



U T S
e P R E S S

PORTAL Journal of
Multidisciplinary
International Studies

Vol. 15, No. 1/2
August 2018



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Citation: Nguyen, N.H.C. 2018. 'My Husband Was Also a Refugee : Cross-Cultural Love in the Postwar Narratives of Vietnamese Women. *PORTAL Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies*, 15:1/2, pp. 53-65. <https://doi.org/10.5130/portal.v15i1-2.5848>

ISSN 1449-2490 | Published by
UTS ePRESS | <http://portal.epress.lib.uts.edu.au>

RESEARCH ARTICLE

'My Husband Was Also a Refugee': Cross-Cultural Love in the Postwar Narratives of Vietnamese Women

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5130/portal.v15i1-2.5848>

Article History: Received 08/09/2017; Revised 09/07/2018; Accepted 20/07/2018;
Published 22/08/2018

Abstract

This article explores the representation of cross-cultural love in the postwar narratives of Vietnamese women. The end of the Vietnam War in 1975 and Vietnam's reunification under a communist regime led to one of the most visible diasporas of the late twentieth century, in which more than two million Vietnamese left their homeland in order to seek refuge overseas. The main countries of resettlement were the United States, Australia, Canada and France. Vietnamese women in Australia who chose to marry outside their culture constitute a minority not only within the diaspora but also within Australian society and the Vietnamese Australian community. In contrast to the largely negative representations of cross-cultural relationships in novels and memoirs of colonial and wartime Vietnam, these women's accounts highlight underlying commonalities between themselves and their European partners such as a shared understanding of political asylum or war. The narratives of these women illustrate cross-cultural *rencontres* that were made possible by the refugee or migration experience, and that signify a distinct shift in the representation of exogamous relationships for Vietnamese women. Oral history provides these women with the opportunity to narrate not only the self but also the interaction between the self and the other, and to frame and structure their experiences of intermarriage in a positive light.

Résumé

Cet article explore la représentation de l'amour interculturel dans les récits de l'après-guerre des femmes vietnamiennes. La fin de la guerre du Vietnam en 1975 et la réunification du

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTEREST The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. **FUNDING** Interviews in this article were conducted as part of a large research project on 'Vietnamese Women: Voices and Narratives of the Diaspora,' funded by the Australian Research Council in 2005–2010.

Vietnam sous un régime communiste mena à une des diasporas les plus visibles de la fin du vingtième siècle, pendant laquelle plus de deux millions de Vietnamiens quittèrent leur pays pour se réfugier à l'étranger. Les pays principaux de réinstallation furent les Etats-Unis, l'Australie, le Canada et la France. Les femmes vietnamiennes en Australie qui ont choisi de se marier à l'extérieur de leur culture constituent une minorité non seulement dans la diaspora mais aussi en Australie ainsi que la communauté vietnamienne en Australie. Contrairement à la représentation largement négative des relations interculturelles dans les romans et les mémoires du Vietnam colonial et en temps de guerre, les récits de ces femmes surlignent les points communs entre elles et leurs compagnons européens telle une compréhension mutuelle de l'asile politique ou de la guerre. Les récits de ces femmes illustrent des rencontres interculturelles rendues possible par l'expérience d'être réfugié ou migrant, et qui signalent un changement net de position dans la représentation des relations exogames concernant les femmes vietnamiennes. L'histoire orale permet à ces femmes de raconter non seulement le *moi* mais aussi l'interaction entre le *moi* et l'autre, et de structurer et d'encadrer leurs expériences de mariage interculturel de manière positive.

Keywords

Vietnamese women, Vietnamese diaspora, cross-cultural marriage, oral history, narrative, migration; femmes vietnamiennes, diaspora vietnamienne, mariage interculturel, histoire orale, récit

Drawing on the oral narratives of Vietnamese women who left their country in the postwar years and resettled overseas, this article explores women's portrayal of love across ethnic and cultural divides. In contrast to the largely negative representations of cross-cultural relationships between Vietnamese women and foreign men in novels and memoirs of colonial and wartime Vietnam from Vu Trong Phung's *Ky Nghe Lay Tay* (*The Industry of Marrying Europeans*, 1934) to Kim Lefèvre's *Métisse Blanche* (*White Métisse*, 1989), these relationships highlight underlying commonalities—for instance a shared experience of political asylum or war—that led to these *rencontres* or encounters, and strengthened the ties between these women and their European partners. The end of the Vietnam War in 1975 and Vietnam's reunification under a communist regime were the catalysts for one of the most significant diasporas of the late twentieth century, during which more than two million Vietnamese left their homeland to resettle overseas. This exodus was driven by widespread state repression in postwar communist Vietnam, including the internment of one million people in re-education camps, the forced de-urbanization and displacement of another million to the New Economic Zones, the execution of 65,000 citizens, the curtailment of free speech, individual and religious liberties, the nationalization of commerce and industry, and the discrimination against all those associated with the former South Vietnamese government as well as ethnic Chinese and Amerasians.¹ Set against the backdrop of mass trauma in the former South Vietnam, mass migration, and within the context of multicultural Australia, the narratives of these women illustrate cross-cultural relationships that were made possible by the refugee or migration experience, and that signify a distinct shift in the representation of exogamous relationships for Vietnamese women.

1 See Desbarats (1990: 60–64); Hitchcox (1990: 37–68); Valverde (1992); DeBonis (1995); McKelvey, (1999); United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2000: 82); and Freeman & Nguyen (2003: 7).

Oral history enables the recording of voices that have been marginalized by history. As noted by Beth Robertson, 'one of the most important uses of oral history is to record the perspectives of disadvantaged people who traditionally have been either ignored or misrepresented in conventional historical records' (2006: 3). Vietnamese women refugees and migrants of the postwar years contribute such perspectives. Their lives are shaped not only by their firsthand experience of conditions in the newly created Socialist Republic of Vietnam but also by that of diaspora. Their voices are rarely heard in the public arena (Thomas 1999: 170–171). The major countries of resettlement for refugees from Vietnam were the USA, Australia, Canada and France, while Vietnamese communities were also established in countries as diverse as Norway and Israel. In Australia, the Vietnamese community grew from 1,000 people in 1975 to 277,400 in 2016 or just over one percent of the Australian population (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018). This article focuses on the narratives of two women who resettled in Australia in the 1980s and 1990s. They form part of a small percentage of Vietnamese women who intermarried with Europeans.² Only 13 percent of first generation Vietnamese women in Australia married outside their culture (Khoo, Birrell & Heard 2009: 20). As such, these women represent a minority voice on multiple levels: as migrants, as members of the Vietnamese community in Australia, as female members of that community, and as women who opted for partners from a different ethnic and cultural background.

Cross-cultural relationships in Vietnamese literary culture

'Vietnamese,' writes Neil Jamieson, 'have long had an extreme preoccupation with maintenance of the ethnic boundary, first between themselves and the Chinese, later and even more traumatically between themselves and the French' (1995: 339). This historic hostility is illustrated in the following words by Toan Anh in 1968:

Vietnamese from well-behaved families look upon marrying a foreign husband as a bad thing to do, no matter what rank or status the man may have. When she marries a foreigner, a Vietnamese woman feels ashamed no matter what her social class ... The act of taking a Western husband is an act of losing one's origins; the act of going astray by someone who has severed her roots. (quoted in Jamieson 1995: 339–340)

As Neil Jamieson notes, this level of xenophobia was exacerbated in times of colonialism and war (1995: 339). Vietnamese literature portrays the failure of cross-cultural relationships in colonial and postcolonial contexts. In Vietnamese francophone novels set in France and colonial Indochina in the 1920s, such as Truong Dinh Tri's and Albert de Teneuille's *Bà-Dám* (*The Frenchwoman*, 1930), or set in France in the 1930s, such as Pham Duy Khiem's *Nam et Sylvie* (*Nam and Sylvie*, 1957), love across ethnic divides cannot overcome the pressures and stresses of colonization and inevitably ends in sundering.³ Vu Trong Phung's *Kỵ Nghe Lay Tay* (*The Industry of Marrying Europeans*, 1934) satirizes not only relationships between Vietnamese women and European legionnaires but also Vietnamese customs and traditions, and the institution of marriage.⁴ The damaging legacy of cross-cultural relations is detailed in Kim Lefèvre's autobiographical novel *Métisse Blanche* (*White Métisse*, 1989), in which she

2 The women were interviewed as part of a large research project on 'Vietnamese Women: Voices and Narratives of the Diaspora,' funded by the Australian Research Council in 2005–2010. For further narratives of intermarriage, see N. H. C. Nguyen (2009: 121–139).

3 See N. H. C. Nguyen (2003: 104–129).

4 See Vu (2006) and Tranviet (2006: 14).

relates the story of her mother, a Vietnamese woman who fell in love with a French officer in Indochina in the 1930s and defied convention to live with him only to have him abandon her when she became pregnant. She was ostracized by her Vietnamese family and community, and this ostracism was extended to her Eurasian daughter, who suffered the triple disadvantage of being born female, illegitimate, and of mixed blood in colonial Indochina. This experience of rejection had a marked impact on Lefèvre, who writes:

Tout en moi heurtait mes proches: mon physique de métisse, mon caractère imprévu, difficile à comprendre, si peu vietnamien en un mot. On mettait tout ce qui était mauvais en moi sur le compte du sang français qui circulait dans mes veines ... Je n'ai gardé aucun souvenir des premières années de ma vie, hormis ce sentiment très tôt ressenti d'être partout déplacée, étrangère. J'en ai beaucoup souffert, non comme d'une injustice mais comme d'une tare existentielle. (1989: 18)⁵

The marginalization of Eurasian children during colonial times was experienced in turn by Amerasian children—the offspring of Vietnamese women and American military and civil personnel—after the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. Amerasians were referred to as *bui doi* (the dust of life).⁶ Their stories and that of their Vietnamese mothers have been conveyed in numerous oral histories and in memoirs such as Kien Nguyen's *The Unwanted* (2001). Like Lefèvre, Kien Nguyen never knew his father. Lefèvre and Nguyen bore the stigma of their mixed blood against a background of Vietnamese nationalism and xenophobia, and both eventually left Vietnam to reconstruct their lives overseas, Lefèvre in France, and Nguyen in the USA. Cross-cultural encounters between Vietnamese and Soviet personnel in postwar communist Vietnam are also portrayed with negative outcomes as in Duyê Anh's *Mot Nguoi Nga o Saigon (Un Russe à Saigon, 1983)*,⁷ in which the relationship between a Southern Vietnamese woman and Soviet engineer ends in tragedy. The novel relates that Vietnam and the Soviet Union may have been socialist friends but '[l]'amitié concerne les peuples, pas les individus.'⁸

Changes in the representation of exogamous relationships are a feature of the Vietnamese exodus, in particular Vietnamese women's diasporic narratives and memoirs. The cross-cultural relationships conveyed in women's autobiographies and oral histories post migration reveal 'confluences of culture, border crossings, exchanges, and fluid terrain, rather than simple unidirectional flows of power or desire' (Constable 2005: 7).⁹ Even before 1975, the work of Ly Thu Ho, a Vietnamese female writer living in France, illustrated wartime interracial relationships in a positive light. In Ly Thu Ho's novel, *Au Milieu du Carrefour* (In the Middle of the Crossroads, 1969), set during the Vietnam War, the relationship between Xinh, a young Vietnamese woman, and John, an American soldier, is portrayed as an attraction of opposites. When John is badly wounded, Xinh proposes to him, and both leave Vietnam for the USA.

⁵ 'Everything about me was deeply offensive to my relatives: my Eurasian looks, my character which they found unpredictable and difficult to understand—in short, everything about me was un-Vietnamese. My French blood was blamed for all that was bad in me ... I have no memories of my early childhood, apart from the sensation of being everywhere displaced and a stranger. I suffered greatly as a result of this. I did not see it as an injustice but as an existential flaw.' Author's translation.

⁶ See, for example, Valverde (2001: 136).

⁷ See Duyê (1986).

⁸ Duyê (1986: 142). 'Friendship concerns peoples, not individuals.' Author's translation.

⁹ See N. H. C. Nguyen (2009: 121–139).

Although contemporaneous with Toan An's negative assessment of relationships across cultures, Ly Thu Ho's approach differs significantly from his. Vietnamese American Yung Krall's memoir, *A Thousand Tears Falling* (1995), depicts her love for a US Navy pilot during the war and her move to the USA to marry him in 1968. While leaving her country was a difficult experience for Krall, it is a marriage that endured through war and the postwar years. In *Autumn Cloud* (2001), Vietnamese American Jackie Bong-Wright relates her marriage to an American foreign service officer in 1976. She was a refugee and widow with three young children, and had initially met him in Saigon during the war. Vietnamese Canadian writer Thuong Vuong-Riddick writes of a cross-cultural relationship that sustained her in her poem 'He covered me with a blanket':

He covered me
when I was sick
useless, hopeless,

when I was naked
in the world's eyes.

In Montpellier station,
he took all my luggage
on his back,
put his arms around me.
Mother said:

'He is the one for you.' (1995: 198)

These verses allude to the shock of being a refugee bereft of country and compass, and finding shelter and love with a partner who was able to comprehend the enormity of that loss.

While negative perceptions of cross-cultural relationships may have existed in colonial Vietnam and throughout and after the Indochina War (1946–1954) and Vietnam War (1955–1975), it is also clear that there were positive and sustaining relationships that occurred during that time as conveyed in Vietnamese family histories and Vietnamese women's diasporic narratives after 1975.¹⁰ The nature of the postwar diasporic experience—in other words, state repression, forced migration, and resettlement in a country of second asylum—in turn provided the circumstances that enabled women to form relationships with partners from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. A closer look at these relationships reveals that it was perceived personal and political commonalities across ethnic and cultural boundaries that made these relationships possible and that the women themselves highlighted these aspects of their partnerships in their life histories. The narratives of two women who chose European partners after migration and resettlement will be explored in depth in the next section.

The narratives of Yen and Tran

The first narrative is that of Yen, born in Saigon in 1945.¹¹ Yen volunteered for military service at the age of nineteen in 1967, and became an officer in the Women's Armed Forces Corps

¹⁰ In the author's own family, examples of successful intermarriage date from the 1930s onwards. Intermarriages from the 1930s to the 1950s were between Vietnamese men and Western women (as Vietnamese men went overseas to study) while intermarriage between Vietnamese women and Western men occurred in the following generation during the 1960s and 1970s, as well as after 1975.

¹¹ Yen. Oral history interview, Adelaide, Australia, 13 January 2007. For reasons of confidentiality, the women who took part in the oral history project are only identified by a single name.

(WAFC) of South Vietnam. The WAFC formed part of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF). The only daughter in a family of five sons, Yen remembers that her father loved her and was proud of her. As a young girl, Yen dreamt of 'going overseas for [her] studies and going to different places' (Yen). She saw an advertisement on television about recruiting female officers and applied. Servicewomen in the WAFC all volunteered while their country was at war, serving in a wide variety of roles as 'typists, supply clerks, switchboard and teletype operators, social workers, nurses, and medics' (Phung 1970: 7). By 1975, there were more than 6,000 women in the WAFC, including 600 officers (Ho 2001: 18). A lieutenant and an instructor at the WAFC School, Yen was at her post until midday on the day Saigon fell on 30 April 1975.¹² The end of the war not only signaled the collapse of South Vietnam and its armed forces but also the end of her career and of life as she knew it. She responded to the communiqué issued by the new communist authorities in May to present herself for re-education, and followed instructions by bringing enough food and clothing for ten days. She was interned for three years in a series of re-education camps during which internees were subjected to indoctrination and forced to write repeated confessions, which she refers to as 'a form of mental torture' (Yen). She was released from detention at the end of 1978, and escaped from Vietnam by boat in April 1981, relating that she was lucky in that their boat reached Hong Kong safely after only ten days. Eleven months later, she was resettled in Adelaide, Australia, in March 1982.

Yen's trajectory of service, internment and escape is one that is replicated in the life histories of many former South Vietnamese military personnel. As a female officer in the RVNAF, Yen was directly involved in South Vietnam's twenty-year struggle against communist North Vietnam. When South Vietnam and its armed forces collapsed in 1975, many servicewomen, like servicemen, were interned without trial in communist re-education camps, Vietnam's 'Bamboo Gulag' (Nguyen 1983: 188). Yen's account of being advised to pack for ten days but then spending three years in internment, was a common experience. It was not only former service personnel who were incarcerated in prison camps but also civil servants, teachers, journalists, writers and academics as well as escapees and their families, in other words those who tried to escape from Vietnam by boat or land and were caught by Vietnamese authorities (Desbarats 1990: 50–63; Hitchcox 1990: 37–68; Robinson 1998: 179–180; Nguyen 2001: 245). Detainees were interned for periods ranging from a few months to fifteen years (UNHCR 2000: 82; Freeman & Nguyen 2003: 7). The war left enduring scars in the South, however it was the severity and extent of political repression after the war that led to the mass exodus from Vietnam from the late 1970s through to the 1990s.

Yen's personal story takes place against a backdrop of forced migration from Vietnam, and refugee resettlement and acculturation in Australia. It was in Adelaide that she met her Polish husband. She relates:

My husband is from Poland. He was in a refugee camp in Austria and he had just arrived in Adelaide. We knew each other in English class and five months later, we celebrated our wedding.

Did you know that Poland was the first country to topple the Communist Party? Other countries followed the example of Poland.

12 For further details of Yen's story, see Nguyen (2009: 56–88).

My husband also escaped. From the time he was thirteen, fourteen years old, he realized that people were living under an unjust communist regime. He worked for the government then applied for a passport to go to Austria. It took a long time but he persevered. Once he got the passport, he applied to go to Austria as a tourist. There was a refugee centre there helping people who wanted to escape from the communist regime to resettle in another country. My husband knew that because he used to listen to Voice of America on the radio. At that time, the communist government hid news like that from the general population. He did whatever he could in order to get the passport. Once in Austria, he went directly to the refugee centre. He spent a year in Austria before arriving here. He was thirty-two or -three, two years younger than me. We had the same situation, we matched each other. (Yen)

Yen and her husband have an only son, whom they took to Vietnam when he was twelve. She states:

He could not stand the water in Vietnam; he developed pustules all over his body and he did not dare go back after that time. He speaks a little Vietnamese. When he was young, I sent him to study Vietnamese and he could speak some then but the older he got the less he spoke. We live in an area where there are not many Vietnamese. He gradually forgot his Vietnamese. He can understand all right but cannot express himself in Vietnamese. We mostly speak English at home. He learnt some Polish but he is not very good at it either. He is now twenty-three years old.

The future looks good to me. When my husband and I first came here, we had to work very hard but we are rewarded with financial security. We agree that we owe a lot to this country, and that we are living in a quiet and peaceful country. After retirement, we plan to spend our time travelling around Australia in a caravan. We are waiting for our retirement to embark on the adventure of our dreams. (Yen)

It is noticeable that Yen refers to the personal and political dimensions of her shared experiences with her Polish husband. Her life narrative is not only strongly anchored in her community history but also encompasses that of her European partner. Both she and her husband made the deliberate decision to leave communist states, planned their escape over a number of years, and successfully reached refugee camps in neighbouring countries of first asylum. When Yen notes that her husband believed that communist Poland was an 'unjust ... regime' and 'hid news' (Yen) from the general population, she is alluding not only to political repression in Poland but also to her own experience of unjust internment and censorship in communist Vietnam. Although she does not provide any specific dates regarding her husband's experiences as a refugee from Poland, it is likely that he was among the 20,000 Poles who were granted refugee status in Austria in 1981 even before the imposition of martial law in Poland in December 1981 (Lewis 1981: A11; Moritz 1981). His application for a Polish passport and travel to Austria as a tourist in order to seek political asylum reflects the experiences of other Polish refugees during that period (Lewis 1981: A11). Yen's narrative highlights parallels between the political systems of Vietnam and Poland, and between her personal trajectory and that of her husband. It was their firsthand experience of living under communism that prompted them to leave their respective homelands. The process of planning their escape was time-consuming and took patience and persistence. She was released from detention in 1978 but it took her another three years in order to leave Vietnam. She relates that it took her husband likewise 'a long time' (Yen) to get his passport so that he could leave

Poland. Even the amount of time they spent in refugee camps prior to being accepted for resettlement in Australia was comparable: eleven months in Hong Kong in her case, a year in Austria in his. As she underlines: 'We had the same situation. We matched each other' (Yen). When she points out that Poland was 'the first country to topple the Communist Party' (Yen), she is referring to the momentous events of 1989, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the collapse of communism in Europe. Her narration reinforces the underlying message that both she and her husband had sought asylum from one-party states.

Yen and her husband met in an English-language class in Adelaide, a meeting ground for migrants and refugees from different countries and cultures seeking to adapt to Australian society and construct new lives. This common thread, in addition to their shared experiences as political refugees in the early 1980s, shapes a relationship between two people who would not have met in other circumstances. Although Yen does not refer to difficulties in terms of linguistic communication or cultural adjustment either in relation to herself or her husband or their being migrants in Australia, her portrayal of their Australian-born son's response to his dual Vietnamese and Polish heritage illustrates some of these difficulties. As she notes, he learnt Vietnamese initially and still understands it but no longer speaks it, and although he learnt some Polish, he is not good at it either. He retains only a smattering of his parents' native languages. The common language in their household is English, which constitutes a second language for both Yen and her husband. Yen relates that she and her husband worked hard to establish themselves in Australia, and registers gratitude to the country that granted them asylum and rewarded them for their hard work and diligence.

The second narrative is that of Tran, born in Bien Hoa in 1957.¹³ Her family was Chinese Vietnamese and owned the second largest bookshop in South Vietnam. Tran was the eldest of eight children and loved books. She grew up reading the novels of Tolstoy, Romain Rolland, Balzac and Thomas Hardy. The family bookshop was a source of inspiration for her, and nurtured her imagination, her love of European literature, and her desire to go overseas for her university studies. She recalls: 'I wanted to get high marks and win a scholarship ... I've wanted to study overseas since I was fourteen' (Tran). All of these dreams were ruptured when South Vietnam collapsed in 1975. The communist authorities confiscated all the books and closed the bookshop. She remembers that 'they came in trucks and took everything away, they even confiscated all the stationery [her] father had, compasses, pencils, pens, colours, rulers, they were all gone' (Tran).¹⁴ Tran and her family experienced discrimination directed against the ethnic Chinese community in Vietnam in the postwar years, and became second-class citizens. Chinese schools and newspapers were closed in 1976, and ethnic Chinese or *nguoï Hoa* had to register their citizenship (Hitchcox 1990: 37). More than 260,000 ethnic Chinese fled northwards to the People's Republic of China (Hitchcox 1990: 37; Robinson 1998: 272). Tran's family tried unsuccessfully to escape from Vietnam by boat twice, in 1977 and again in 1978. Having poured all their savings into these escape attempts, they had no remaining funds, and were trapped in Vietnam. Tran never gave up on her dream of leaving the country, however, and finally realized this dream twenty years later, when she won a scholarship to Australia in 1995.

She met her husband Ray, an Irishman, in Australia in 2002. She relates:

13 Tran. Oral history interview. Sydney, Australia, 5 December 2006. For reasons of confidentiality, the women who took part in the oral history project are only identified by a single name.

14 For further details of Tran's story, see Nguyen (2009: 11–33).

I met Ray when I went to Brisbane to see an exhibition entitled "Viet Nam Voices." Ray was in the exhibition but I didn't know him at the time. I knew another mutual friend, Peter Daly, who was on the curatorial board of the exhibition. When I said that I wanted to see the exhibition in Brisbane, Peter said: "You must meet my friend, he can take you around." I met Ray, he was still living with his ex-wife and their two children at the time. A short while after, Ray moved out of the house. We communicated by phone and then he went to Sydney and we formed our relationship.

We share so many things. First of all, I would like to talk about the similarity between Ireland and Vietnam. Ireland is divided between North and South, there is not so much conflict now but in the past there was conflict between the North and South. The same thing happened between the North and South in Vietnam, and that conflict is still relevant in Vietnam now. When you talk about Southern people and Northern people, you feel the differences between the two groups.

Ray and I share experiences as migrants to this country and I feel very natural with him, as if I'd met him twenty years ago and have been living with him for twenty years. When I apply for Australian citizenship, Ray will also apply for Australian citizenship. (Tran)

Ray served for one year with the Australian Army in Vietnam. He states:

I come from Northern Ireland, from Belfast, and I have a British passport. Northern Ireland was at war, there was conflict with the IRA and all the sectarian violence, and I didn't want to know anything about it. I had a very good education and then suddenly the political situation intervened in my life until everything was frozen, and I thought, "This is a terrible situation." So I went to England and hitchhiked all over Europe for six months and then decided to migrate. I became a "twenty-pound migrant," it was easy for British people to come to this place as migrants. I came here as an eighteen-year-old and by the age of twenty, I was conscripted, and was in the infantry. I am now on a military pension, a disability pension from Veterans' Affairs. (Tran)

When they met, Tran was separated from her husband in Vietnam, and the mother of two children. Like Yen, she draws on the similarities in terms of the personal and political between herself and her husband. Her narrative points to parallel trajectories. Both came from divided countries that had been partitioned into North and South – Ireland in 1921 and Vietnam in 1954 – and experienced the violent legacy of partition. For Tran, that legacy was two decades of war in Vietnam followed by the reunification of North and South under a repressive communist regime that discriminated against ethnic Chinese amongst others and triggered a mass exodus, while for Ray, it was political insecurity and sectarian violence in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s that also led to emigration (Trew 2013: 51–52). Both made the decision to leave their homeland. While Ray left Northern Ireland for England, and travelled in Europe before making the decision to migrate to Australia, Tran attempted twice to leave Vietnam but was unable to do so. Her fate and that of her family is a reminder of the many people who tried to leave Vietnam in the postwar years and failed despite repeated attempts. Since the process of planning an escape was fraught with anxiety and entailed financial commitment and a high level of risk, failure was devastating. This experience left internal scars for Tran. Even after resettlement in Australia, she suffered from nightmares of arrest by the Vietnamese authorities. She remembers: 'In Vietnam, I'd lived with trauma for so long, I'd dealt with suppression for so long. I didn't say a word about the loss of my parents' business.'

Who could I talk to? What could I say? I couldn't trust anyone. So the losses stayed inside, like an infection' (Tran). While Ray's experience of migration was not as traumatic as Tran's, he left political violence in Northern Ireland only to find himself serving in the Vietnam War. He said that there were servicemen from other Commonwealth countries such as South Africa for example, who had, like him, migrated to Australia, spent two years in the country, and were then conscripted into the Australian Army.

On a personal level, both Tran and Ray had children from previous relationships when they met. These relationships had proven problematic, and this provided another point of connection between them—a shared understanding of managing difficult partnerships from the past. Ray's service in Vietnam led to his interest in art, and this provided further common ground between them—they met, after all, at an art exhibition on Vietnam. As Tran underlines, 'I feel very natural with him, as if I'd met him twenty years ago' (Tran). This partnership relatively late in their lives revealed personal and political synergies and provided love, understanding and a sense of familiarity.

Intercultural marriage

Yen's and Tran's portrayals of cross-cultural relationships are embedded within life narratives that encompass living through wartime in South Vietnam, experiencing political persecution in postwar communist Vietnam, and emigration. Their accounts not only relate their own individual stories as women and as refugees or migrants but also position them within their communities and in relation to their partners.

The narratives of both evince a strong sense of individuality and agency. Both women display patience and perseverance, and the will to overcome significant obstacles in order to leave their homeland. The same will is evident in their decision to marry outside their ethnic group. Their experience of state repression, transnational displacement, and cultural adjustments are all echoed to a certain extent in the life histories of their European partners. Both women preface their accounts with statements that they had wanted to travel overseas since they were young girls. These infer that they were by nature pre-disposed not only to openness to other cultures but also to the possibility of partners across ethnic and cultural boundaries, and to migration and resettlement in another land. By choosing a partner from another culture, they are not only unusual but also ahead of their generation. While the rate of intermarriage among first generation Vietnamese women in Australia is low, it is considerably higher in the second generation (Khoo, Birrell & Heard 2009: 22). The trajectories of these two women, while marked by hardship, loss and trauma in their homeland, reveal a successful enmeshing of personal openness to others, flexibility in dealing with difference, and appreciation of the strengths and understanding involved in cross-cultural relationships.

A principal difference between these narratives of cross-cultural love in multicultural Australia and earlier colonial and postcolonial representations is that they do not reveal imbalances of power such as that between colonizer and colonized nor the fraught context of colonial or wartime Indochina. In the narrative of Yen, both partners were refugees from communist states in the 1980s, and were equally vulnerable to the policies of countries of first asylum towards refugees, whether Asian or European. Both had to await acceptance by a country of second asylum, learn to adapt to a new language and culture, and work hard to reconstruct lives in a new host country. Yen and her husband had to learn English as adults in their thirties, and communicate with each other in what is for both a second language. Learning a language signifies an opening into a different culture and mindset, and they have attempted to convey this

dual Asian and European heritage to their son with mixed success. In the narrative of Tran, both partners met each other later in their lives, after failed marriages. Both had migrated to Australia and had a shared understanding of broken pasts and nationwide violence and traumas.

While '[d]ifferent behaviours in social situations, different manners, different courtesies, different values all put a strain on an interracial couple' as suggested by June Owen (2002: 182), neither Yen's nor Tran's narratives contain references to cultural or religious differences or tensions. Challenges in cross-cultural marriages include understanding racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and coping with the stresses that can be generated by differences in values and belief (Kim *et al.* 2017: 1096). Negative perceptions and differential social acceptance of interracial marriage can further strain relationships (Kim *et al.* 2017: 1096). Instead of relating potential difficulties such as communication barriers or cultural misunderstandings, however, both women have chosen to focus on the strengths of intermarriage, including an expanded worldview, and commonalities across political and national lines. Oral history has provided these women with the opportunity to not only narrate the self but also the interaction between the self and the other, and to frame and structure that cross-cultural encounter in a positive light.

Migration appears to have given the women and their partners a chance to start anew, and to put aside the weight of the past, even while they acknowledge that it was precisely these difficult pasts that drew them close to their partners. Pasts marked by war and trauma have led to the recognition of affinity with partners who have had similar experiences. Concomitant to this is a marked appreciation for the peace and stability provided by the relationship and by the resettlement country. As Yen notes: 'We agree that we owe a lot to this country, that we are living in a quiet and peaceful country' (Yen). Tran for her part, remarks:

To me Vietnam has too many restrictions that I just can't stand. Vietnam as a country is a lovely place, but as a regime, as a nation, there are so many things wrong there that need to be corrected ... To me Australia provides other options, Australia provides alternatives, and I like that fact, I like living in Australia. (Tran)

These statements justify the women's decision to migrate, and their appreciation of the wider possibilities afforded by Australia. Their life narratives are coherent and reveal not only a strong sense of identity as Vietnamese women and as migrants but also a clear engagement between themselves and the society in which they live.

In conclusion, there are two distinct aspects to these cross-cultural relationships. The first is the explicit reference to a shared understanding of adversity between themselves and their partners. Both women choose to highlight this. This shared adversity is not only personal but also political and communal, referring either to repressive communist regimes or the damaging legacy of partition. The second is that while these intermarriages took place in Australia neither partner is Australian-born. All are refugees or migrants in the context of multicultural Australia. Rosemary Breger and Rosanna Hill note that:

Living in a mixed marriage can be an intimate performance of juggling identities and the ideologies associated with them, a dance sometimes threatening to perform as well as to behold. It is sometimes enriching but always calls into question deeply held assumptions about the nature of one's own identities, and those of one's reference groups. (1998: 28)

In the case of these two narratives, potentially damaging experiences of loss and communal trauma across different continents and cultures are identified instead as providing the foundation for building enduring relationships.

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