaspora in Australia or on Vietnam’s war history. Any citing of Vietnamese and Australian creativity studies in particular, remains problematic. Vietnamese writers, for example, have often been categorised as being either writers for the State or dissident writers, and this has also been the case for other arts practices, whilst in Vietnam, few know much of Australia’s artistic memory in relation to Vietnam.

Contemporary Vietnam—especially since the *doi moi* renovation, is a very different place from that in which Bao Ninh wrote *The Sorrow of War*. The field for writing in contemporary Vietnam has been expanded by globalization. Young Vietnamese writers have access to the Internet, mobile phones, visiting writers, TV and film. The urban landscape has been transformed by consumerism. Vietnam’s younger generations live postmodern, postmemory lives. Places are read against the past with its grand narratives of modernisation and political agendas, as Lyotard claimed (Lyotard 1984). They continue to be constantly overlaid with new narratives and voices. The French colonial occupation, televised, and newspaper images of the American/Vietnam war constitute postmemory for the children of survivors. However, the tendency for postmemories of the Vietnam War and its aftermath to overshadow the significance of the present has been resisted in contemporary literary practice in Vietnam.

Vietnam’s generation Y, it could be argued, has moved beyond postmemory, beyond war and trauma to uncover the traces of collective and cultural memory as framing discourses in contemporary creative writing. And as such the national identity, the relationship between countries such as Australia and Vietnam, has shifted with it.

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