Lingering Phantoms: Haunted Literature and Counter
Memories from the Vietnam/American War

Hoa Hong Pham
Doctorate of Creative Arts
University of Western Sydney
2016
For Alister Air who was with me right to the end
Acknowledgements

First and foremost the support and guidance of Gail Jones. Also many thanks to Ivor Indyk, Nicholas Jose, Melinda Jewell and the Writing and Society Research Centre staff.
Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material either in full or in part for a degree at this or any other institution.
Lingering Phantoms: Haunted literature and counter memories from the Vietnam/American War
Table of contents

Abstract

Introduction

Ghosts and haunting

The 1.5 generation

The Fifth Book of Peace. Maxine Hong Kingston

Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace

The Sorrow of War, Bao Ninh

The Boat, Nam Le

Monkey Bridge, Lan Cao

Anguli Ma a gothic tale, Chi Vu

A psychic guide to Vietnam, Chi Vu

Conclusion
Lingering Phantoms: Haunted literature and counter memories from the Vietnam/American War

Abstract

Ghosts feature prominently in the imaginary of the Vietnam/American war for all sides. These spectres form counter memories that are maintained by ancestor worship or Buddhist conceptions of the hungry ghost, and they run against the rhetoric of the Vietnamese and American nation states. This exegesis will explore the presence of ghosts in published works in English after the Vietnam/American war. Maxine Hong Kingston’s renditions of American war veterans’ stories have emerged from workshops which she has run for veterans. These workshops have been informed by engaged Buddhism, as practised by Thich Nhat Hanh *The Sorrow of War* sees Kien, a Vietnamese war veteran turned writer, become like a ghost himself after his experiences. In Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge*, Mai is haunted by her mother’s grief and eventual suicide in America. Nam Le writes a short story about his father, who resembles a hungry ghost unable to receive his son’s love. Vu uses the gothic retelling of the Buddhist myth of Anguli Ma to reveal the hungry ghost that dwells inside Dao, his landlady. Vu’s story, *A Psychic Guide to Vietnam* obscures more than explains Vietnam to the reader with a text using silences and omissions. These works are ‘counter memories’ to the dominant Hollywood depictions of the war. The novel that accompanies the exegesis, titled *The Lady of the Realm*, retells the parable of Quan Am and is a historical fiction featuring Lien and her decades of stories, and Kim, a young psychic employed by the present-day Vietnamese government to reunite the war dead with their descendants. Ghosts literally feature in the text, and the work is polyphonic like the nature of truths. These works together present a diverse range of voices and heterogeneous representations of the war, and it is hoped that in telling their stories, some ghosts will be put to rest.
Introduction

Background

The 30\textsuperscript{th} of April 1975 marks the fall of Saigon and the beginning of a mass migration of 'boat people' from Vietnam. Now, 40 years later, the Vietnamese diaspora has settled into established communities from Cabramatta in Australia to Orange County in America. These communities have their own established cultural identities and have adopted the yellow flag with three horizontal red stripes that was previously the symbol of the Southern Vietnamese Government. The members of this Vietnamese diaspora, or Viet Kieu, have had the option of returning home since doi moi in the eighties.\textsuperscript{1} Strictly speaking, Viet Kieu may not be all labelled as diasporic subjects, since although they were in exile, they are able to return home. They have instead been described as transnational subjects (Brook & Nunn 2009, Carruthers 2007).

'Vietnam' is used as a one-word descriptor in American discourse to refer to military interventions overseas (Appy 2003). It is also associated with the failure of such interventions. Narratives about the Vietnam/American War in English are dominated by Hollywood films such as Full Metal Jacket, Born on the Fourth of July and The Quiet American. They are almost all told from the American perspective of the war and they number over 80 films (Broinowski 1997).

For the Vietnamese, the Vietnam/American War is known as the American War, as opposed to the French Indochine War. In articulating their suffering, members of the Vietnamese diaspora provide counter memories to the dominant Hollywood discourse about the war.

Counter memory challenges the notion of monolithic history and absolute truths. Counter memories provide a space in which the ‘other’ or ‘minority’ can be

\[\text{\textsuperscript{1}}\]
heard. When examining the counter memories produced by these communities, one must ask, 'Who is able to tell the truth, about what, with what consequences and with what relation to power?' (Foucault 1977) Counter memory as a concept suggests that there are three alternative views to monolithic history:

the first is parodic, directed against reality, and opposes the theme of history as continuity or representative of a tradition, the second is dissociative directed against identity, and opposes history given as continuity or representative of a tradition the third is sacrificial opposes history as knowledge ... and constructs a counter memory – a transformation of history into a totally different form of time (Foucault 1977: 160).

In the Vietnamese historical context, the stories of common soldiers and civilians are not acknowledged by government heroic war memorials, and they can be regarded as counter memories that are not part of the official historical framework.

In America and Australia, war veterans and refugees are those whose stories are not heard. America has a troubled relationship with Vietnam due to the events of the Vietnam/American War. The power relations between Vietnam, a third-world country, and America and Australia, both first world countries, cannot be ignored when reading or writing texts about Vietnam in the Western context. Depictions of these relations can be seen in Western mainstream war entertainment where America is represented as a 'big brother' to Southern Vietnam, such as in The Quiet American. Here, the romantic lead, Phuong, is a silent, shy Vietnamese girl caught between two Western men. The Vietnamese interpreter working with the newspaper is revealed to have communist links and is traitorous. This adds to the multitude of stereotypes about Asian men and women – Asians are portrayed as attractive and feminine, or dangerous and evil (Broinowski 1996).

Vietnamese Americans’ stories are viewed as a 'thorn in the side' of the American psyche, representing the failure of its military ambitions (Pelaud 2010: 20). The war sits uncomfortably in the context of the Cold War for Americans (Kwon 2010). Trinh Minh-ha goes so far as to say that ‘Nothing separates the Vietnam
War and the super films that are made and continue to be made about it’ (Minh-Ha 1992:88). It could be argued that the perception of Vietnam, in the eyes the global left, as a heroic victor against a military superpower, is as inaccurate as the portrayal of Vietnam in American Hollywood films (Nguyen, V. 2006).

These contested tropes about the war have consequences for what people and communities believe about themselves. In America, a white film maker has more power and opportunity to tell a story than a war veteran or refugee. Stories of the Vietnam/American war, particularly when produced by Americans, perpetuate stereotypes of the mad, alcoholic veteran (Brook 2008) and of Vietnamese women as beautiful victims. It is difficult to portray Viet Kieu without mentioning the war, and it is even more difficult for Viet Kieu stories to reach a receptive audience in America and Australia.

Trauma and western narrative

The concept of trauma has shaped dominant Western narratives inspired by the Vietnam/American War. It was American veterans whose lobbying saw Post Traumatic Stress Disorder first added to the Diagnostic Standards Manual, Fourth Edition (DSM–IV) in 1984, replacing what was formerly called shell shock. The recognition of PTSD as being event-related, rather than a weakness in the soldiers themselves, gave voice to the suffering of the veterans when they returned. Nowadays it is understood that refugees from the wars also have PTSD, and that witnesses as well as victims can suffer from PTSD (DSM–V). Post traumatic stress disorder as defined by the DSM–V includes intrusive flashbacks, disassociation and possible psychosis in response to traumatic events.  

2 Diagnostic criteria for PTSD include a history of exposure to a traumatic event that meets specific stipulations and symptoms from each of four symptom clusters: intrusion, avoidance, negative alterations in cognitions and mood, and alterations in arousal and reactivity. The sixth criterion concerns duration of symptoms; the seventh assesses functioning; and, the eighth criterion clarifies symptoms as not attributable to a substance or co-occurring medical condition.
This has been described in the context of mental illness, although one could describe it as an understandable reaction to traumatic events throughout history. As trauma expert Cathy Caruth argues:

If PTSD must be understood as a pathological symptom ... it is a symptom of history (Caruth 1995:5)

For some populations, PTSD is not pathological; it is commonplace. Haunting manifests in the figures of ghosts or the flashbacks of war survivors. Its commonness suggests that this suffering is too much to be borne on an exclusively individual basis. For the war to be defined as collective trauma, it must disrupt the self-identity and sense of community of its victims, and it must involve violent acts on a mass scale. Whole communities can be haunted with PTSD symptoms. In particular, people in Vietnam all pay tribute to the dead, including wandering and hungry ghosts. Culturally, it is believed that once the remains of the dead are given proper burial, the often psychosomatic symptoms haunting the living will cease (Gustafsson 2012; Kwon 2008).

The dialectic of trauma, between the urge to know and the urge to forget (Herman 2007:1), is a feature of trauma narratives. It is rare for trauma to be completely healed, and the very nature of trauma renders some memories unspeakable. Similarly, the presence of ghosts in a narrative can involve a literary process starting with the marginal – the experiences that people do not wish to relive (Gordon 24). As Gordon writes: 'Following the ghosts is about making a contact that changes you and refashions the social relations in which you are located' (Gordon 2007:24).

Ghosts and haunting

Heonik Kwon, a Canadian-Korean researcher, has done years of field work observing significant sites like My Lai and researching the massacre that
occurred there. He describes in detail the rituals that take place and their importance in the lives of the villagers.

In traditional ancestral worship a typical home will have a family shrine where one will make offerings for one's deceased ancestors. Kwon differentiates between this death in the home, which is considered ideal, and death in the street, which is seen as something to be avoided. Death 'in the street' includes the death during war away from one’s descendants. At official monuments to war, heroes are given offerings, and against the rulings of the state the same government officials who give those offerings also give offerings to their ancestors, and to unsettled war dead at their own home.

In the context of the Vietnam/America war, the concept of counter memory can privilege the memories of veterans from all sides, and including civilians in Vietnam.

Spirits can be taken literally and they exist despite official disavowals from the Americans and Vietnamese governments. There are two ways to honour the dead: through official and state memorials, and through private ancestor worship in people’s homes.

These domestic rituals provide a counter memory in the way the dead are remembered. One of the uses of history is the systematic dissociation of identity: 'it is plural, countless spirits dispute its possession, numerous systems intersect and compete' (Foucault 161). State memorials hail the ghosts as heroes, while domestic ancestor worshippers remember the dead in relation to family and descendants. Along with its promotion of state memorials, the Vietnamese government initiated the search for war dead in the 1970s in order to celebrate war heroes (Kwon 2006). According to Kwon, 'heroes, ancestors and ghosts coexist in the village environment' (Kwon 2006). However, Kwon then distinguishes between heroes and ancestors, and sees the two 'cults' as uneasily coexisting. Kwon suggests that the resurgence of ancestor worship is resistance to the state-sanctioned heroes and is a 'countermeasure against dominant political convention' (Kwon 2006: 152).
'We want the bones. That's what we want. We don't want the ghosts. You keep the ghosts ... Your ghosts are driving us out of our minds (George Evans 87).

The ghosts tell of suffering they witnessed during the war. They remain in this world because of unfinished business from the war and because their remains not buried properly.

Writing about the ghosts as a tool or strategy also creates ‘counter memory’. Ghosts are a presence and an absence, and they have stories waiting to be told. For some, the formation of counter memory is for the future (Gordon 2007) a means of challenging the mainstream. Kwon (2008) describes Vietnamese and American ghosts as apparitions in human form, or as possessing humans with their spirits.

. This hauntedness is a rupture in the social fabric and possibly a rupture in the boundary between the real and unreal (Gordon 1997: 15). For Gordon (1997) and Kwon (2008) the presence or absence of ghosts is effected affected by matters of class, and these apparitions can be disruptive of the world order (Gordon 1997:16) as determined by communities or/and governments.

Ghosts in Vietnam have been described by people from all walks of life such as the apparition of a soldier in Cam Re a small village in the South and the spirits of young girls at the point of their deaths (Kwon 2008). Kwon also documents the haunting of a village by an American veteran’s ghost, and the belief that for the ghost to depart, the veteran’s remains need to be exhumed and reburied. The apparitions are described as human in form, sometimes in uniform, sometimes with visible fatal injuries.

Gordon describes haunting and ghosts appearing when the trouble that they represent is no longer contained.

It is neither premodern superstition nor individual psychosis ... it is of great import (Gordon 7)
Ghosts and hauntedness can be explained in the Western sense as representing something that needs to be told, with haunting being a manifestation of trauma (Rippl 2007:1). To write ghost stories involves ‘writing permissions and prohibitions, presence and absences, apparitions and hysterical blindness.’ (Gordon 17) These are some of the tensions involved in the telling of tales from the past. For example Joe Lamb, a veteran, describes the behaviour of his nation as being like the psych ward where he worked:

The grandiosity, the paranoia, the belief in global conspiracy ... similar to the delusions of the guy who thought he was controlling Neil Armstrong (Lamb 2003:232).

He goes on to say that the American psyche is psychotic during and after war time, and is in denial (Lamb 2003). In America, it is also veterans’ stories that run counter to the government narrative of the war. Though there are many memorials, and although many veterans’ events take place in America, writings from veterans about the war often highlight the haunting memories that they have not exorcised.

Gordon herself poses question: ‘What is it to identify haunting? ... What does the ghost say?’ (Gordon 2007:22) To understand haunting, one may look towards Vietnamese cultural practices such as ancestor worship. In this context the hungry ghosts are demanding to be looked after through the tending of shrines and the observance of ritual practices. Gordon links theoretically what is being done in the present to pass on to the future. She argues that ghosts can correct mistakes, that ghosts are instrumental in creating understanding, as well as integral to a healing process.

It is sometimes about writing ghost stories that not only repairs representational mistakes but tries to understand conditions to form memories, towards a counter memory for the future (Gordon 2007:22).
Anthropologists such as Kwon and Endres detail the social and financial transactions that accompany such spiritual rituals. For example, offerings of food and drink are given to the dead, as well as incense offerings. Psychics are often middle aged women without children, and being recognised as a psychic can bring with it a higher social status. It has been noted that some spirit mediums, in embracing the Southern dead who are not acknowledged by the communist party, challenge the status quo of official ceremonies and recognition (Endres 2012). The presence of such ghosts and rituals, even forty years after the Vietnam/American war, symbolises how the grief and trauma of war is still woven into civilian spaces in Vietnam.

Other treatment modalities for healing from trauma include the practice of mindfulness from Buddhist psychology, which encourages experiencing the here and now and observing the trauma’s effects from a position of stillness. Buddhism has its own conceptions of violence, which differ from the Western model. Violence is viewed as a potential in all of us if the conditions are right (Hanh 2002).

In Western psychology, trauma theory and testimony suggests that once one’s story can be told, heard and understood then traumatic experiences can be processed and the individual healed. However, the assumptions of Buddhist psychology include the First Noble Truth that life itself is suffering. The aim is to alleviate suffering by gaining insight into one’s suffering (Second Noble Truth), to cease doing what makes us suffer (Third Noble Truth), and then follow the fourth truth – the eightfold path of ‘right view, right thinking, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right diligence, right mindfulness and right concentration’ (Hanh 1998:11). Buddhist psychology includes accepting that the self is transient and illusory, which has been said to be the hardest view for Western-based psychology to accept (Nairopa 2005).
These views challenge traditional Western psychological assumptions. Coming to accept one’s suffering in order to acknowledge it is difficult to process, especially with trauma. Whole nations are said to be traumatised by events like wars (Gordon 1987; Lamb 2003). Often one can look to literature to find evidence of counter memories to the stories told by nation states to their citizens to justify their decisions such as going to war. The domino theory promulgated in America is one such imperialistic narrative used to justify war, which is now discredited.

**Viet Kieu the 1.5 generation**

The silence around the suffering endured in war and in the boat journeys of those who fled from Vietnam is often carried through to the next generation in what Hirsch calls postmemory. She explains:

> Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can neither be understood nor recreated. I have developed this notion in relation to children of Holocaust survivors, but I believe it may usefully describe other second-generation memories of cultural or collective traumatic events and experiences (Hirsch 1988: 22).

The ‘1.5 generation’ are those Vietnamese migrants who are born in Vietnam but raised predominantly in Australia or America. English is often close to their first language, and though they may have experienced the boat journey and life in a refugee camp, they are often too young to remember. First generation trauma can be passed down to the second and even third generation (Nguyen, N. 2009: 7). Hirsch describes the intense curiosity and connection that members of second generations may feel toward the past of their parents, a past that may be absent or missing. Vietnamese diasporic writers, such as Nam Le, exhibit this curiosity too in regards to the shared experiences of the diaspora and wishes to write about it. Trinh Minh-ha comments: “A million of Vietnamese dispersed
around the globe. It will take more than one generation for the wounds to heal” (Minh-Ha 1992:83).

Historians Suzannah Radstone and Jenifer Hodgkin argue ‘the process of bearing witness can ... be empowering for individual narrators and can generate public recognition of collective experiences which have been ignored or silenced’ (Hodgkin & Radstone 2012:97). Recognition of the Southern Vietnamese community and its suffering has been a long time in coming in America and Australia. In Australia, two statues featuring a digger and a Southern Vietnamese soldier exist, are in Cabramatta, in a public park and memorials in Canberra and Dandenong.

To do justice to the Vietnamese communities, 1.5 and second generation authors need to examine their own identities and how they relate to Vietnam and Australia. These authors are often described as being from an exilic diaspora, with the third space they inhabit, between the host country and their country of origin, being a manifestation of their hybridity (Bhabha 1993). Palumbo-Liu suggests that there is ‘a counterdiscourse of resistance, invention and modification ... and recognition of their historical circumstance’ (Palumbo Liu 1999:247) on the part of Vietnamese refugees. Chi Vu suggests that ‘1.5 generation authors ... have to redefine their positioning with each new creative work, to (re)translate themselves along a shifting continuum of otherness’ (Vu 2011: 131).

Vu alludes to the constant flux in the circumstances of the 1.5 generation, and discusses the question of artistic identity, the waters that must be traversed in order to be a conscientious artist. Being aware of the ‘other’ position that the Vietnamese diaspora inhabits in Australia, and insight into this condition, are necessary ingredients for writing about the Vietnamese diaspora. Goellnicht suggests that if one is to write ethically about Vietnam, one must be concerned with community tensions. As part of a diasporic movement, one must remember,
memorialise and honour the dead. The war is not over for some first generation Vietnamese, and community spaces, such as in Buddhist temples in Melbourne, fly the Southern flag (yellow with red stripes) rather than the official communist flag (a yellow star on red). However, Vu suggests that the otherness of the Vietnamese diaspora is impermanent and will change, possibly with the generations and the identification of one's audience when writing (Vu 2011).

Gunew has suggested that the later generations (third and fourth) need to consider the positioning of the writer as an ‘inventor of community’ (Gunew 109) that is seeded from the diaspora. Writers are often seen as representative of their community and suffer from the burden of delegation and depiction (Gunew 108). For instance, Tran calls for the Viet Kieu to turn to Vietnamese diasporic literature to ‘recognise and face their problems, to understand how their stories are told and how their voices are rendered’ (Tran 263).

Viet Kieu share many characteristics: a (mythical) homeland, a shared vision of what Vietnam the nation could be, a displacement of people in exile, and a belief they are not accepted by their host country (Safran 1991). Other researchers argue that communities can have diasporic moments (Clifford). For example, the 1.5 and second-generation Vietnamese Australians may well see themselves as being Vietnamese Australians rather than Vietnamese in exile. Other researchers have suggested that the whole Vietnamese diaspora can be seen as one global entity rather than a series of discrete diasporas.

However, to conflate Vietnamese-American experiences with those of Vietnamese in Australia is to overlook key features and characteristics of the respective diasporas. The titling of the war as the Vietnam/American war already demonstrates how Vietnamese Americans and Vietnamese Australians differ. America is a superpower and can be seen as the aggressor. Australia played a minor role as an ally of America and had a low profile in combat. The search for the remains of American soldiers missing in action, and America’s loss are deeply and publicly felt in America. Australia, on the other hand, only officially recognised six soldiers as missing (Broinowski 2003). In Australia only
very recently have Southern Vietnamese veterans been allowed to march in Remembrance Day marches. There are only three war memorials specifically dedicated to the Vietnam/American war in Australia. They are in Canberra, Cabramatta and Dandenong, an outer suburb of Melbourne.

In contrast, America did not lift its embargo on Vietnam until 1994. There are many memorials for the American victims of the war including a sculpture of twelve copper pages with four-thousand Vietnamese names repeated over and over again by Chris Burden titled 'The Other Vietnam Memorial' in response to the black wall that is the Vietnam Memorial in Washington.

The national imaginaries for Australia and America also differ. In America the 'hero triumphs over weakness, and has the promise of salvation' (Lowe 2006:2) and the American citizen is portrayed as being defended by the independent self-made man. In contrast the 'digger' figure emphasises mateship, a man who fights in other people's wars, and downplays being a hero (Brook 2010). These defining characteristics result in different representations of the military. In addition the stereotype of the mad, alcoholic American veteran is perpetuated by Hollywood.

Dorais, in exploring the Vietnamese diaspora, suggests that despite their differences, most Viet Kieu share the same values, migration history and ways of organising themselves (Dorais 4). Typical of diasporic literature over the last forty years, Vietnamese writings include the event that prompts exile (in this case the end of the war), the journey to safety, the encounter with the host country and adaptation, and the development of community with the 1.5 and second generations, and the telling of intergenerational tales. Further along may be the return home narrative and the journey which is often a search for identity and one's place in the world (Nunn & Brook 2011; Pham & Brook 2011).

Qui-Piet Tran has observed in the Vietnamese-American literature important gender differences between. Male writers describe their ordeals with anger, whilst women are resigned to their situations. Tran speculates that men are still
angry about America’s part in the fall of Saigon, while women view their situation as a karmic debt. This seems to also be a trend in Vietnamese-Australian literature as well. Women write about the communities they observe whilst men are focused on the journeys of individuals.

It is debatable whether the Vietnamese diaspora, now settled in the host country and returning back to Vietnam post *doi moi* in the eighties when Vietnam opened up to foreigners, can be accurately described as transnational. There is still a segment of the population, mostly from the first generation or, as termed by Nunn (2011), the foundation generation, who are hostile to the current Vietnamese government. For this part of the community the Southern flag is the only recognised symbol of Vietnam. Vietnamese activists have censured works of art that display the Southern and Northern flags. For example a work at Casula Powerhouse in NSW has been associated with death threats (Chan 2011; Huynh-Beattie 2011). Similar outcries have occurred in the USA against controversial Vietnamese artists who have used the two flags in their works.

The complexity and nuances of the Vietnamese diaspora requires a thorough ethical interrogation of one’s subjective position. Caution is required when making generalised statements about the Vietnamese communities – for instance, I use ‘communities’ in the plural not the singular, a usage which would imply there is only one homogenous body. I’m of the second generation; my extended family migrated to Australia in 1979 through the family reunion plan. My maternal grandfather was a politician who was assassinated in 1975. I am mostly Australian but consider myself a Vietnamese Buddhist. I come from a well-educated background; my mother and father were Colombo Plan students in Hobart. Neither of them has been involved in politics and they have chosen not to engage with the communities associated with the Vietnam Community Associations (VCA). My writing that is set in Vietnam and America has been crafted to favour neither the Vietnamese government or America. I also accompanied Thich Nhat Hanh on his tour of Vietnam with Great Ceremonies of Mourning for all those that suffered during the wars in 2007.
The Vietnamese diasporic first generations have only recently begun to be examined in oral histories in sociology – for instance in Nathalie Nguyen's *Voyage of Hope* (2005) and *When Memory is Another Country* (2010). Nathalie Nguyen's oral histories are carefully positioned; she reflects that she is giving first generation women the opportunity to share their stories. In this process each woman’s individual narrative is remembered as a counter memory and can be woven in community histories (Nguyen 2010).

Researchers have also just begun to look at Vietnamese diasporic literature and the complexity of their representations of experiences. Unlike the two dimensional portraits of Vietnamese people from writers such as Graham Greene, Vietnamese diasporic literature portrays the heterogeneity of Vietnamese experience. Not all Vietnamese refugees came by boat, and refugees can be stereotyped, for instance the model minority myth which portrays them as hard workers and high achievers (Lowe 1996:2) or as drug dealers. The representation of Vietnamese people has to accurately reflect the communities, and needs to be heterogenous in nature (Minh-ha 1999). Minh argues:

*like the many names Vietnam has had ... every time one tries to retrieve or rescue what is thought to be retrievable and representable – the authentic Vietnamese for example it loses itself culture .... it's a reality that cannot be contained ... that always escapes but that one cannot escape (Minh-ha 1999:22).*

This is particularly salient for the Vietnamese community in the current anti-refugee climate where parallels can be drawn between the Vietnamese diaspora and the current war refugees from conflicts involving Western powers. There also is an urgent need to tell success stories about the Vietnamese exodus to counter the current Australian government’s perceptions of refugees.

The writings of the diaspora also contribute to the collective memory of experience, identity and memory (Dorais 2001). The Vietnamese diasporic literature translated into English includes translations of *The Crystal Messenger* and *Sunday menu* by Pham Thi Hoai. Works using the return home narrative
common to diasporic writers include Andrew X Pham’s *Catfish and Mandala* and Chi Vu’s *A Psychic Guide to Vietnam*. Plays include Khoa Do’s *Motherfish* which describes the voyage of boat people, Binh Ta’s *Monkey Mother* and Chi Vu’s *Bang Chung* which follows Tet in the war past of Vietnam to the present day. The common Asian American women’s story, in which a younger generation woman has to reconcile her culture of origin and the culture of the host nation (Pelaud 2010), acting as a cultural translator to the older generations, is told in a Vietnamese context in Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge* and Lê Thị Diễm Thúy *The Gangster We Are Looking For*. A more recent publication, *The Perfume River*, edited by Catherine Cole, is an anthology of Vietnamese and Vietnamese diasporic writers’ short stories. It covers a diverse range of authors and includes: an extract from *The Sorrow Of War*, Vu’s *A Psychic Guide to Vietnam* and Lê’s ‘Love and Honor and Pity and Sacrifice’ all of which will be discussed in this exegesis.

In writing about Asian-American literature, Kim comments, ‘the ghosts are spirits of the ancestors, rhetorical agents, repositories of the past and useful cultural interpreters’ (Kim 243). When examining Vietnamese diasporic literature, one should consider texts which use different modes of ghostliness, the actual and literal figures of ghosts, and the nature of texts being haunted, whether explicitly or implicitly. For instance Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge* tells of both psychic and historical haunting, because of her mother’s suicide. Bao Ninh’s classic text *The Sorrow of War* is filled with the haunting of Kien, a war veteran in the jungle. The male characters in Nam Le’s and Chi Vu’s works include hungry ghosts, two older men among the living. In my own work *The Lady of the Realm*, ghosts are helpful and benign when given offerings and incense on the site of death. Following on from Kwon’s research, the ghosts haunt their descendants but beyond death there are no different sides to the war (Kwon 2008).

All of these works require careful positioning by the authors, who often need to keep in mind the literature and representations of Vietnam that have come before. Writing is a political act in the Vietnamese context. In the act of writing,
Vietnamese literature is also seen as a call to conscience. Pham Thi Hoai, who resides in exile in Berlin, has said that:

I come from a civilization which is marked by literature. There literature carries more responsibility for the social life than a mother with her new born child, more missions than a liberation army, more ties than blood connections and can create more miracles than magical power. There literature is a moral ... and as a moral it has to be more than art (Hoai in Ninh 2002: 255).

Hoai is an advocate for the writer working from conscience and as a journalist runs ‘Talawas’, a Vietnamese diasporic website. In ancient times Vietnamese literature was imbued with Confucian values and in current times often contains political messages.

This exegesis is about haunting, both literal and figurative, from the Vietnam/American War. For the Vietnamese, ghosts are real, part of the social fabric and subject to change. Writing ghost stories can sustain counter memories which can be woven into the narratives of diasporas and nations. The process of transformation and retelling of the hauntings of Vietnam can give agency to the storyteller and the listener. It can help integrate the horrors of war with the recall of memories that for some may never be forgotten. However, it seems there is no one who recovers totally from the war experience that catalyses their writing. Readers are often left with questions for the ghosts of the past and the writers that live with the present.
The Fifth Book of Peace, Maxine Hong Kingston

The Fifth Book of Peace describes Kingston’s use of Buddhist techniques to create a safe sangha (group) for war veterans to create their stories. She engages in myth making for herself and for the veterans of war, using as a model the story of Odysseus when he returns from war and can finally tell his story. Kingston naively engages in archetypal psychology in her work with the veterans, as in The Woman Warrior when she draws on the myth of Mulan. Kingston has two brothers who served in the war and initially she held the workshops in the hope that they would come. They did not, but a core group of war veterans did.

Kingston relies on Engaged Buddhism techniques which were developed in the name of peace in response to the Vietnam/American War by Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Zen Master (Hanh 1998). Hanh argues that to create peace, one must find peace in oneself first. Meditation and mindfulness are at the centre of the practice, and they promote the observation of emotions from a place of calm (Hanh 1998).

Kingston views the writing which emerged from her workshops as part of the peace-making process; in finding peace for themselves the veterans also share their experiences through story. This is one example of sharing stories from trauma in a safe environment and it helps transform the trauma into narrative memory. Her stance against American foreign policy politicises the discussion and work that she does for the veterans. She encourages veterans to tell the truth as they see it, including the horror of it. These are counter memories of America's military failure and are not often heard. The veterans do not deny the horror and suffering that they are exposed to, but personalise their experiences in writing.
Engaged Buddhist psychology

Buddhist psychology can act as a ‘counter-process’ to war trauma. In particular Vietnamese Zen Buddhism, as espoused by Thich Nhat Hanh, has been used in story making and to produce counter narratives to the dominant American mainstream. Mindfulness is the key to dealing with trauma. Mindfulness, paying attention to the present moment, enables one to see flashbacks as being in the past, not the present. When one is strong enough one can invite the fear to one’s attention and comfort that fear like a baby (Hanh 2012) without being drawn into the past. One of the mantras used by Hanh, addresses the fear directly:

Breathing in, I know that the feeling of suffering, despair, unhappiness, fear is in me. Breathing out, I embrace the feeling of suffering in me (Hanh 2012)

Boat people's continued suffering from trauma may cause them to have flashbacks from their journeys. Thich Nhat Hanh advises that they are only images but they still cause much suffering (Hanh 2012). Hanh himself survived the war and several attempts on his life and was exiled by the communist regime. He came to prominence in the Western world in the sixties and seventies specifically in America where he lobbied for the American War to end.

As part of the deep listening process for the veterans, Kingston draws on the myth of Kuan Yin (Quan Am) the goddess of mercy. According to mythology, Kuan Yin listens to the cries of the world with compassion. Kingston personifies herself and the other Asian women involved in her writing workshops as embodiments of the bodhisattva to listen to and support the veterans. This practice is consonant with Buddhist practice as understood by Hanh, where everyone has the potential to be a bodhisattva. This is also part of Kingston's creative process, as seen in The Woman Warrior, where the female protagonist relies on ‘talk story’ and draws on the mythology of strong women like Mulan, the warrior woman who posed as a man, to survive in a hostile Chinese-American world.
The trope of the hungry ghost is typically seen as one of the Buddhist six stages of being human. Spiritual practice in Vietnam includes leaving out food and drink for the hungry ghosts on the seventh month of the full moon. As characterised by Thich Nhat Hanh, hungry ghosts are people who can be alive and suffering:

When we feel disconnected with our source of life, with our ancestors, with our traditional values, we begin to wither and become a hungry ghost, going around and looking for something to help us revive, looking for a source of vitality again. Someone who is alienated feels that he or she is a separate entity that has no connection with anyone. There is no real communication between him or her with the sky, with the earth, with other human beings, including his father, her mother, brother, sister and so on. Those who feel cut off like that have to learn how to practice so that they will feel connected again with life, with the source of life that has bought him or her there (Thich Nhat Hanh 2009:64).

Hungry ghosts are hungry for love, understanding, and something to believe in. They have not received love, and no one understands them. They have large bellies and their throats are as small as a needle. Even if we offer them food, water, or love, it is difficult for them to receive it. They are very suspicious (Thich Nhat Hanh 2009:64).

Hungry ghosts broker between the living and the dead. They can be sated by the practice of deep listening. The practices of Thich Nhat Hanh have a similar function. Hanh suggests that if one listens with compassion to people’s grief, anger and frustration they will find release and peace within themselves (Hanh 85). Hanh says that ‘You should have peace within yourself before doing the work of peace’ (Hanh 2012:90). It is this deep listening that Kingston wishes to evoke using Avalokitesvarā’s name – Kuan Yin or Quan Am the goddess of mercy.

We invoke your name Avalokitesvarā. We aspire to learn your way of listening in order to help relieve the suffering of the world. You know how to listen in order to understand (Kingston 2003: 318).

Avalokitesvarā is a bodhisattva, someone who has stayed back from going to nirvana to assist human beings and relieve their suffering. Buddhist understanding of suffering is built around the Four Noble Truths. These truths
are that there is suffering, that there is an ignoble way that has led to suffering, that there is a path to being free of suffering, and that there is a noble way that leads to wellbeing. Hanh says that to cultivate mindfulness one needs a *sangha*, a group of like-minded people with whom to practice. Mindfulness techniques include the practice of meditation, staying in the present moment and being an observer of thoughts about past hurts and future dangers.

During dharma discussion one practices deep listening which enables people to be heard. One stays fully present and listens to what another says. It is not unlike ‘active listening’, one of the five key points of Carl Rogers’ person-centred counselling techniques or witnessing – an important process in the healing of trauma (Caruth 1997).

In the Buddhist understanding of suffering and connectedness, one does not suffer alone but is connected to other people – this is called ‘interbeing’. Thus, the Buddhist conception of the self is that there is no-*self*, the self does not exist in isolation from others; in fact it is made of non-self elements like one’s ancestors.

Buddhist psychology has its own explanation of violence and recovery from trauma. In Thich Nhat Hanh’s Mahayanan Buddhist conception, consciousness consists of mind consciousness, and store consciousness which contains the seeds of violence, sadness and joy. Mind consciousness is an equivalent to the Western ego, whilst store consciousness can be seen as the collective consciousness. Seeds of trauma can be planted in one’s store consciousness by one’s ancestors. However Buddhist psychology suggests that if one nurtures good seeds like those of joy and brings them to mind consciousness, then these seeds will ripen and multiply, enabling one to have the strength to face the seeds of trauma (Hanh 2012).

---

3 Dharma is the teachings of the Buddha. Dharma discussion is a formalised discussion of the teachings.
Being mindful also involves staying in the present moment, which can be a challenge especially for those with a traumatic history. Mindful breathing and counting the breath can keep one’s conscious attention on the present moment. By using this technique one can try to remain safe in the present moment and not be overwhelmed by the past. The breath is seen as a vital unit, an embodiment of life itself.

The reframing of war trauma stories as narratives to be told in order to promote peace makes the storyteller an active and not just a passive victim. The audience is not just passive: a sangha uses empathy and deep listening to attend to the storyteller. This mode of storytelling and orientating the storytellers to the present moment enables war veterans to move from the past to the present. It gives them a sense of worth, a sense that telling their suffering is valuable and can be used in the name of peace.

Engaged Buddhism as practised by Thich Nhat Hanh and his followers was born in war times, an irony not lost on Hanh who in his more esoteric teachings suggests that one cannot grow a rose without garbage:

When you perceive reality in this way you will not discriminate against the garbage in favour of the rose. You will cherish both. You need both right and left to form a branch. Do not take sides (Hanh 2002).

This more complex and sophisticated view can be applied to counter memories of war and complicates interpretations of veterans’ writings. Foucault suggests counter memories draw on the flow of mainstream currents in order to transform history into a totally different flow of time (Foucault 1977:160). Traditional Western storytelling emphasises the hero’s journey with a beginning, middle and end, and something changes, internally or externally to the hero. The stories of these war veterans and civilian survivors typically do not follow this model. The counter memories that are processed through using Engaged Buddhist techniques aim to resonate with the listener and be a call for peace.
Kingston’s work is put in the context of peace making, both for the veterans and the nation at large.

Maxine Hong Kingston wrote *The Fifth Book of Peace* in four sections, using fiction, non-fiction and autobiography. ‘Fire’ is autobiography and documents the California fires when she lost her house and her first draft manuscript titled . ‘Paper’ is a fictional account of looking for the mythical books of peace. ‘Water’ is a fictional recreation of the book of peace. The last part of the book, ‘Earth’ details how she began a sangha for predominantly Vietnam/American war veterans to write and tell stories about their experiences. Veterans from Kingston’s sangha say, ‘Yes I can change myself writing’ (Kingston 263) and ‘Writing my pain, I write myself to health’ (Kingston 265).

Mainstream stories about the damaged war veteran, such as in the film *Born on the Fourth of July* are sidelined both by the government and the peace counter culture which can oppress war veterans. What Kingston allows for is the telling of war stories within a framework of working for peace. The narrative function of writing assists individuals in processing what has happened to them in a compassionate environment.

As she argues

> They would write the unspeakable. Writing, they keep track of their thinking; they leave a permanent record. Processing chaos through story and poem, the writer shapes and forms experience, and thereby, I believe, changes the past and remakes the existing world. The writer becomes a new person after every story, every poem; and if the art is very good, perhaps the reader is changed, too (Kingston 2007:7).

The need for closure, for resolution, or sometimes the need just to write an event into the past, can make writing a source of powerful healing. Kingston frames the storytelling as a way of finding the road to peace, after Hanh, who believes that the special sharing veterans can have can affect the rest of the world.
Veterans have something to tell their nation. Veterans have experience that makes them the light at the tip of the candle, illuminating the roots of war and the way to peace (Hanh in Kingston 2003: 311).

With the use of Thich Nhat Hanh’s practices, Kingston has made her workshops a spiritual practice for the veterans that attended them. The influence of Vietnamese Zen Buddhism on these American veterans’ lives could be seen as ironic or paradoxical: at first Vietnam was a war to them, and then, through Thich Nhat Hanh’s Vietnamese Zen practice, they have found peace.

The memoir ‘Earth’ is a jumble of Kingston’s reflections and doubts conducting the workshops, as well as being the biography of the group that formed from the writing workshops. There is no easy resolution for the veterans or Kingston; they have been heard by a select audience and at the time of publication the group was still meeting after September 11 2001, although Kingston sought to end it.

In ‘Earth’ it appears that there has been some catharsis, however during the narrative of ‘Earth’, Kingston’s father dies, which is barely touched on. The narrative of ‘Earth’ is rambling, and draws on Buddhist philosophy. It includes a poem about Brave Orchid’s Kingston’s mother, and fragments of poems written by the veterans such as:

'John Wayne I was in fatigues and boots
here to kill those fucking gooks
... They touch my hair and say same-same Vietnamese’
This is a poem written by Paul Fujinaga, an Asian American veteran.

Kingston’s almost naïve belief in the power of story is evident throughout the book. When she visits Plum Village, Thich Nhat Hanh’s home sangha, she discovers that in changing one person – herself – she could change the world.

She describes her experience of losing everything in the California fires as the traumatic experience she had to draw on in order to be able to deal with the suffering of the war veterans. This is an unfortunate conflation of events, and
knowing of her ignorance of war, she draws on the experiences of Wayne Karlin, a war veteran, to help facilitate the writing workshops.

Kingston finds her Plum Village visit disappointing as she finds Thich Nhat Hanh’s teachings on the 50 verses of mindfulness too esoteric and not applicable to her situation with the veterans. However, those verses still inform her Zen practice, highlighting the need for mindfulness to help deal with overwhelming fear.

Kingston herself admits the mix of fiction and memoir that she publishes is difficult for publishers to define. But she insists on staying true to her form of ‘talk story’ in order to try and change the world. ‘Earth’ is an honest account of her time with the veterans of war, and her attempt to touch her brothers’ suffering. It also honestly documents her limitations, her hopes and her dreams.

**Veterans of war, veterans of peace**

Kingston compiled an anthology for the veterans who attended her workshops titled *Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace* (2006). It took twelve years to compile and features Vietnamese veterans as well as American survivors of war. The core group of veterans that kept meeting could be said to have once been hungry ghosts looking for recognition and compassion from the living. They are haunted by their war experiences and often had just missed out on becoming actual ghosts themselves.

The veterans’ writings were heterogeneous in nature. Trinh Minh-ha comments that history and culture need to be rewritten, and they need to reflect diversity rather than just pay token attention to ethnicity and gender (Minh-ha 1992: 153). The following poem is by Nguyen:

```
War.
They want war.
They want war.
```
No one wants to read a book about peace.

Peace.
Maxine Hong Kingston wrote
The Fifth Book of Peace
Full of people
Who will not stop talking
About war.
(Nguyen 2003: 393)

This poem demonstrates the frustration that Nguyen has about talking and listening to stories about the war and the irony that a book of peace is about people talking about war. He left Vietnam in 1975 and returned to Vietnam in 2006, three years after these poems were published. In the preface to his poems he says he’d like to deal with other topics apart from war, but only returns to think about his exile from Vietnam and how it occurred. His suffering is constant; like a hungry ghost he is looking for some relief from his suffering in writing. His constant return to war as a topic in his writing may indicate that inside him, the war is not yet over. This is demonstrated in the repetition of first line ‘They want war. They want war. They want war.’ Nguyen is still haunted by the war and his poem echoes the collective consciousness from the American War ‘Nobody wants to read a book about peace’. For haunted writers like Nguyen, the war is far from over. Peace is what is missing here, for him and the American audience referred to as ‘they’ in his poem.

Joe Lamb was a medic during the war and felt that Americans leading the war did not know what they were doing. He writes:

I felt guilty being in the military ... and at the same time I felt guilty opposing the war. In that regard I was a little schizophrenic like America itself during those times ... It helped me empathize with the patients and it helped me keep an open mind while feeling my way through the broken psyche of my country (Lamb 2003:232).

Lamb’s personalising of America the nation as having a psychotic mental illness demonstrates how he could make sense of American actions during the
Vietnam/American war. To him the generals that led the war were disconnected from reality, much like his patients, but he could still care for the veteran victims and perpetrators.

The Buddhist concept of the sangha penetrated some of the work of the American veterans. In the Denis Dass poem ‘Fred said compassionately witness trigger … don’t shoot the messenger’, written in flashbacks and fragments, the time in the poem is not chronological as can be seen below:

I went with the advance party of the 1st cavalry division, I never compassionately witness anything / You could only count so high. You had no time to reflect (Be there now)…. Compassionate witnessing is very foreign to me/… / Remembering is thinking of the past without possibility of change/Meditation is thinking of the future for Change. LET ME MEDITATE NOW (Dass 2006: 73).

The body of the poem is like the flashbacks of PTSD from the war, abrupt, jumbled and confused. This reflects the disjointed nature of his traumatic memories and experience. ‘Thinking of the past without possibility of change’ is an example of the frozen thinking and revisiting of the traumatic moment that recurs for veterans. Dass wishes for change and Buddhist practice is one way of showing him a future. His intention to MEDITATE NOW shows his distress and determination to make a peaceful future for himself. The free-association style of the poem and its stream of consciousness heightens the impact of Dass’s experience for the reader. He too is haunted by the war but he wishes to practise mindfulness and living in the present moment through meditation. This demonstrates how unprocessed trauma and memories haunt Dass, but mindfulness practice gives him hope.

Dass creates counter memories with his recitation of violence and his response to them.

You only killed the same guy over and over and over. Keep the same face on every kill. Vengeance, personal it's all nothing (Dass 73).
The way he copes with killing depersonalises what he does. In his second poem ‘Why did I let you live’ he reflects on how he spared a Viet Cong soldier. He sees the soldier back in America, wondering if he has let him go. He is haunted by the memory of one life he did not take. This counter memory of sorrow and disassociation, with hope in Buddhist practice, is a viewpoint missing from mainstream representations of the Vietnam/American War.

Garry Gach’s story ‘Fathers and Sons’ is framed by an old black woman asking about family values. Gach says that ‘life is lived forward, and understood backwards’ (119), a reflection which can hold for the importance of narration of past events for understanding, memory and healing. Like Dass, Gach is influenced by Buddhism. Unlike Dass however, Gach seems to have found some peace after the war in pursuing Buddhism. His storytelling style is conversational, with the occasional breaking out of the text with the phrase ‘Will someone say Amen?!’ (112). ‘Amen’ is a Christian phrase which punctuates the prose and is a direct appeal to the reader to close the work with agreement from both Christian and Buddhist perceptions. This style lends intimacy to the stories told by Gach about his family and finding peace with his father.

Gach was ordained as a Buddhist monk and compiled an anthology of Buddhist poetry. Buddhist practice has clearly connected with him. He tells of how he listened to his father using deep listening and was able to reconcile with him after hurting him badly (Kingston 2006: 119). Garry Gach describes the peace process and his way to peace through the middle way, saying, ‘I learned there was no path to peace, that peace is the path … I learned to walk with balance, a middle way between extremes’ (Kingston 2006: 117). Gach describes how using Buddhist compassionate practice he is now able to relate to his father by imagining him as a child and feeling for that child, as well as connecting with himself as a child (Kingston 117). He reflects that he hopes that all will come to reconciliation and healing, and stop needless suffering.

In ‘Poem for Tet’, Ted Sexauer writes:
This is the poem
That will save my life
This the line that will cure me
This word the word the one
This breath the one I am

Tet is the Vietnamese New Year. It also is the name given to a military operation in Hue in 1968 during the war, the Tet Offensive. In the poem Sexauer is drawing on mindful breathing and living in the present moment to try and cure himself. To practise mindfulness meditation, a core practice of engaged Buddhism, one concentrates on the in breath and out breath. As Hanh instructs: ‘Breathing in I feel calm. Breathing out I feel at ease. I am not struggling anymore’ (Hanh 2012: 70)

In Hanh’s teachings, staying in the present moment is what is aspired to; too often we are living in the past or the future.

In ‘Progress Report’ Sexauer describes how as a young man he was ‘an unhealthy mix of Buddha-like compassion and a young man’s impatience’ (Kingston 2006: 468). He writes,

I taught myself to feel by writing out
Accounts of those times I remembered
Becoming numb in increments
And by reading the writings to citizens.
I found perspective in the Dharma
In the Dharma I found soul sufficient
To inform the heat of the spirit.

And now at peace I am become
Human. I let go
The dread story, survivor’s identity.

This poem documents what Kingston wants to achieve with the veterans’ sangha. Sexauer processes his emotions by writing and sharing. He has transformed his numb moments and trauma into story and then he can let go of the veteran identity and become human again. Another interpretation from the Buddhist perspective is that he was a hungry ghost until he discovered the dharma, and
having found peace within himself he has become human, another stage of humanity. The six stages of being human according to Buddhist philosophy are animals, hungry ghosts, human, titans and bodhisattvas (Hanh 2002)

Robert Landman had a spiritual awakening after conversing with a northern Vietnamese captive soldier. He reclaimed the central tenet of Christianity – to treat others as we wish to be treated – and was introduced to Buddhism. He ends his description of his months in Vietnam with:

In every year that comes another silence continues. I too am among the many missing in action, when invited to sit at the banquet table of life. In the space between all words ... other voices speak. In the time between moments ... other stories unfold. In the silence between all things ... is the eternal call to listen (Landman 247).

The reference to himself as ‘missing in action’ speaks of the loss of self that occurred for him surviving in Vietnam. Landman too is like a hungry ghost to Americans; part of him died when a scout was killed minutes after his platoon had left a bunker. For him, being able to write another story allows another to speak and most importantly to listen, and that brings him back to life. He talks of the ‘space between all words ... other stories unfold’ with ‘the eternal call to listen’ (Landman 2006: 247). Landman’s work addresses the Other, the Viet Cong, and documents violence. The last three lines describe silence as an absence which is filled by other voices and stories. This could be a description of the counter memories that one has to listen out for.

Hanh Hoang’s ‘Field of Heads’ is a calm narration of a barbaric practice from the war, in which Vietnamese girls are buried up to their necks and their mothers are forced to work the fields. She describes the story which won a Writer’s Digest prize, as being about ‘the cultural and social isolation that some of us immigrants suffer in a modern society.’ (Hong 2006: 163) One could read the story as being very alienating, cruel and inconceivable. However, if one believes in the transformative power of imaginative writing, it may make Vietnamese suffering seem more human.
George Evans in ‘A Walk in the Garden of Heaven’ refers to Kannon, the Japanese Goddess of Mercy and the temple he entered in Kyoto where there were 1000 statues of Kannon, with each statue having a multitude of arms and hands. He writes of compassion and manifestations of Kannon which include Avoliketera and Kuan Yin. He says ‘representing the fragments of a time when their heads exploded in dismay at the evil in this world, the way our heads exploded in the war, though we don’t wear our histories where they can be seen’ (Evans 85). This is in reference to veterans and maybe even including civilians of America, where war history and scars are often not seen out in the open.

The story describes how the Goddess of Mercy has infinite compassion and how he feels that compassion. He asks, ‘how many heads do we have and how many arms and how many worlds do we hold, and just how far will we go to end our war?’ (Evans 88), perhaps questioning human ability to listen and heal like Kannon.

Evans wrote the story in response to meeting Le Minh Khue and Huu Thinh, two Vietnamese authors who are war veterans from Hanoi. The piece goes on to describe how they might have killed each other in another time and place and how he is sad but not ashamed. Evans has managed to find a place in his personal narrative for his war experiences. This work is addressed to the Vietnamese authors, explaining Evans’ point of view, his regret and his drive to honour his memories and the dead.

Evans’ work is divided into ten sections, again fragmented in nature like Dass’s with passing mention to the great suffering of the veterans after the war. It tells of trauma in a fractured manner, saying that he is considered insane in America, without going into detail.

I’ve read the war is over for you, but have never believed it. Victory is no balm for loss ... We can’t afford to heal. If we do, we’ll forget, and if we forget, it will start again (Evans 90).
This work also functions as a counter narrative to mainstream American assumptions about the Vietnam/American War. It differs from conventional ideas about healing and forgetting. To continue to want to remember war and trauma is considered insane by the medical establishment. However, Evans has found a purpose for his traumatic memories: he seeks to remind the world about the horrors of war through his writing.

Evans’ work alludes to the Vietnamese war veterans that he met after the war; the prose riffs about how winning the war wasn’t everything and how he was angry at America but not angry at Vietnam. His conclusions about healing are at odds with mainstream mental health assumptions and Western ideals about wellness. He also mentions the high suicide rate amongst veterans of war.

Evans writes about the missing in action issue in the United States, where even in the present day there is a drive to have the remains of American soldiers returned to America from Vietnam.

Evans draws on the contradiction that the American remains are required, but not the Vietnamese ghosts that come with them. Evans’ line ‘we don’t want the ghosts … Your ghosts are driving us out of our minds’ acknowledges the American veteran psyche itself is haunted by Vietnamese ghosts.

The cognitive dissonance illustrated by this work demonstrates the biases of American views of the war. Evans’ piece highlights the contradictions in remembering/forgetting the war and what people choose to remember. The war is still an open wound for many people. Evans reflects on how he ‘wants remembering to end, yet cannot let it’ (Evans 87). Evans’ horrific memories are still bothering him and a part of him wishes his war memories to end. But his conscience bothers him and he reframes his memories, seeing them not just as flashbacks but as serving a greater purpose: they impel him to write and tell America to remember the horror so it won’t happen again. This tension between wanting to forget and his conscience revealing the need to remember causes him, from his American war veteran’s point of view, to refer to Vietnam as ‘an
epoch, a paradigm, a memory, a mistake’ (Evans in Kingston 2006: 86). He feels grief, not guilt, and wants to honour the dead by not forgetting them or Vietnam.

Evans has constructed a narrative about the war and sees his memories as being a reminder of human suffering that he cannot forget. This runs against the dominant American need for amnesia when it comes to the Vietnam War. He writes: ‘I want this remembering to end, yet cannot let it. It’s like drinking the ocean but someone must remember, someone refuse to be tethered’ (Evans in Kingston 2006: 87)

Evans wrestles with surviving and dying during war time:

The double bonds of living for something and dying for something are ribbons that trail from us, drag behind or flap from us, and if I could understand it now or ever this business will be done (Evans in Kingston 2006: 89)

Evans is unresolved about his life and issues after coming back to America. He describes the two Vietnamese veterans he meets:

Yet we are like them. We are. They are the way it is between our two countries. One talking one looking away. Both talking, both looking away (Evans in Kingston 2006:86).

This failure to communicate with each other and looking away, knowing that they would have killed each other some time ago, give a sense of common humanity between the veterans of the two sides. Evans reflects:

Let the future think about the war being over, because then it will be ... we're all guilty of something. Wars are always lost. Even when you win (Evans in Kingston 2006:90).

The conclusion to Evans’ piece is about the present moment in 2003 – before another war begins. The reference to the Iraq wars reminds the reader that the same mistakes are being made again. ‘A Walk in the Garden of Heaven’ has also
been used in the post war anthology *The Other Side of Heaven*, broken up in parts as a prelude, framing stories that have been grouped by theme.

*  

These examples of the works published in Kingston’s anthology demonstrate the effect of her adaptation of Hanh’s Buddhist exercises of mindful meditation and walking to create space for writing. The anthology contains counter narratives about the Vietnam/American War from Vietnamese and American perspectives. They serve Kingston’s aim of promoting peace in the aftermath of war. As Hanh concludes, from garbage roses can grow; we cannot eliminate evil from the world, but from its aftermath one can find compassion and peace (Hanh 2002). However the content of the works suggest that the writers are still haunted by the war, with some writers indicating that for the American psyche the war is still not over, and indeed individual healing may lead to forgetting which means war will happen again. American veterans are still haunted by the past and can be described using the trope of the hungry ghost, which perpetually needs compassion to be appeased. Kingston demonstrates how writing can help the veterans live with what they have seen by enabling them to share their stories. Kingston wants the veterans and us, the readers, to find peace of sorts, even for just a moment or two.

The Sorrow of War, Bao Ninh

_The Sorrow of War_ was written by Bao Ninh in Vietnamese and translated into English in 1994 after being banned by the Vietnamese government. This novel is a ‘modern’ novel in the Western sense, in that it has an anti-hero Kien who barely survives the war using postmodern narration techniques, including self-reflexive narration, to tell his story. He is a haunted man, having survived when the rest of his battalion was killed in the war. He is forced to revisit where they died as part of a missing in action retrieval team. This novel is haunted by the men and women that have died. Their stories form counter memories framed by the memory of a North Vietnamese veteran who challenges the national discourse about the American War in Vietnam.

The trauma experienced by Kien is conveyed by the literary devices used in the text and the overall narrative style of the work. Kien attempts to make sense of his suffering and form a coherent narrative, but the mode of writing and PTSD hijacks his resolve. Although the narrator reflects at one point that his devils have been changed to ash by his writing, the conclusion of the novel is that the psychological wounds of war last forever (Ninh 180). Trauma theory alone is unable to account for the unresolvable, haunted nature of Kien’s wounds. Kien is unable to heal and in the end retreats into the pre-war past. He becomes a hungry ghost himself in post-war Hanoi, unable to find solace except in the past. He is unable to respond to the love and care he receives from a mute girl in his block of apartments, but yearns for his first love, Phuong.

Gordon asks:

What is it to identify haunting? How does the ghost interrupt the demand for ethnographic authenticity? What does the ghost say? (Gordon 24).

Minh-ha asks:

Who is s/he? How does s/he create? How true, how authentic is her/his creation? How much of her/his real self has s/he inserted into the work? (Minh Ha 1999: 29).
This interrogation of the subject position of the writer would be familiar to the Vietnamese diasporic writer (Vu 2011). Whether these questions need to be answered for the reader is a moot point; nowadays authors are required to be performative in the public domain. Texts are read with many narratives being conflated with the personal story of the author. Thus, works are often positioned carefully with these issues in mind.

Kien is described as a hungry ghost. A common interpretation of the work is that it is autobiographical fiction – Ninh is drawing on his own experiences to write the novel. Ninh’s ghost like Kien’s ghost is too traumatised to say anything meaningful, and it is left to the publisher to provide a message about the story. Using the guise of fiction, the ghosts of war tell of human suffering, and the novel provides a complex rendering of the war that goes beyond a simple discourse about two sides locked in a civil war. His mocking of official Northern Vietnamese propaganda positions Kien as unpatriotic, along with other soldiers.

Beginning with third person narration, the novel switches to first person at the end with a different narrator, the publisher of the book that Kien was attempting to write. Kien is a reflexive narrator ‘but the act of writing blurs his neat designs ... he is astounded then terrified to read that his hero from a previous page has, on this page disintegrated’ (Ninh 44). This mirrors Kien’s own fear of psychological disintegration.

Ninh writes of Kien’s plans to write a novel, with a beginning, middle and end, but the drive to write rebels against this: ‘There is a force at work in him that he cannot resist, as though it opposes every orthodox attitude taught him, and it is now his task to expose the realities of war and to tear aside conventional images’ (Ninh 45). This force exists in a parallel process with the novel which does not conform to mainstream conventions with a Western narrative arc, including a defined climax and resolution. Kien’s narration is shell shocked and fragmented. He cannot get away from the stories that seem to tell themselves: ‘It is a
dangerous spin he is in, flying off at a tangent, away from the traditional descriptive writing styles where everything is orderly’ (Ninh 45). For example, in recalling the war scenes bleed into each other:

Tu raced past him and straight into the machine gun fire. Tu's back burst open and blood showered into Kien's face. Back came the memories of Oanh dying on the third floor of the Banh Me Thuot police station (Ninh 168).

There are four narrative lines in The Sorrow of War. First, the chronology of recalling the war flashes backwards and forwards, as does the second narrative line in the present day during Kien’s writing process. The third narrative is when Kien returns to the former battlefields with the missing in action (MIA) team after the war, and the fourth is from the point of view of the publisher of the novel and his discovery of Kien’s manuscript. The writing in the novel flashes back and forward, and out of chronological order, much like the jumbled recall of unprocessed traumatic events. The structure of the novel could be described as a series of revelations, with the final one being what happened to Phuong, his idealised sweetheart.

Kien is haunted with the past intruding into his present.

The past years out here imprison me. My past seems to enfold me and move me wherever I go ... I just have to shut my eyes to conjure up those past times and completely wipe out the present (Ninh 40).

During Kien's flashbacks the narration changes tense from third person past tense to the present tense, bringing alive the horror of the events and subsequent flashbacks. For example 'Kien sinks into reminiscence. Whose soul is calling whom as he swings gently and silently in his hammock over the rows of dead soldiers'.

The book begins with the 'Jungle of Screaming Souls' in which Kien returns with a missing in action team after the war. The very name of the jungle evokes the haunted nature of the rural landscape of Vietnam. This chapter describes in
graphic detail the events of the massacre of Kien’s battalion and the stories of the place that persist after the war’s end. Landscape is used as a metaphor for the terror of the war, with soldiers labelling the landscape, in this case the jungle, as ‘forgotten by peace’ (Ninh 1). The jungle is haunted by slaughter and ghosts, described with horrific poetic language: ‘the stream moans, a desperate complaint ... the eerie sounds come from somewhere in a remote past’ (Ninh 2). These descriptions of the haunting of the jungle seem to be a mix of actuality and projections from the minds of the surviving soldiers. Birds scream like humans and the trees themselves seem to drip blood to the observer (Ninh 64). ‘The Jungle of Screaming Souls’ is haunted with the dead, with the very trees moaning in memory.

The repetitious language highlights the horror and sorrow of war, for example: ‘Broken bodies, bodies blown apart, bodies vaporised’ (Ninh 3). The novel’s long sentences pound the reader with image after image, replicating the sensory and cognitive experiences of being flooded by memories:

The dreams focused and refocused until past scenes and the present became a raging reality within him, images of the present and the past merging to double the impact and the smell and atmosphere of the jungle there in the room with him. Wave after wave of agonising memories washed over his mental shores’ (Ninh 62).

Graphic descriptions of the battlefield are presented: ‘Bloated human corpses, floating alongside the bodies of incinerated jungle animals ... all drifting in a stinking marsh’ (Ninh 3). The numbness and cold blooded description of horrors is also a symptom of trauma.

In other sections, Kien’s flat language accentuates the horror of the war, for example in his matter-of-fact description of his sweetheart Phuong being raped on a train, and how he walks away from her, not wanting to heed her calls for him. The sacrifice of Hoa who decoys an American unit so his unit can get away, and the gang rape Phuong suffers before dying are reported in the same manner. Kien reflects that the soldiers took Hoa’s sacrifice too much for granted: ‘It was nothing special during the war time’ (Ninh 177).
In this novel the point of view of the women in Kien’s life is missing. Family, too, are barely present in Kien’s recollections. His treatment of women such as Phuong and Hoa is unsympathetic, perhaps influenced by a conservative Confucian upbringing, or numbness from his own trauma.

Kien is driven to write his novel by his own haunting and suffering and sense of duty to his fallen comrades:

the memory that afternoon awakened in him the sense of sacred duty. He felt he must press on to fulfil his obligations, his duty as a writer. It was necessary to write about the war, to touch readers hearts (Ninh 51).

Ninh writes about the compelling obligation he feels to write about the war, the conscience and ‘moral’ that Hoai refers to (Ninh 1992) and the higher duty of the Vietnamese writer.

I must write! It’s going to be like smashing granite with fists like turning myself inside out … I must write! To rid myself of these devils to put my tormented soul finally to rest instead of letting it float in a pool of shame and sorrow. I must push on! .... Otherwise the pain will be unbearable (Ninh 1992:136).

Kien is haunted, and through the writing process he hopes to exorcise the devils of the war. He is possessed with the Vietnamese haunting of history and cannot get away from it. Like a hungry ghost he looks for compassion in the world and only finds a woman that he leaves his memoir with before disappearing from the text all together, leaving the publisher to complete the tale.

What Kien wants is release from the past. But his plans are disrupted by the trauma of his memories. His narration is affected by all that he has suffered:

The author who will later have to give all credit for his unique writing style and storytelling fame to those war stories? When starting this novel, the first in his life he planned a post war plot … but relentlessly his pen disobeyed him (Ninh 51).
His writing appears to have a life of its own, and Kien appears not to be writing of his own volition. This suggests that the need to write is possibly the trauma dictating what Kien needs to express. The retelling of trauma when one is safe can exorcise bad memories, with the individual re-integrating the trauma into memory and giving it some meaning (Herman 1992). However, this is not a cure-all and sometimes can re-traumatise the individual. ‘The novel seemed to have its own logic, its own flow ... As for Kien he was just the writer, the novel seemed to be in charge’ (Ninh 81). Kien’s loss of agency demonstrates his traumatic suffering after the war. His life was out of his control when he was a soldier, and even in post-war peace he seems unable to regain control of his life.

Kien is flooded by his traumatic memories and unable to function, a classic sign of PTSD. ‘They told stories from the precariously fine border dividing life from death blurring the line and finally erasing it. The fighting continued from the lines of the pages into the real life of the author, the fighting refused to die’(Ninh 1992: 100). The war refuses to go away for Kien; for him the fighting is never over. He is haunted and troubled by the intrusive past, and the haunting demands that he do something about the violence he has witnessed. Kien tells the MIA driver that they are better off telling them to forget about the war. But the driver replies, ‘How can we forget? We’ll never forget any of it. Ever!’ (Ninh 1992: 39). This foreshadows Kien’s obsession with the war and what happened to him, and this is what he ends up writing about. He asks himself when he will forget about the war and its grip on his heart. His memories intrude even into the day time (Ninh 1992: 40), another symptom of PTSD. The memories begin to merge; he is reminded of Hanoi ‘deserted, wet, cold, lonely and deeply sad’ (Ninh 1992: 62) when he is in the jungle and vice versa.

Kien is always fighting his memories that blur into the present (Ninh 1992: 100). The bleeding of reality and memory is another sign of unresolved trauma and haunting. The dialectic between peace and war is also blurred, with the driver of the MIA team concluding that the peace is not worth the price paid. At this stage of the novel Kien tries to disagree with him. By the end of the novel he concludes
that ‘Justice may have won, but cruelty, death and inhuman violence had also won’ (Ninh 1992: 180).

The MIA driver who takes Kien back to the jungle talks about the ghosts he sees, both northern and southern. Kien reflects that maybe the Lost Battalion that Kien survived gathers on special days in uniform and haunts the clearing. His experience when seeing ghosts from both sides of the war is that they do not care that one side or the other is victorious. This agrees with Kwon’s description of co bac, the hungry wandering tortured ghosts from the past.

Kien reflects that ‘peace is a tree that thrives only on the blood and bones of fallen comrades’ (Ninh 1992: 37) and that people in hell don’t care about wars. This differs from the reverence shown by the Vietnamese government to fallen Northern martyrs and war heroes. The MIA team aims to retrieve the remains of the dead, name them and bury them in the hope that their souls will rest in peace. Kien himself only starts to believe in ghosts in the jungle after hearing many stories. Kien reflects that intense physical pain has been sucked up by the jungle which screams and haunts with ghostly music. He dreams about the hungry ghosts that ‘moved around him in his sleep surrounding him like mirrors’ (Ninh 1992: 64). The ghosts demand that something be done for them, and Kien heeds their call. Kien himself is described as being like a ghost haunting the almost empty apartment block that he lives in in Hanoi after the war. He too is still suffering after the war and is haunted by his memories. The fighting is not over for him, just as the ghosts are unable to find peace in the ‘Jungle of Screaming Souls.’

The ghosts are a manifestation of the suffering and slaughter of war. Kien and his MIA team construct an altar in secret, against the atheist directions of the communist party, to burn incense for the ghosts. The landscape populated by ghosts reveals the trauma of the land and the people. The shared spiritual experiences of the soldiers and the MIA team indicate a collective trauma. Heonik Kwon comments that ghosts in Vietnam ‘are a source of historical evidence (and a cultural witness) of war caused violent death … and historical
ceremony’ (Kwon 5) and that they are able to relate to issues in current everyday life. The everyday hauntedness of Vietnamese villages and cities reminds the living about the needs of the dead to not be forgotten.

Near the end of the novel Kien reflects that his devils are extinguished, the ash of which make up his novel (Ninh 1992:105). Kien is at a loss as to what to do with his novel, having written to write, not to publish. Through the experience of writing, he refights all his battles. Later on he concludes that the psychological scars of war will remain forever (Ninh 1992: 180). Like Lamb, Dass, Landman, and other veterans, he has not healed completely, and finds it hard to integrate into civilian life.

Ninh writes against the propaganda of the time, describing the flat realities as Kien saw them: ‘The fallen soldiers shared one destiny, no longer were there honourable or disgraced soldiers, heroic or cowardly. Worthy or worthless. Now they were merely names and remains’ (Ninh 1992: 21). This reductionism of the soldiers’ actions and values shows the hopelessness and pointlessness of war as a counter story to the propaganda issued by the communist government. Ninh has nostalgia for the life and innocence of the pre-war years when the imperialist government was in power in the South. He says that ‘The future lied to us, there long ago in the past. There is no new life, no new era nor is it hope for a beautiful future … The hope is contained in the beautiful pre-war past’ (Ninh 1992:42). This runs directly counter to the Northern propaganda about the victory over the South and the new era after the fall of Saigon in 1975.

Ninh writes about the lack of rewards for the soldiers that are haunted by the war every day, even after the war is over.

That will has gone, that burning will that was once Vietnam’s salvation. Where is the reward of enlightenment due to us for attaining our sacred war goals? Our history making efforts for the great generations have been to no avail (Ninh 1992: 43).
Kien narrates that what was promised to the soldiers was not delivered. His hopelessness is apparent in the above quote. He feels it has all been for nothing, even though his side won. It could be argued that the North Vietnamese lost the support of the people, with re-education camps and land redistribution. More than a million Vietnamese fled overseas, and it was not until doi moi, the opening of the country to foreigners and to Viet Kieu, that the country was able to start prospering.

The denouncing of the importance of the political rhetoric that drives the communist party and the anti-war message of the book has led to it being banned by the communist authorities. Ninh is critical of the people that have sent the troops to war:

He just wanted to be safe, die quietly, sharing the fate of an insect or ant in the war. He would be happy to die with the regular troops... It was clearly those same friendly simple peasant fighters who were the ones ready to bear the catastrophic consequences of this war, yet they never had a say in deciding the course of the war (Ninh 1992: 15).

Ninh idolises the common soldiers, whilst recognising their powerlessness in deciding their own fate:

But he knew it wasn’t true that young Vietnamese loved war ... The ones who loved war ... the others like the politicians middle aged men with fat bellies and short legs. Not the ordinary people (Ninh 1992: 68).

Bao Ninh's narrative goes against the Vietnamese Nationalistic rhetoric about the fight against the imperialistic puppets that used to rule Vietnam. Instead of the war being a 'people's war', Bao Ninh portrays the soldiers as being immune to the propaganda perpetrated by the communist party that war is glorious and for the liberation of the people.

Into their ears poured an endless stream of the most ironic of teachings, urging them to ignore the spirit of reconciliation to be aware of the bullets coated with sugar ... And especially to guard against the idea of the South having fought valiantly ... But we meritorious and victorious soldiers knew how to defend ourselves against this barrage of nonsense. We made
The true nature of war and its futility is graphically described by Ninh through the eyes of his narrator Kien: ‘In all my time as a soldier I’ve yet to see anything honourable’ (Ninh 1992: 18).

Even after victory Kien does not rejoice. His suffering and his memories drive him to drink and to write a memoir of the war. His counter memories paint a graphic picture of what the war was like and his attempts to find meaning in it.

Ninh uses the first person to introduce the character of the publisher of the novel. This allows Ninh to comment on his own work, and on the fact that the manuscript is a cluster of images and events and cannot be read in conventional chronological fashion (Ninh 1992: 214). It also provides an alternative resolution for the reader. The publisher suggests that the sorrow of war enables the veterans to return to their lives again. He asks the question, ‘But now we are living the most beautiful lives we could ever have hoped for because it is a life in peace. Surely this was what the real author of this novel intended to say?’ (Ninh 1992: 217).

There is the possibility that the real author is Bao Ninh and that Kien’s story is an autobiography. The question raised in the reader’s mind about this easier ending anticipates what a Vietnamese audience and in particular the communist party may wish to have said in a book about the war. However Ninh does not allow an easy resolution for Kien or the reader.

Ninh’s novel may well be an example of autobiographical fiction. With its self-reflexive commentary and the direct comments Ninh allows himself in the character of the publisher, the novel could be said to be performative of the traumas of war. Other authors have commented on how in trauma narratives, there is the dialectic between telling and not wanting to tell, and between what is known and unknown (Jensen 2012). Kien seems torn by remembering and not wanting to remember the horror of war. To write, he has to remember, but without the writing he would be lost.
*The Sorrow of War* writes against the nationalist discourse of Vietnam and is driven by haunting and trauma. Only the actual writing of the novel, Kien's 'sacred duty', provides him with any release. The lack of an easy resolution or conclusion, however, suggests that the scars of war will haunt Kien forever, and complete healing may not be possible. Kien remains a hungry ghost in the pages of his memoir and the reader pays tribute by reading his stories that serve as counter memory to the misrepresentation of war by both communist Vietnam and the American government.

In the creative component *The Lady of the Realm* has two narratives providing a counterpoint between the historical stories of Lien and Kim. History is polyphonic and like postcolonialism can be revisited and revised depending on who the speaker is. Lien lives through history whilst Kim experiences people's history through her psychic powers.

Like Kien in *The Sorrow of War*, Lien is trying to find peace, a difficult task. Both Lien and Kim also experience events that are not part of the national imaginary of Vietnam and the war as told by the Communists or the American Imperialists. Kim discovers that we are all on the same side on the other shore. All the spirits communicate with her regardless of which side they fought on. Lien finds her fragile peace in Vietnam for only four years before the Vietnamese government destroys Prajna Monastery.

Like in *The Sorrow Of War* there are no easy conclusions to the experience of war in *The Lady of the Realm*. Using retrospective narration allows for Lien to make commentary on her own story as well as history itself much like the device of the voice of the publisher concluding *The Sorrow of War*.

**The Boat**, Nam Le

Le's collection of short stories *The Boat* is bookended by two stories influenced by Vietnam. Le was brought to Australia by boat when he was a child and though
he has said that his family’s story is off limits to his fiction (Cunningham 2008), it is apparent that Vietnamese community history has influenced him as a writer.

Nam Le’s ‘Love and Honour and Compassion and Pity and Sacrifice’ is the first story in his anthology *The Boat*. It frames the remaining stories in its observation of the expectations of ethnic literature, enabling a sophisticated reading of Le’s virtuosity in writing about subjects from diverse cultural backgrounds. It demonstrates the nature of trans-generational trauma and the limitations of writing as a cure for war trauma.

The last story ‘The Boat’ fulfils the audience expectations that the first story raises, but does not end in the positive or uplifting. The success of *The Boat* may be due to the usual limiting expectations placed on ethnic writers which Nam Le defies (Lee 2012). The anthology has been praised for showing Nam Le’s virtuosity with the middle stories set in diverse locations such as Hiroshima and Colombia. Many papers have been written about Le, including a deliberate misinterpretation of Le as being American rather than Australian (Lee 2012). This conflation of Le’s diasporic identity and subsequent analysis of his “ethnic writer” status seeks to make the two diasporas universal in comparison. However this overlooks the differences between America and Australia’s roles in the Vietnam/American War and subsequent readings of such.

Nam Le’s short story ‘Love and Honour and Compassion and Pity and Sacrifice’ is notable in its commentary on the way ethnic literature is received in the US. It has a self-reflexive Vietnamese-Australian narrator Nam, who is dwelling on the ‘ethnic story’ he has been advised to write by his peers in a creative writing class. It is seen as trendy, featuring cooking dishes and commercially popular, which Nam attempts to emulate. His story is ironic in that he describes the currency of ethnic stories, imagining himself in a conical hat in a rice field – the same imagery of the cover of the anthology *The Perfume River*, in which the story is also featured.
The story is told in the first person, with the narrator Nam addressing the reader directly at times. The prose is economical and understated, with the more horrific details from his father's experience spared from the reader:

He told me about his imprisonment in re-education camp, the forced confessions, the indoctrinations, the starvations. The daily labour that ruined his back. The casual killing. He told me about the tiger cage cells and connex boxes, the different names for different forms of torture: the Honda, the airplane, the auto (Le 2008:27).

The short story silences the unspeakable memories of his father's torture in a re-education camp – memories that haunt Nam and which are rarely heard by the Australian or American mainstream. Nam suffers from what Hirsch calls 'postmemory' which is the unspeakable story that has dominated and shaped the second generation in their imaginings and cultural history (Hirsch 2012). Nam has a curiosity about the past which has dominated his childhood, though parts of it his father has not shared with him. In writing his father's story Nam hopes to achieve some peace with his father and his past.

The story recounts Nam's wish to have some understanding of his father, and to earn his father's pride through writing about his 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 (Le 2008: 19).

He comments on the market currency of these stories and imagines himself in a conical hat in a rice paddy, and then imagines his father 'young and hard eyed' (Le 2008: 11).

Nam recounts how as a 14-year-old he heard his father telling some of his story when drunk with his Vietnamese friends. His father recalls a massacre and the killing of the elderly, as well as women and children. Le’s reference to the My Lai massacre puts his father’s suffering in a historical context which many readers may not be aware of.
Nam’s search echoes the common desires of 1.5 generation Vietnamese diasporic writers to come to grips with history. He wrestles with the ghosts of his father’s past and tries to come to terms with their estranged relationship. Le writes:

He had been buried alive in the warm wet clinch 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 (Le 2008: 23).

The narrator Nam has survived trans-generational trauma, passed on to him through his father’s physical abuse of him as a child, and he tries to understand the legacy of violence by imagining what it was like for his father as a 14-year-old survivor of the My Lai massacre. The past looms large for Nam: ‘A past larger than complaint, more perilous than memory’ (Le 2008: 28).

The haunting of Nam, like Kien, drives him to write his father’s story. Nam’s technique of connection and understanding is writing, the writing of his father’s story. Nam portrays himself as belonging to the generation that writes to heal and to work through trauma. But his father only sees his writing as being 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 in the way Nam hopes it will: ‘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’ (Le 2008:29). But the details of his father's story are obscured and the reader is never shown the story, which Nam's father destroys. What is contained in his story, his father wishes to forget, indicating the horror of it.

This story has no resolution for Nam the narrator, or for the reader. It is written with the non-Vietnamese literary readership 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. Le has stated in an interview that he views writing as a performative act, so it is likely that these devices are used deliberately (Cunningham 2009).

I vowed I wouldn’t fall into writing ethnic stories, immigrant stories . . . Then I realised that not only was I working against these expectations (market, self, literary, cultural), I was working against my knee-jerk resistance to such expectations. How I see it now is no matter what or where I write about, I feel a responsibility to the subject matter. Not so much to get it right as to do it justice. Having a personal history with a subject only complicates this – but not always, nor necessarily in bad ways. I don’t completely understand my relationship to Vietnam as a writer. This collection is a testament to the fact that I’m becoming more and more okay with that’ (Le, cited in Cole 2014).

His father is an angry and violent hungry ghost. He beat his son and is still haunted by the My Lai massacre experienced when he was 14. Nam inherits some of the characteristics of the hungry ghost: he is unable to communicate his feelings to his girlfriend, and he is looking for some connection with his father. He seems unable to reciprocate his girlfriend’s affections, much like a hungry ghost. As is the case in Ninh’s writing, the references to women in Le’s story do not include the women’s points of view. Women are merely a function of their relationship to Nam, as is Phuong to Kien.

Unlike The Sorrow of War, war experiences are not described in Le’s short story. It is the absence of detail that is prominent, rather than the features of war. The omission of detail teases the reader with the promise of the untold story being a pivotal part of the text. However both works use a self-reflexive writer-narrator and tease the reader about what conclusions or resolutions can be found, if any, in the aftermath of war and in the power of writing.

Much has been made of the five international middle stories of The Boat which highlight the cosmopolitan and transnational nature of Le’s writing. However, the title of the story alludes to the boat journey from Vietnam, and this suggests that Le, like his 1.5 generation peers, is haunted by Vietnamese diasporic history.
‘The Boat’ is a narrative of the boat journey from Vietnam undertaken by many refugees from women’s point of view. The protagonist Mai is on the boat, and is haunted by memories of her father who was also tortured in re-education camps. Her father has gone blind, psychosomatically, in response to his experiences. His eyes, which are still open and unseeing, haunt Mai, and especially the money that he gives for Mai to escape Vietnam. The short story chronicles Mai’s escape from Vietnam, including her departure from her village and boarding a fishing boat.

Whilst on the boat, when it is lost in fog, Mai realises that they have entered a ghostly area where the previous boats have sunk or been attacked. The ghosts of those boats haunt the fog: ‘Everyone has heard about these places. They had ventured into the fields of the dead, those plots of ocean where thousands had capsized with their scows and drowned’ (Le 2008: 268). Time is stretched out during the 13 days that they are at sea, a common subjective experience of suffering and trauma. The journey is compressed then dilated through the subjective experiences of Mai:

> Time which had distended every moment on the boat- until there was no shape to it - seemed now to snap violently shut, crushing all things into this one task (Le 2008: 312).

The writing is understated and matter of fact, which highlights the horror and trauma of the journey, with bodies being thrown overboard. The numb and emotionless rendition of the story is consistent with trauma survivors’ narratives, in which disassociation and flatness is notable. Mai adopts Truong, a 12-year-old boy, whose lack of facial expression reminds her of her father’s unseeing stare, the stare of someone who had seen too much. Truong dies just before they sight land. His death is described circumspectly, which underlines the everyday nature of deaths on the boat, the horror of viewing these deaths as an everyday occurrence.

> When she’d left last night, Truong had been recovering. He’d been fine. He’d been asking Mai over and over, to sing to him. What could have happened? (Le 2008:312).
The title of the anthology, the inclusion of this story in the collection, and its placement at the end, are worthy of comment. The story is evocative of post memory (Le was one year old when his family fled Vietnam) and it is Le’s curiosity about what his family has been through that drives his work. He also creates counter memories, humanising boat people and Viet Kieu in his work. In discussing the placement of ‘Love and...’ as the first story in the anthology, Le acknowledges that this story frames the stories to come, and with ‘The Boat’ story the reader returns to the concerns that wish to be told (D’Ambrosio 2009).

Media stories of refugees on boats, particularly at the present time, are unsympathetic. The Australian government rhetoric at this time portrays refugees on boats as queue jumpers who do not deserve asylum and who are a security threat. People who have died attempting to flee Vietnam are not acknowledged in the public domain. But their stories haunt the Vietnamese community, although they are not often heard. Counter memories need to be told as an antidote to the government’s portrayal of asylum seekers and refugees.
*Monkey Bridge* by Lan Cao

*Monkey Bridge* (1997) is a novel concerning two women’s stories, a mother (Thanh) and a daughter (Mai) who have fled Vietnam to settle in America. Their stories are ones of trans-generational trauma; the mother has a secret and feels she is shielding her daughter from the worst of the past, whilst Mai protects her mother by not translating English words for her mother truthfully, instead telling her what she wants to hear and believe. The novel portrays the distance between generations and explores the complexity of the legacy of the war. Unlike Le and Ninh, Cao tells the stories of a number of women and what they do as a community.

This novel shows the power of stories, and of the writing and telling of stories between generations. The suicide of Thanh, the mother, shows that some things are too much for one person to bear. Unlike Le who shrouds his father’s stories and doesn’t disclose them, Cao reveals the truth in a series of disclosures about the past. Her work portrays the Vietnamese diaspora unsentimentally and the secret of Baba Quan being Viet Cong yet saving American soldiers displays a reality which does not fit into the simple dichotomy of North versus South in the war.

The style of the book includes writing that is lyrical and understated. The reader is not often shown Mai’s emotional state, but her upset and anger is implied in the matter-of-fact language used in the text. For instance Mai comments after the funeral of her mother: ‘I had not cried at the funeral ... A few more minutes and it will all be over. Keep calm, keep calm simplify, simplify, everything will be all right’ (Cao 1997: 257).

Mai is an unreliable first person narrator, a young woman in her late teens and Cao allows her to make authorial comments about the Vietnamese diaspora in America. In addition, the letters from Thanh to Mai serve as a literary device which enables the reader to both hear from Thanh and read the perspective of
her daughter. Mai’s mother is not as foolish as Mai supposes, and knows that she is losing her.

Through the observations of Mai, we are privy to Mai’s understanding of the refugees who cling to the past and follow avidly any slender thread of coming back to Vietnam.

They had continued to hang on to their Vietnam lives, caressing a shape of a country that is no longer there ... Years later they continued to deny ... continue to live their lives, like my mother, in one long wail of denial (Cao 1997: 64).

Mai is an outsider to the first generation and their trauma. She is of the 1.5 generation; she witnessed parts of the war but was educated in America. Her questioning of her place in the world and here desire to find a community to belong to is characteristic of 1.5 generation authors (Pelaud 86). Mai does not fit into the first generation Vietnamese community, and nor does she fit in with white Americans. Although she yearns for the blank slate that moving on will give her, she is forced to confront the past by her mother’s last letter to her before her suicide. The letter reveals the truth about Baba Quan who failed to escape to America with them.

Mai positions herself as a keeper of the English language, which gives her power over her surroundings. Mai’s little deceptions include lying to both her mother and the landlord in order to get a better apartment, and wrongly translating the Bionic Woman on TV. Mai and her mother cannot talk to each other about how things are, and sadly Mai is not made aware of her mother’s private thoughts until after her death.

Mai herself wonders about which side of the war they were on, and concludes that it is complex to say. She is ambivalent about the Little Saigon community that her mother is part of. She feels that she is an outsider there as much as she is an outsider to the American lifestyle. She says she belongs to neither side; seeing both sides means she is an intermediary (Cao 1997: 88), a common repositioning
of 1.5 generation Vietnamese which Vu believes needs to be negotiated and renegotiated (Vu 2011: 51). This is a sophisticated representation of the forces that pull on the 1.5 generation, with Mai’s narration forming a counter memory to both American culture and the Vietnamese first generation stories. Her story is carefully positioned and she is aware of the complexity of South Vietnamese and American circumstances. Hers is an outsider view of both the Vietnamese community and America. Migration in her case ‘represents unlimited possibilities for rebirth, reinvention and other fancy euphemisms for half-truths and outright lies’ (Cao 1997:124). This quote renders Mai as a subjective unreliable narrator yet also gives an insight into the other Vietnamese refugee characters in the book.

The members of the small community around her mother are like hungry ghosts looking for a new homeland. Even Mai herself does what a dead ghost does, ‘stealing sweetmeats and pork buns and sticky rice from their true and rightful owners’ (Cao 1997:167). Mai also describes the refugees in little Saigon as ghosts: ‘Our Ghosts could roam unattached to the old personalities we once inhabited’ (Cao 1997:40).

In a foreshadowing of what is to come, Mai describes coming upon her mother sleeping on her desk as being akin to coming across a giant ghost, ‘a strange lingering presence that induced a quickening of the pulse’ (Cao 1997:46)

Her mother is unable to feel Mai’s love for her, and Mai feels she did not demonstrate her love – she never told her mother that she loved her. Thanh carries the family story to the grave; she is unable to get over her complex family history or accept living in America. She will now haunt Mai forever.

Despite her mother’s efforts to protect her, Mai is curious enough to attempt to contact her grandfather, Baba Quan, from Canada but fails to do so. Her reaction to Baba Quan being on the side of the Viet Cong is distant, though she cries on discovering the truth that her mother hid from her. Near the conclusion of the novel her report of the funeral feast her mother had prepared in advance is
underlined by guilt. She wonders if she could have done more and have said ‘I love you’.

The novel is a haunted narrative, with the mother’s and Mai’s recollections of the war. The mother’s story is contained in letters that Mai discovers after her suicide. However, Mai is old enough to remember their flight and she suffers from flashbacks from the war. For example the sight of an American hospital takes her back to the bloodiness of the wounded in south Vietnam.

Ever present is the guilt of leaving Baba Quan behind in Vietnam. That Baba Quan was actually on the side of the Viet Cong, is a detail which is revealed in the final letter the mother writes to her daughter before she commits suicide. This twist includes the information that Uncle Michael, an American vet and family friend, is saved by Baba Quan; this demonstrates the complexity of wartime relationships on both sides.

Throughout the novel there are many reflections about ghosts, day ghosts being the American forces in the village and night ghosts being the Viet Cong. Mai says she doesn’t believe in other worlds but can see how ghosts can be conjured up in mid-air with shadows and mist (Cao 1997:113).

Ghosts provoke memories which wish to be forgotten. The lingering memories of Baba Quan, of him missing their rendezvous to escape Saigon was concocted by Thanh to shield Mai from the truth. It shows Thanh is desperate to invent a better past, present and future. In turn Mai is haunted by her mother’s spirit and what happened in Vietnam. The absence of Baba Quan in America is as significant as his possible presence; he is an ever-present phantom for both mother and daughter. Ghosts are often seen as disruptive presences with haunting being an action that confronts the living (Gordon 1997, Kwon 2008). Baba Quan’s absence and his secret loyalty to the Viet Cong is a burning issue for Thanh, while Mai goes behind her back to try and contact him.

Mai’s mother believes wholly in karma and that what has come to pass is due to her guilty secrets and Baba Quan’s true allegiances. She is traumatised by the
war and Mai observes that ‘The new country must have doubled her sense of impending doom’ (Cao 1997: 24); she sees danger everywhere. Thanh believes that if she suicides, she will take the bad karma with her and free Mai from the past. She says in her last letter that ‘I close my eyes and still bear the wails of ghosts and cries of demons submerged in the blood and flesh of my body’ (Cao 1997: 252). Thanh is a haunted hungry ghost in America and to ensure her daughter is not haunted by her suicide she prepares her own funeral feast so Mai will be able to do the proper offerings for her.

In the last chapter of the novel Mai speaks of finding out that her mother had suffered from depression and she is afflicted by her own helplessness about what happened. Mai observes of her mother, ‘the sound of old memories ripping their way through her face’ (Cao 1997: 9). Thanh attempts to protect Mai from phantoms and apparitions from the past, ‘from the smouldering ashes of prior generations’ (Cao 1997: 228) by inventing better memories of Baba Quan to share with her daughter. Mai’s memories of her grandfather, and the stories she has been told about him, portray him as a kindly farmer who missed the chance to be evacuated from the South. In fact he was a guerrilla fighter on the side of the Viet Cong. Thanh’s memory is a counter memory even to the experiences of the Southern Vietnamese refugees. The South has more than one narrative of survival and suffering.

Cao makes observations about American veterans; in the text the American public assume that all vets are mad (Cao 1997: 209). Mrs Bay, their neighbour believes that America will not accept the Vietnamese when they hate their own American soldiers (Cao 1997: 64). Mrs Bay runs an Asian grocery store and Mai observes that it is also patronised by American war veterans. In an authorial comment, Cao mentions that to the vets, Vietnam was everything and now it means nothing (Cao 1997: 63). Cao says of the veterans that ‘they were custodians of a loss everyone knew about but failed to acknowledge’ (Cao 1997: 63). This inability of the American mainstream consciousness to recognise and grieve for all who had lost their lives is noted by Pelaud, who comments in her analysis of *Monkey Bridge* that the novel fills the gaps in America memories of
the war, with the ghosts of the Southern Vietnamese left behind when America pulled out of the war (Pelaud 2011: 50).

Cao also challenges the typical boat journey narrative of Vietnamese refugees. Mai arrived in a plane before 1975 and at her college interview dodges the question about her supposed ‘boat journey’. Mai is perceptive and smart enough to know what is expected of her and anticipates what the typical white middle class administrator would want to hear – a story about a boat person made good.

Mai has no wish to return to Vietnam. Her aim is to go to college in the States where her mother and the war ghosts can be left behind. She will not be known by anybody; she hopes her life will be a blank slate. However, in Thanh’s final letter to Mai she tells her about karma and the Buddhist notion of time:

> Our reality is a simultaneous past, present and future. The verbs in our language are not conjugated because our sense of time is tenseless, indivisible and knows no end (Cao 1997:252).

Therefore karma can be passed down from generation to generation. Thanh’s planned suicide was to protect her daughter from the family karma.

*Monkey Bridge* is a novel haunted by the past, despite Mai and Thanh's attempts to be free in America. The book is populated by lies, as the two women hide the truth from each other, Mai by language and her mother by invention. This deception demonstrates the tragic results of trauma. Mai’s mother cannot live with what has happened and has depression, and her daughter is left wondering whether she could have done more. Mai is a complex character, trying to find her place in the world with acute perceptions of the limitations of the Vietnamese first-generation community. The ghosts still haunt her – the ghosts of Thanh, her mother, and the spectral figure of Baba Quan. However, there is an optimistic ending when Mai goes to college, away from the world between worlds that she occupied in Virginia. The book ends on a hopeful note with the crescent moon the same shape as a seahorse and the outline of Vietnam.
Anguli Ma, Chi Vu

The works of 1.5 generation Vietnamese-Australian writers such as Chi Vu and Nam Le have also been influenced by ideas of post-memory and trans-generational trauma. Refugee and boat narratives influence their work and both seek to do justice to their backgrounds. Their reflections on their respective works show they are trying to be ethical about the representations of Vietnamese people. However, in the texts that they have produced, trauma is not easily resolved by the written word or by coming to a new country; they are still haunted by the war.

In Anguli Ma – a Gothic Tale Vu uses Western literary forms like the gothic tale and Buddhist references to create a horrific story of Vietnamese refugees. She uses the Buddhist understanding of the nature of violence to create two parallel worlds, one that is timeless and mythical and the other set in the late ’80s in the western suburbs of Melbourne. Vu is an example of a transnational writer, able to draw on more than one literary tradition and culture.

The original fable of Anguli Ma is about the Buddha being stalked by a serial killer who wore his victims’ fingers around his neck. The Buddha was able to transform Anguli Ma into an enlightened being by teaching him mindfulness and showing compassion to the killer instead of fear. Vu uses Buddhist tales to give a sophisticated representation of Vietnamese refugee stories. Vu uses this fable in Anguli Ma – A Gothic Tale in a modern setting to show how even a traumatised killer could be transformed by Buddhist teaching. She uses Buddhist theology to show a way out for her Vietnamese refugee characters who are haunted by the past, while at the same time alluding to the Australian gothic tradition in the text.

There are at least two narratives at work in Anguli Ma. The first is told in the sections titled ‘the brown man’ and ‘the monk’, which appear to be out of chronological time and have the qualities of myth. Time is perceived through the mindfulness of the monk and the brown man, perhaps touching on the ultimate dimension. The second narrative is
told in the main body of the work, which is narrated from a number of points of view and is in the novella’s present – some time in the late eighties.

The quote at the beginning of the book is from *The Way of Non-Attachment*:

> The truly present moment has no connection with the past or the future – it is independent of what has gone before or what will follow – it is a different dimension to the flowing of time.

This quote is about the nature of the present moment, and explains the relation between the brown man and Anguli Ma. The brown man touches the present moment in a different interpretation of time and finds peace, whilst Anguli Ma is still damaged by the past and is driven to bloody acts. The present moment can be touched on through mindfulness and observing the flow of emotions away from chronological time. According to Thich Nhat Hanh, time has a historical dimension and an ultimate dimension. One experiences history and the ultimate dimension, with the wave being historical and the water being the ultimate dimension. When you reach nirvana you would also experience and perceive the historical and the ultimate dimensions.

To maintain consciousness through attending only to the present moment is part of Buddhist mindfulness practice. To be mindful one can practise meditation, not just for oneself, but for one’s loved ones past and present (Hanh 1998).

> It is on disaster that good fortune perches
> It is beneath good fortune that disaster crouches (Lao-Tzu in Vu 2012)

The above quote from Lao Tzu appears at the beginning of *Anguli Ma*. It is about good fortune and disaster, with the two being interlinked. It is a reference to Australia being the lucky country and the refugees being lucky to survive so far. But in *Anguli Ma* disaster awaits despite the good fortune that the refugees have, and the violence that is about to unfold is foreshadowed with this quote.

*
The chapters titled ‘the monk’ and ‘the brown man’ provide a counter narrative to Dao and the other realist characters and their concerns. These chapters are more surreal, providing a moment for the brown man and the monk to pause and reflect on Buddhist teachings. One example of this is what the monk reads about emptiness in nature and man before meeting Anguli Ma. Man is connected to nature and vice versa. One could argue that Anguli Ma is made up of non-Anguli Ma elements such as the monk, and the violence he may have perpetrated or witnessed in Vietnam. Everything is interconnected and the monk becomes part of Anguli Ma too.

The transformation of the brown man into an enlightened being takes place as a result of the practice of mindfulness taught by the monk. This includes raising insight and strengthening the observer so that the practitioner can watch the emotions, rather than engage in them. Anguli Ma catches a glimpse of this in his first encounter with the monk and gets a taste of calm and peace despite his darkest emotions. He is told to sit down and he experiences the present moment for the first time under all his anger. Then the monk tells him that humans need to practise to recognise that they are animals. In Buddhist theology one of the lower stages of the six stages of evolution is the animal stage. The other stages include hungry ghosts, humans and boddhistivas. Later on in the book the monk amends his previous explanation by saying, ‘the human race needs to practice to know itself as an animal, this is not the same as to be an animal’ (Vu 2010:96). The monk is describing mindfulness practice which focuses on self-knowledge and heightened awareness of one’s emotions (Hanh 2002). The observer self can perceive and step back from animal-like emotions and impulses. Therefore, to know one’s emotions and feelings doesn’t mean one is subsumed in them.

The first meeting of the brown man and the monk is dominated by an impending storm. The violence inherent in the brown man suggests an easy parallel with Anguli Ma, but he is also able to touch the present moment by following the instruction given by the monk to mindfully breathe. Vu uses the quote ‘if you meet the Buddha on the road kill him’ as the monk’s first words to Anguli Ma. This saying is to indicate that Buddhist teachings are separate from Buddha as a man, and the dharma (Buddhist teachings) are merely the showing of the way. It is also confronting Anguli Ma, who does want to kill the monk but is unable to.
According to Buddhist understanding, the nature of ‘interbeing’ and emptiness means that all things are interconnected. The monk reflects on ‘interbeing’ with the trees, that the trees are made up of non-tree elements such as soil and sunlight. Thus, the violence in Anguli Ma is connected to the latent violence in Dao, the violence in the land and the peace that the monk has found. The violence visited on Sinh, the youngest tenant, is connected to the violence inflicted on the indigenous people on the same land. In samsara, in the cycle of suffering, everything is connected and according to Buddhist thought, the only way out of the cycle is to follow the Noble Eightfold Path.

The noble path is illustrated in the novella through the meditation practices that the brown man (Anguli Ma) is told to follow by the monk. The parallel story of the brown man and the monk is told in a surreal fashion rather than in the realist style of the rest of the novella. It is unclear whether Anguli Ma does die at the hands of Dao, or whether he is redeemed by practising mindfulness with the monk.

The Buddhist references are extended in the book to include the women refugees – a comparison is made between them and hungry ghosts – the souls of the dead that need to be fed continuously to be sated. The narration is polyvocal, with each section being given to a different character from the women tenants to Anguli Ma.

Bac, the older tenant in the house, says:

Left behind ma co hon in the old world.' Dao stopped. Wandering, hungry ghosts. Unable to be reborn as a human or animal unable to enter heaven or hell because of their gruesome, untimely deaths. ‘We think we have a new beginning because we escaped the terror and come to a new land. But we haven’t left them behind, they came with us!’ (Vu 54).

Hungry ghosts are one of the domains of humankind, according to Buddhist theology, one of six before attaining enlightenment as a bodhisattva. They have small throats and large mouths, unable to receive compassion, and are in a living hell where they are eternally hungry (Hanh 2007).

Being an animal is another one of these stages where one is driven solely by one’s desires. Dao is described as being at the stage of an animal by Bac, the older tenant who
sees that she is driven insane by her grief. Anguli Ma has animal violence within him which is foreshadowed by his initial response to the monk and his threatening countenance to Dao. The tale comes around full circle with Anguli Ma meditating in the sun like the monk in the beginning – just like in Buddhist theology there is no end or beginning.

He arranges his hands into beautiful mudras ... The river red gums have within them sunlight and soil and rain clouds and wind. Within each thing is its other. That is the nature of emptiness (Vu 2010: 105).

One interpretation of the Buddhist concept of emptiness is that all things are interconnected. As Hanh suggests, lotuses can grow from mud, and in Vu's novella a killer can be transformed by mindfulness. The violence that the refugees have escaped from has followed them to Melbourne, and that violence is still present, as is portrayed by Dao’s transformation into a potential killer.

By subtitling her novella ‘A Gothic Tale’, Vu alludes to the Australian gothic tradition in which the landscape of the bush is haunted and macabre (Gelder 2011). Vu's tale, like many Australian gothic tales, can be seen as a ‘counter-story’ (Gelder et al.) to the upbeat national story as presented by Anh Do with his book The Happiest Refugee (Do 2011). Do's depiction of Australia is a happy rendition of the lucky country and Vu's tale is a stark contrast to it.

For example in Australia the genocide of the Indigenous people manifests in the repressed violence present in the land. Vu describes the landscape as having ‘shabby grass’ and ‘misshapen trees’ under a cloudy boiling overcast sky (Vu 2010:15). Later she alludes to Australian history by describing:

a land so ... peaceful that the newcomers believed that it was empty space unmarked and unstoried, a barely populated land uninhabited by wandering demons and limbless men from wars that dragged on for millennia (Vu 2010: 49).
She describes the fish traps that were once used on the river, an allusion to the Indigenous past of Maribyrnong which is where Sinh, a young woman, is murdered. As Nicholas Jose comments in his Wheeler Centre essay on Asian Australian writing, Vu has located the site of an indigenous massacre, a foreshadowing of the violence that is yet to come.

Vu adapts the gothic conventions to suburban Melbourne in the ‘80s. Dao’s house can be seen as standing in for the traditional castle that is a mainstay of the gothic story, with Anguli Ma’s room in the garage being the room of horrors that the hero/heroine is not supposed to enter. Other tropes of the gothic include the structure of the plot, with Dao finding the blood of the dog before discovering Sinh’s fingers. The title of the work sets up the reader’s expectations of fear and horror which are played on by Vu to create suspense.

In keeping with the tradition of the gothic narrative, Vu casts a site in the western suburbs of Melbourne as a concrete wasteland close to an abandoned park, with river running alongside it. The rooms of Dao’s house are claustrophobic and piled high with junk that Dao has collected over the years. The reader gets a strong sense of claustrophobia in the house where Dao has hidden the hui money. The hui is a money circle, where participants draw lots to determine who gets the pooled money on a monthly basis.

The house is haunted with the memories of war that the women and Anguli Ma have escaped. Vu writes that ‘The house itself seemed to whisper and gasp with his approach for the women could hear every creak and reverberation from its old frame’ (Vu 7). The family is suffering from the past, with Dao hoarding fabric offcuts just in case she needs to hide things in a hurry, and Anguli Ma himself drowning his memories in drink after eating a dog that he hit with his car. The post-traumatic stress that the characters
endure is merely hinted at in the novella, through the violence that is latent within both the male and female characters. All have survived the wars in one way or another.

The Western gothic trope of the haunted house is reframed by Vu’s references to Buddhist theology and hungry ghosts. The Buddhist fable of Anguli Ma has a serial killer trying to harm the Buddha but fails. The Buddha shows him how to be calm and Anguli Ma stops harming people and becomes one of his disciples. Vu tells the Anguli Ma fable in parallel with the story of Dao, Anguli Ma’s landlady, and how she turns into a killer by the end of the book. Dao is driven to a desperate act of murder after the hui money that she is in charge of is stolen and Sinh, her young tenant, goes missing. At the climax of the tale, Dao threatens Anguli Ma in her mind: ‘When he comes she will be old but ready. She will not even hear the words of an enlightened being. She will make a wreath of his fingers that will hang outside her door’ (Vu 2010: 104). The reference to an enlightened being shows that even with the teaching of the monk, this Anguli Ma cannot escape his fate after the crimes he has committed.

The function of writing and the creative act can be to re-narrate and empower the writer to heal from traumas like these. However, some stories do not provide this positive release and they serve merely to bear witness and to articulate the pain of survival. For instance, the grief and trauma of Anguli Ma and his workmate from the fall of Saigon in 1975 when they lost the war is reduced to the depiction of drunk men crying their separate tears:

In that stillness they avoided each other’s eyes, for losing a homeland was like losing someone who knew you intimately, and whom you knew intimately. In this abyss, Anguli Ma and the workmate realised that their old life, and youth were gone forever.’ (Vu 2010: 52)

Their Southerner grief is not one acknowledged often in Western stories about the war. Writing can be a form of testimony for writers: ‘for some the act of writing itself is intimately linked with the wish to reify history, to serve as witness to the past’ (Pelaud 2010: 51). In Anguli Ma, the characters are trapped by the past. Even though Anguli Ma attains enlightenment he cannot escape what he has done earlier, and neither can Dao.
He is described as having the ‘dead countenance of a man severed from history. It is a form of liberation, he thought, from your own conscience from all your expectations of life.’ (Vu 2010: 37). Vu's characters serve as witnesses to a bloody past, with Buddhism the only way out of the vicious circle of violence.

Vu uses a series of symbols in her work, including dismemberment in the fabric off cuts collected by Dao and the violence perpetrated by Anguli Ma. Food is another symbol: the soup stock Dao initially makes for the tenants is warm and centring, drawing the household together. Then she discovers a bowl of soup rotting in the garage, a sign of Anguli Ma's decay. Sinh begins the story eating a lot, then she eats less and finally avoids sitting with Dao altogether before she goes missing. A clever play on words occurs when Anguli Ma cooks the dog for the men to eat: in a reference to the Azaria Chamberlain case young Trieu says that in Australia the dog eats the man. When Dao discovers the necklace of Sinh’s fingers they are described as looking like longish plump fruit. These descriptions ground the text in a visceral experience for the reader.

Vu is a conscientious writer, who acknowledges the ability of 1.5 generation writers to be ‘translators’ or ‘traitors’ to their culture of origin (Young 2003). Vu suggests that 1.5 generation writers use either realism or ‘impressionism’ in order to avoid stereotyping and invisibility (Vu 2011). It is debatable whether the non-Vietnamese reader needs to know the Anguli Ma myth to fully comprehend what Vu is seeking to accomplish with this work. The descriptions of the monk and the brown man are impressionistic in nature, interspersed with a semi-realist narrative. The readers’ expectations of a ‘gothic tale the foreshadow fear and horror at Anguli Ma. Vu also uses Western references to hell, for example, he refers to ‘This other layer of hell’ when the men continue drinking after eating the dog.

In retelling this parable in the Australian setting, Vu allows the work to be read in a number of ways. According to Bac, the older tenant, ‘We all bring hell inside of ourselves’ and Thich Nhat Hanh suggests that if you are a hungry ghost you may find other like-minded people, thus creating a community of hungry ghosts. In Vu’s novel
Dao invites Anguli Ma into her home and community. Dao is a hungry ghost, hoarding money and fabric offshoots and obsessed about money in her running of the hui circle. The potential for her to become a murderer is realised after the disappearance of Sinh. According to Hanh we all have this potential, if the seeds of violence are watered inside us (Hanh 2008).

Vu’s realist depictions of the lives of the refugee women are detailed and specific, and do not allow the reader to pass them off as typical refugees. Vu has stated that heterogeneity in representation of individuals can mitigate against stereotypes and expositions (Vu 2013) and Anguli Ma is an example of Vu as a writer of conscience. In this novella, Bac is an old woman with wisdom on her side. She is shown as having insight into the ma hon hungry ghosts that they brought with them to Australia. Sinh is the young innocent refugee who is murdered, whilst Dao is a shrewd but clearly troubled woman who collects fabric samples and hides money amongst them. The novella is narrated from multiple points of view, including the monk and the brown man. This polyphonic approach prevents the reader from drawing on Orientalist stereotypes and from having a simplistic idea of what refugees are like. The depiction of the characters, their stories and how they cope with them serves as counter memory to the media portrayal of refugees.

Depending on the reading of Vu’s tale, one can see people as either being trapped by the cycle of violence, or has having hope through Buddhist practice. The potential for violence in all individuals is accounted for in Buddhist psychology. Dao’s seeds and potential for violence are watered and she could become a murderer.

Vu has rendered a complex representation of the potential for violence in Vietnamese communities. However, titling her novella ‘a gothic tale’ shows the deliberateness of her intentions. Vu has successfully avoided writing stereotypes, with the violence of Anguli Ma counterbalanced by his time as the brown man, and the possibility of him becoming an enlightened being. Dao and Anguli Ma are haunted by the past, and neither is able to leave it behind. The simplicity of trauma theory cannot account wholly for all the suffering of Anguli Ma. There are no easy conclusions in the book and, it appears, no healing outcomes.
The inconclusive nature of the end of the novella provides possibilities of another murder that may or not be carried out. All the characters have the potential to be seen as hungry ghosts. Anguli Ma is given an opportunity for salvation through mindfulness but Sinh is murdered and Dao may become a murderer. The reader is left with a vision of horror in the string of fingers necklace.

This conclusion is open to multiple readings, including hope for those who follow the Noble Eightfold Path or despair for those caught in the cycle of suffering – samsara. One of the possible interpretations of the work is that Buddhism is being used ironically, with this version of the fable of Anguli Ma set in Melbourne where Anguli Ma does not become a follower of the Buddha because of the reality of the trauma he has endured. Another interpretation is that Vietnamese war trauma cannot be easily resolved, even with Buddhist assistance. Perhaps the writing process in telling a horror tale demonstrates that not all traumas can be resolved by mindfulness.

*A Psychic Guide to Vietnam*, Chi Vu

Another example of the complex representation of Vietnam and the diaspora is in *A Psychic Guide to Vietnam* also by Chi Vu. *A Psychic Guide to Vietnam* is a return home narrative, consisting of postcards written by Michelle, a Viet Kieu (overseas Vietnamese) tourist in Hanoi. The story opens with a quote from Picasso: ‘Art is a lie that makes you realise the truth’ and is concluded by Michelle commenting ‘I tell you a lie, I tell you a truth’ (Vu 2010: 49). This bookending of the narrative signals to the reader that this postmodern work is open to different interpretations, with Michelle’s observations being unreliable.

Vu overtly engages with Western expectations of Vietnam, with Michelle asking a local Vietnamese what she thought of *Three Seasons* – an American film starring Harvey Keitel featuring romantic stories about Vietnam. Michelle reflects on the way Vietnamese were portrayed ‘a prostitute, a cyclo driver, beggar children. But I couldn’t be sure what her silence meant’ (Vu 2010: 36). The local replies that the film portrays
rural Vietnam but Vietnam is modern now. This highlights the sophisticated counter story and counter memory that Vu is constructing for the reader. Vietnam is more than rice paddies and conical hats. It also highlights silence, a trope that is used often in this text. *A Psychic Guide to Vietnam* relies on reader’s knowledge of the Vietnam/American war to make sense of its allusions. The war is the backdrop to the piece, and the site of pivotal moments in time. The war made Michelle come to Australia, and references throughout remind the reader that she is now an outsider in contemporary Vietnam. Michelle comments that ‘some travellers go to exotic places to pretend that people do not suffer deeply … some travel to let go of understanding what’s happening around them to be as nude and deluded as children … there are those who travel to exotic places to feel sorry for the natives’ (Vu 2010:43). These interpretations of possible Western attitudes and assumptions when going to Vietnam pre-empt the colonial attitude of some tourists or/even the reader of *The Perfume River*, the anthology that this story and Le’s short story are featured in.

Vu plays with audience expectations and assumptions, destabilising Michelle’s viewpoint and extending the stories about Vietnam into the fantastical, such as in the story Michelle tells about Hanoians conversing by tying pieces of string to one another. Vu’s narrator comes to no firm conclusions about her return journey to Vietnam but builds increasing complexity with every encounter. At the airport she reflects that, ‘we build centuries of history from each other’s seat number’ perhaps a reference to historical friendship. Michelle also describes Hanoi as a snake shedding its skin, with the old skin next to the new reflecting the modernity of Vietnam.

Michelle has multilayered anecdotes of her encounters with the locals. When asked if there is suffering in her country by a xe om driver (moped), she replies with a Buddhist homily: ‘Suffering. To be human is to suffer … As I sat on the back seat I knew what I said was both true and untrue’ (Vu 2010:44). Michelle cannot guess at what the locals she interacts with think, and in this silence the reader is left to draw her/his own conclusions.

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’ (Vu 2010: 46). This pragmatic judgement is at odds with Western patriotism and simplistic assumptions about which side Vietnamese people fought on. Michelle concludes this section with the observation that she entered the ‘museum of sadness’ on that day (Vu 2010: 46), a reference to an universal truth about 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’ (Vu 2010:47) – a shared dilemma of the 1.5 and second generation who need to find their sense of self on the return journey to Vietnam. Like Michelle, their experiences of returning home mac goc (i.e. without roots) are haunted by the memories and histories of war.

Vu describes the 1.5 generation, of which she is a part, as translators – 1.5 generation writers need to reinvent themselves with each work and monitor what cultures they are translating and for whom (Vu 2011:131). 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. Vu suggests that such writers need to be mindful of how they can be read – and awareness which is evident in her own work (Vu 2011: 32). Michelle translates what she sees to the audience without much authorial commentary, leaving the readers to make up their own minds, not just about Vietnam, but also about Michelle.

When Michelle is shown the psychic guide she reads:

‘The journey of importance is not the physical one. The real journey is in the heart and in the mind. This is a guidebook of a different kind. It is the psychic guide to Vietnam’ (Vu 2010:37)

The psychic guide is referred to and that it contains pictures and handwriting but its actual contents are a mystery.
Through silence or omission, the postcards that Michelle writes, and the omnipresent narrator, also conceal what is profound. For example, the section titled the ‘friendship of birds’, refers searching between the lines of poetry ‘from the sages across the ages’ for a word that does not exist. Birds call out words which closely resemble the missing non-inventive word.

Michelle herself disappears when describing a train ride to the mountains: “So this is what it feels like to disappear,” I thought. I lie there and pretend that my invisibility has made me mute and blind as well. And heartless. But I do have a heart and so do the other people in this cabin.’

The final section ‘the prism heart’ is a description that may fit the dilemma of the 1.5 generation Vu writes about in her article.

If you take a sharp knife to dissect my heart for the grit and sludge of hatred and prejudice you will find it there. If you carve my heart in search of the red blood ... of compassion, forgiveness and courage you will see that too. I am a prism of possibilities (Vu 2010:48).

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 (Poets, Playwrights, Essayists and Novelists) Anthology of Australian Writing (2010) and in English secondary school curricula. These inclusions demonstrate the repositioning of Vietnamese-Australian writing within the broad category of Australian literature: they are no longer just stories of the ethnic margins.

Both Le and Vu are self-conscious, reflective writers. Their works have been carefully positioned and articulated, Vu through her academic work and Le through many reviews and interviews. Ommundsen (2011) comments about Lee’s misreading of ‘Love and...’ saying that Lee has not identified what is unique about Asian-Australian writers. That Lee had to resort to an Asian-Australian writer to illustrate a point about Asian-American writers indicates a shallow understanding of the different natures of diaspora (Ommundsen 2011).
Goellnicht, in his comprehensive critique of *The Boat*, highlights the questions that can apply to anyone identifying or identified as an ‘ethnic writer’ and particularly as an Asian-American writer. Cultural authenticity is a vexed question, especially for 1.5 and second generation migrants. The gap between the actuality and the representation can be enormous. Goellnicht suggests that the gap itself can provide inspiration and fuel creative work. Ironically, it is the absence of story or representation that makes ‘Love and...’ work as a postmodern story. The gap is in the present day narration.

Goellnicht also brings up the questions of ownership and voice appropriation, as common ethical issues for Asian-Americans. So is the ‘selling out’ of ethnicity in the publishing arena. Le’s story touches on his possible exploitation of his family’s story and how it is perceived – a friend tells him that all he needs to do is write a story about Vietnam.

Goellnicht in the end explains that he is indulging in academic luxury by framing Le’s stories as an example of cosmopolitanism. He asks whether the 1.5 and second generations are obligated to the first generation, and suggests that they need to remember, and memorialise. Yet he recognises that with some memories, it is better to forget, as the character Nam’s fictional father asserts.
Conclusion

These examples of writings inspired by the Vietnam/American War demonstrate how difficult it can be to exorcise the ghosts of the past. It has been suggested that it will take generations for Vietnam to come to terms with the many millions of war dead and hungry ghosts in the land (Gustafsson 2009). However, there are multiple truths and understandings of the American War which lead to the formation of powerful counter memories. For instance, in the workshops facilitated by Maxine Hong Kingston war veterans are drawn back to write about the war up to thirty years later, with George Evans as an example. Evans concludes that he could not heal, or the nation would forget the horrors they have been through. Some catharsis can occur through writing such as Kien the protagonist of The Sorrow of War who attempts to write down his memories. But his end is inconclusive, he disappears and in the self-reflexive omnipresent view of the publisher, Ninh describes what it is he is supposed to say - that war is worth it for the times of prosperity and peace.

Cao, Vu and Le write about the first generation’s experience through trans-generational trauma and their prose is haunted by their war past. Though they have different perspectives of Vietnamese communities, they all tell counter stories to those told by Hollywood. Kingston wants the work the veterans do in her group to change the world, and she provides a space for the veterans to be heard. The works of Cao, Vu and Le are influenced by trans-generational trauma, and are still haunted by the hungry ghosts of war.

There are no easy answers or resolutions in the works examined. All the protagonists have suffered, and though there is the desire to heal it is contraindicated by wanting to never forget. The dialectic of wanting to know and not wanting to know plays out in the gaps and absences in the texts. For example in Le’s ‘Love and Honour...’ his father’s story is the story, even though it is not told. Cao wrestles with the absence of Baba Quan and her mother’s letters fill in the details. All the protagonists are reaching for some understanding of what has happened and what will happen in their lives. Their stories
fill the gaps in the national imageries around the Vietnam/American war and official government amnesia in Vietnam, America and Australia.

The novel that accompanies this exegesis, *The Lady of the Realm*, is set in Vietnam from 1940 to the present day. Writing from the second generation Vietnamese-Australian point of view, with a Buddhist context, I have positioned the novel as a piece of transrealism, a term describing fiction that is set in reality but has extraordinary characteristics.

This novel explores haunting stories of Vietnam that are not often heard outside Vietnamese communities. The Lady of the Realm is a goddess worshipped in South Vietnam in many different guises.

*The Lady of the Realm* is narrated by Lien, who is clairvoyant and by Kim, a young psychic. Kim lives in contemporary Hanoi whilst Lien initially lives in the South in an unnamed fishing village. Lien's story stretches across decades of history whilst Kim accesses history through her psychic gifts. Kim's almost naïve point of view allows commentary on the politics involved in digging up the war dead and writing history.

Counter memory is evoked from a woman's point of view in *The Lady of the Realm*. Lien participates in history unwillingly. Her story is touched on by Binh who says that a young girl who worshipped the Lady of the Realm warned the villages to flee when the French came, the young girl being Lien herself. The reader learns about the Buddhist story of Quan Am, who is a girl disguised as a boy in a temple. A girl falls in love with her and when she is rejected she gets pregnant and blames Quan Am. When the baby is born the baby is abandoned and Quan Am is blamed. Quan Am takes the baby and looks after him. The traditional ending is that Quan Am dies and only then do the villagers who rejected her recognise that she had sacrificed herself for the child's sake. In the version in this novel, Lien adopts the abandoned child and runs to Hoi An to try and support them both.

The intention of this story is to portray a version that could have happened. Alluding to Quan Am, this section also touches on the Heart Sutra which points out that everyone
and everything is connected (described as interbeing by Thich Nhat Hanh). This connection is shown literally in the portrayal of Kim’s psychic gift, where by touching hands with someone she receives visions of the past, present and future. Kim learns about the worst in human nature through her gift and how others wish to use her. For example Bac Phuc, a senior officer in the military, wants to use her gift and to receive bribes and gifts for it. Only Khoi, an American Viet Kieu who is also gifted, seems to not need anything from her.

Kim is literally haunted by the ghosts of the past. She experiences trans-generational trauma in reading people’s spirits and only Buddhism seems to offer a way for her to move forward with her gift. ‘The Other Shore’ section of the novel includes a vision that Lien has seen and she dreams of Prajna Monastery in Bat Nha in Vietnam being at peace. This fragile peace only lasts a few years before the government of Vietnam hires mobs to destroy the monastery. This is based on true events and has been documented by Sr Chan Khong in The Novice which is Hanh’s version of the Quan Am myth.

Buddhism offers hope to these counter stories, and provides a counter history to both official Vietnamese and American sources. For example in this novel Binh, an elderly woman befriended by Lien, is a people smuggler and money lender, whilst Kim is imprisoned by American immigrant detention in a country that claims to be free. She sees the Southern Vietnamese flag, yellow with red stripes, flying in America, and wonders what it means.

Kim’s psychic gifts include having spiritual access to the other shore (nirvana) when she falls asleep. She sees many ghosts from many different sides and tries to be ethical by following her Buddhist roots rather than the officialdom of Hanoi.

I learnt about parapsychics working for the military in Vietnam from a BBC documentary. My ultimate question in the novel is how can one be ethical in an unethical world? And what about the stories that we don’t hear about?

The Lady of the Realm features haunting, ghosts and counter stories to the Vietnamese and the American governments’ official stories. Lien witnesses wars and a fragile peace, whilst Kim, born in peace time, learns about the past.
My hope is that the story about the destruction of Prajna Monastery will become more widely known and Australians will not just think of Vietnam as a war or a place for a cheap holiday, but as a complex country with oppressive moments. Similarly, America oppresses with its extraordinary rendition practices yet claims the high moral ground in international affairs. With a third Iraq war in the offing, Vietnam is being used again as a single word, to refer to the American defeat in a foreign civil war. It has become even more important that a variety of voices and counter memories from war survivors are heard and not forgotten.
References

Primary Sources


Nguyen, V. (2006) ‘speak of the dead, speak of Viet Nam: the ethics and aesthetics of minority discourse’


Pelaud, Isabelle. (2010) *This is all I choose to tell: history and hybridity in Vietnamese American literature.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press


General Sources


American Psychiatrist Association (2014) DSM 5


Herman, J. (1997) *Trauma*. Basic Books


**The Vietnamese Diaspora**


Nguyen, N. (2010) *Memory is another country* California: Praeger