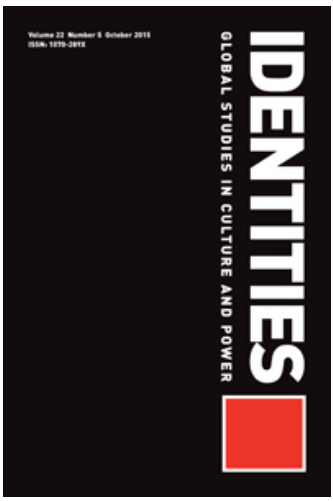

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'Like a foreigner in my own homeland': writing the dilemmas of return in the Vietnamese American diaspora

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'Like a foreigner in my own homeland': writing the dilemmas of return in the Vietnamese American diaspora

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In what ways can refugees be both cosmopolitan and diasporic? This article juxtaposes published memoirs with material from ethnographic research in order to analyse the discursive frameworks through which Vietnamese Americans of the 1.5 generation negotiate both diasporic imaginaries and cosmopolitan aspirations. The collective memories of the Vietnam War that circulate in the Vietnamese American diaspora place obstacles in the path of a younger generation who aspire to be cosmopolitans, but are entangled in memories of the trauma and dislocation of the war and must also respond to a pervasive ideology of anti-communism, which is a form of anti-cosmopolitanism, among the first generation. This case study points to the ways in which our current scholarly efforts to expand ideas of both diaspora and cosmopolitanism to include a variety of positions and aspirations can benefit from more attention to the modes of cultural expression produced by the populations we study.

Keywords: diaspora; cosmopolitanism; refugees; autoethnography; memory; Vietnam

Introduction

The quote in this article's title comes from a memoir written by one of the 'boat people', who fled Vietnam as a teenager and eventually settled in the United States. When he returned to Vietnam several years later, seeking a connection to his homeland, he was disappointed to find that he felt like a foreigner. This theme is one that I encountered many times in both my ethnographic fieldwork among Vietnamese Americans in Texas and my reading of published memoirs written by Vietnamese American authors. The desires of the children of refugees to make return visits to Vietnam as cosmopolitan subjects are, I will argue here, thwarted by the legacy of the Vietnam War,[1] which troubles their capacity to realise those desires. In this article, I consider the paradox of feeling like a 'foreigner' in what is supposed to be one's homeland (Vietnam) among former Vietnamese refugees and their children who live in the United States, and the implications of this for cosmopolitan aspirations. My analysis focuses on the relationship between the discursive spaces (cf. Clifford 1994; Malkki 1995) of diaspora and cosmopolitanism within which narratives of Vietnamese American identity are positioned.

The Vietnam War still evokes raw emotions and bitter memories among former Vietnamese refugees in the United States. Large numbers of refugees began to arrive in the United States after the invasion of Saigon on 30 April 1975 and continued to arrive in the United States up until the end of 1990s, although the rates have declined to a trickle since then.[2] By 2010, the number of Vietnamese Americans was over 1.5 million. They commemorate what they refer to as the 'Fall of Saigon' with an annual ceremony called 'Black April', and tell stories about either escaping as Saigon fell or not managing to do so and suffering at the hands of the victors until departure was possible, sometimes many years later. This trauma has become part of a collective history even as it has been lived and remembered by individuals. It also fuels anti-communist ideologies among former refugees who oppose the current government of Vietnam.

As Glick Schiller, Darieva, and Gruner-Domic (2011, 406) have recently noted, 'Researchers working within the field of diaspora studies have only occasionally addressed notions of cosmopolitanism'. As scholars continue to refine ideas about both the diaspora and cosmopolitanism, there is a need for further work on the articulation of these two orientations to affiliation. The recent emphasis in anthropology on forms of vernacular cosmopolitanism (Werbner 2008b) has demonstrated that cosmopolitanism is not exclusively an elite orientation to the world (see also Hannerz 2007; Schiller, Darieva, and Gruner-Domic 2011; Amit and Rapport 2012). New views of cosmopolitanism extend Hannerz's classic statement that it involves 'a willingness to engage with the Other' (1990, 239) by seeing this as 'an aspirational outlook and mode of practice' that should be viewed, according to Werbner, as a collective and not 'merely individual' orientation (2008a, 2). She writes that 'cosmopolitans insist on the human capacity to imagine the world from an Other's perspective and to imagine the possibility of a borderless world of cultural plurality' (2008a, 2). Rather than being rootless, Werbner suggests, cosmopolitans juggle various loyalties.

This new view of cosmopolitanism, which argues against the 'rootless individual' model, has developed in tandem with a new broadening of definitions of diaspora. Attachment to a former home and fantasy of return are classic features of definitions of diaspora (Safran 1991; Clifford 1994; Dufoix 2008; Hirsch and Miller 2011). There is an idea of groupness, a collective history, and shared memories in this concept. Stéphane Dufoix argues for an inclusive approach to diaspora, and suggests that there are four types, as defined by their aspirational relationships to a homeland. He identifies (2008, 62–63) these as the 'centroperipheral mode' (a 'transnation' existing within a host country and supported by the home country); the 'enclaved mode' (based more on shared identity than nationality, and existing in urban centres); the 'atopic mode' (a diasporic identity based on space rather than place and connected to ideas of dispersion); and 'the antagonistic mode' (a political space in which the current regime of the home country is not accepted as legitimate).

The Vietnamese diaspora in the United States is, as I will explain in more detail below, closest to Dufoix's 'antagonistic mode' (Dufoix 2008, 63), in which the diaspora draws upon its claims of common origin to oppose the current nation state in their former homeland. While there may be an intersection of diasporic and cosmopolitan outlooks in the other modes, the antagonistic mode does not easily support a cosmopolitanism open to multiple loyalties, or even multiple nationalities, but a sort of 'anti-cosmopolitanism' (Hannerz 1990; Dharwadker 2011). Current scholarship that seeks to expand understandings of cosmopolitanism has paid insufficient attention to the barriers to cosmopolitanism among former political refugees and their children, whose experiences and subjectivities interfere with the formation of what Werbner calls 'wider cosmopolitan values' that transcend 'parochial interpretations of culture, religion and ethnicity' (2008a, 16).

Both diasporic and cosmopolitan aspirations are expressed through cultural performances and discursive spaces, and are dynamic processes. I draw here upon Werbner's suggestion that while diasporas may depend on a sense of imagined community, they are materialised through 'embodiments of cultural, political and philanthropic sentimental performances' (2002, 125). The role of imagination and performance is underscored by Parreñas and Siu (2007, 1), who see diaspora as 'embedded in a set of cultural relations' simultaneously involving 'the "homeland" (real or imagined), place of residence, and compatriots or coethnics dispersed elsewhere'. These relations must be sustained, they argue, through 'everyday practices of sociality, collective memory, economic exchange, and the work of cultural imagination and production' (2). Narayan (2002, 472) has suggested that storytelling contributes to emplacement 'as an imaginative process, the orienting of self within multiple frameworks of meaning'.

In the following two sections of this article, I provide cases from my ethnographic fieldwork among Vietnamese Americans and from the published memoirs of Vietnamese Americans in order to explore the 'multiple frameworks of meaning' in which the children of refugees situate themselves, and the dilemmas they face in responding to the legacy of the Vietnam War as they express diasporic and cosmopolitan aspirations.

Ethnographic perspectives on cosmopolitanism and the Vietnamese diaspora

The ethnographic material which informs this article was gathered during a 3-year ethnographic study (2005–2008) in the Dallas-Arlington-Fort Worth metropolitan region in the northern part of Texas. It was part of a comparative, collaborative project with a colleague who studied Indian immigration,[3] and aimed at understanding processes of civic engagement among the two populations. My research has shown that in order to understand the diasporic ideologies to which the younger generations must respond, variation within the Vietnamese American population connected to generational differences must be taken into account.

The first generation of refugees voice a strong ideology of anti-communism. Fleeing political persecution played a major role in their migration, and I was told by numerous research participants that they would have preferred to stay in Vietnam had they been able to do so and live a peaceful and secure life. They oppose what they see as a communist government in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV), a nation state dominated by the Vietnamese Communist Party. Political activists among the first generation adopt moral principles that champion democracy and human rights in Vietnam, which they feel can only be enacted through a restoration of the former Republic of South Vietnam (RSV).

It is important to distinguish between attachment to an idea of nation and attachment to a particular nation state in discussions of Vietnamese Americans, particularly those of the first generation. Their idea of 'homeland' refers both to an ancestral cultural imaginary of Vietnam and to a nation state, the RSV, that was defeated during the war. Their homeland is not, therefore, the current nation state of the SRV because they do not recognise it as legitimate. Despite their opposition to the current regime, many of my research participants professed a desire to return 'home' eventually. One man, who had been in a re-education camp in Vietnam after the war and gained refugee status in the United States in 2001, told me 'I will always be Vietnamese. I had to leave my country. I will try to go back and be buried there'. This was a common sentiment, but it must be stressed that the return was frequently associated with ambivalence, and hope that the communist regime would by then be toppled. Although there is a nostalgic longing for a homeland, there is no attachment to the current SRV, but only to the former RSV.

While many of the first generation felt that the former South Vietnam was home, their children had no clear answer as to where home is located. To illustrate this point, I use the example of a young Vietnamese American university student who seeks emplacement and belonging, but feels alone. This young man came to the United States with his refugee parents as a primary school age child in the 1990s. Bao, as I will refer to him here, expressed his dilemmas of belonging in this way:

> … I'm not really American, you know, and this isn't really my country and I just don't feel that sense of belonging [pause] and it's pretty much the same with wherever I am trying to identify myself with Vietnamese culture. Because there is really no Vietnamese country and there's no place that I can call home. And so, I'm like in the middle of nowhere, no man's land.

Bao was a citizen of the United States when he spoke these words in 2008, and yet he still felt that he could not be truly American in a cultural sense. Moreover, although he strongly identifies as culturally Vietnamese, he feels there is no Vietnamese country (for him) because of his opposition to the current regime. Bao communicates his positioning through spatial metaphors – saying that he is in a 'no man's land' and placing himself 'in the middle of nowhere'. His

cosmopolitan aspirations of belonging, which he experiences as an absence, are not the same as the anti-cosmopolitanism of the first generation, who feel completely 'Vietnamese' in a cultural sense and can identify with their former homeland South Vietnam.

Those of Vietnamese origin born in the United States have yet a different perspective from that of the 1.5 generation who arrived as children. They are American by birth and in some cases do not even speak Vietnamese, so that their sense of affiliation comes from their life in the United States. Many of this generation have grown up in multicultural neighbourhoods and have attended public schools in the United States alongside of children from different ethnic backgrounds. Another university student I interviewed, who was born in the United States, had a broad range of friends and moved easily among them. Thuy was critical of other Vietnamese American youth who preferred to socialise only with others of their same background – those who might say, as she put it 'this person is too American and they think they're arrogant and everything like that so I'm not going to associate with them'. Like Thuy, many of the children of Vietnamese refugees who were born in the United States exhibit flexibility in understandings of their identity and display an openness to others that can be considered a characteristic of the cosmopolitan subject. They exhibit more of a vernacular cosmopolitanism associated with having a Vietnamese ethnic identity but feeling also that they are 'American'.

In my conversations with research participants, they rarely mentioned the Vietnamese diaspora as a locus for belonging that lies between or across nation states, like the 'third space' proposed by writers such as Bhabha (1994) and Hall (1990). There was an idea of 'Viet pride' among youth, but this was a more localised sense of shared ethnicity and origins. The imagining of the wider diaspora was, however, enacted via cultural performances during public festivals and other displays of Vietnamese American groupness organised by leaders of local Vietnamese American civic associations. Public events like the Tet (New Year's) Festival, Black April (the commemoration of the fall of Saigon) or Vietnamese American participation in a 4th of July parade (Reed-Danahay 2010), promote the image of a 'rooted' cosmopolitan diaspora in the sense of reaching out across ethnic lines in the American public sphere and enacting forms of cultural citizenship (Rosaldo and Flores 1997). This is the type of cosmopolitanism observed by Tremon among Chinese in French Polynesia. She defines it as 'a practice of formulating several simultaneous allegiances and a "juggling" of different possible identifications, which allows the cosmopolitan to maximise (economic, political, social) benefits by exploiting power differentials' (2009,105). Paradoxically, the varieties of display used by Vietnamese Americans at public events to perform a cosmopolitan diaspora frequently also included anti-communist protests that embodied forms of anti-cosmopolitanism in relationship to Vietnam. This shows the tensions that are part of the antagonistic mode of the Vietnamese American diaspora.

Diasporic autoethnography, cosmopolitanism and dilemmas of return

Diasporic memoir is a literary genre and form of cultural performance that imagines both the social space of diaspora and forms of affiliation associated with it. Published memoirs by Vietnamese Americans articulate similar dilemmas of belonging to those expressed by my research participants. More explicitly than did the people I interviewed, Vietnamese American memoirists articulate connections between a wider diaspora and their own lives. Their books are 'cosmopolitan' because they travel and circulate among both readers who position themselves within the diaspora and those, like me, who are positioned outside of it. These writers collectively help construct the Vietnamese diaspora and make it visible or legible. This is, in a sense, a form of 'witnessing', in Veena Das' (2007) terms, but is also a way of making a particular group 'visible' in social space (Bourdieu 1989, 20; see also Reed-Danahay, forthcoming). I consider Vietnamese American memoirs to be 'autoethnographies'[4] because they combine autobiography with ethnographic perspectives through stories not only about individual selves, but also about wider sociopolitical events and forces. As ego documents (Dekker 2002), they are useful sources of ethnographic knowledge that complement participant observation research and interviews during fieldwork. By juxtaposing such texts with my ethnographic research findings, I follow Aihwa Ong's suggestion (2004, 1) that we consult 'literature written by diaspora writers' in our studies of diaspora.

The dilemmas of how to be cosmopolitan in Vietnamese diasporic space is a prominent theme in the writings of Vietnamese American author Andrew Lam, who suggests that the children of Vietnamese refugees are 'transnationals whose memories are layered and whose biographies transgress national boundaries' (2005, 15). Lam, who has travelled widely around the globe as a journalist, considers himself to be cosmopolitan. He was 11 years old when his refugee family left Vietnam for California in April 1975. Lam has returned to Vietnam several times, but voices the impossibility of feeling 'at home' there, writing that 'my sense of home these days seems to have less to do with geography than imagination and memories' and 'the country I remember and still yearn for is not the country I visit. Still, like a weaning addict, I go back, from time to time, to look and measure my losses, and slowly, in my own way, to let go' (2005, 115). His cosmopolitan aspirations inform his lament that 'although the world is now at my beck and call and my friends and relatives are scattered in many countries, I feel often utterly alone' (2005, 127). He has become an exile, who echoes the sentiments voiced by my research participant Bao. Although he aspires to a cosmopolitanism with a certain freedom of movement, Lam is an exile who feels at home nowhere but in his imagination of a lost past.

Other examples of this theme of thwarted cosmopolitan aspirations among the children of Vietnamese refugees, which are expressed in contrasting registers, can be found in the memoirs[5] of two people who arrived in the United States as children soon after the war. These texts are of interest not because they are

'representative' of an essentialised Vietnamese American cultural identity but, rather, because their striking commonalities and differences provide clues about the discursive spaces in which Vietnamese Americans of the 1.5 generation position themselves. These books prompt questions about the conventions, constraints and possibilities for telling stories of the Vietnamese diaspora. Their writers situate their narratives within a broader discourse regarding the moral claims of anti-communism that circulate among the first generation, but to which subsequent generations are compelled to respond.

Both texts begin with escape from Vietnam and arrival in the United States, followed by a period of emplacement in the United States and adjustment to living there. The authors end their stories with accounts of return visits to Vietnam when they were young adults.[6] Circulating through these stories is the idea of a collective Vietnamese American experience characterised not only by memories of trauma and family dislocation, but also by the persistence of anti-communism and opposition to the current regime in Vietnam among the first generation.

Saigon to San Diego: Memoir of a Boy who Escaped from Communist Vietnam

The first example is by Trinh Do (2004), who arrived in the United States as a 14-year-old in 1978. Do expresses a strong ideological position of anti-communism through his narrative of childhood experiences. The title of the book explicitly signals the author's political stance, with its use of 'escape' and 'Communist Vietnam' in conjunction with the word 'boy', underscoring the vulnerability but also bravery of a child who flees this regime. Do writes of his childhood before and after the fall of Saigon up until the year he left Vietnam and moved to America. He came from a fairly well-to-do family that had originally migrated south from North Vietnam when the country was divided after the Indochinese War that ended French colonialism. After the Vietnam War, his family was labelled 'anti-revolutionary'. Because he had been a soldier in the South Vietnamese army, Do's father was imprisoned in a re-education camp after the war, while his mother desperately tried to make ends meet. To help Do avoid continued persecution due to his family's political position, his mother helped arrange Do's escape alone by boat. Although Do was reunited with extended family members in California after spending some time in refugee camps, his parents were never able to join him there and died tragically at sea trying to escape soon after he left.

This memoir is framed by a preface and an epilogue which bookend the descriptions of a traumatic childhood in Vietnam. In the preface, the author indicates his self-positioning as a person linked to a wider diaspora, writing 'My story is not unique. It is the story of millions of people who made dangerous voyages to escape from Vietnam' (2). Trinh Do locates his own suffering within what he calls a 'complex historical dimension' and writes that

'apart from those who have suffered and endured the searing misery of Communist rule, I don't think it is possible for anyone living outside Vietnam to grasp the profound depth of pettiness and vengeful spite displayed by the victors of the war' (1–2).

An epilogue charts Do's journey after arriving in America and his return visit to Vietnam as a successful professional. He had been a high-achieving student in Vietnam, despite the discrimination he faced, and eventually excelled again at school in the United States, graduating from Stanford Business School. It was while at Stanford that Do started to write his memoirs. After he found a job and then moved up through promotions in the Proctor and Gamble Company, Do was sent to work temporarily in Vietnam, and he and his wife spent time there after the *Doi Moi* economic reforms of the 1990s. During his stay, he paid a visit to the village where he spent his childhood, and writes about it in this way:

> My return to Vietnam marked a full circle in my life's odyssey, which began on that fateful day of 30 April 1975. On the same day in 1995, I rode a motorbike back to my old hometown, Vung Tau, the first time I was back since my escape.

Trinh Do tells of the pleasures of seeing old friends but painfully notes that 'While I shared a past with my old friends, we had nothing in common in the present and the future. When I left Vung Tau, I felt like a foreigner in my own homeland' (226).

Stealing Buddha's Dinner: A Memoir

My second example is by Bich Nguyen (2007), who left Vietnam at the age of 8 months. Nguyen spent her childhood in the United States but composes her life story, as does Trinh Do, within the same tropes of escape, arrival and return. Her family was able to leave when Saigon was invaded in 1975, due to her uncle's connections to the American Embassy. He managed to secure passage for Nguyen, her sister, her father and her father's mother on one of the ships waiting outside the city. Within the space of 3 months, with help of refugee agencies, she and her family were living in the state of Michigan.

Although Nguyen explains why her family fled Vietnam in such haste, to avoid repercussions from the Communists who had taken over Saigon, which would mean that her father and uncle would most likely be sent to a re-education camp if they stayed, she does not focus on the politics of anti-communism in her narrative. She does, however, express her childhood confusion about this:

> I largely understood that 'the Communists' were the reason we had ended up in America, in Michigan. I knew that Communists had warred against the good guys – people like us. But no one explained why or what it all meant. In our household, the 'why' question get me exactly nowhere. 'Why are the Communists out to get us?'

> 'Because they're bad.' 'Why are they bad?' 'Because they're Communists.' 'Why?' 'Because I said so.' (99–100)

The title of her book refers to Nguyen's guilt at having stolen some food from her grandmother's altar to the Buddha, and foregrounds her lack of understanding of Vietnamese culture as a child growing up in America, wanting to be, as she puts it, 'American'. She writes from the perspective of this child who glimpsed the pain and dislocation of her family through partial knowledge and fragmented observations. Although somewhat exotic at first in the small town in which they settled, her family was eventually joined by several other Vietnamese refugee families who moved there. Nguyen's father married a Mexican American woman who, along with her daughter from a previous relationship, moved in with the family.

Although this memoir has many light-hearted and humorous moments, there is a very dark and sad episode at its centre and that is the story of how Nguyen's mother got left behind in Vietnam when the family escaped. The family secrecy surrounding this troubled Nguyen throughout her childhood. She imagined that her mother was alive and living in Vietnam, but when she was in fifth grade, Nguyen received a letter from her mother indicating that she had arrived in the United States and was living in Pennsylvania. Several years later, when Nguyen was a young university student, she travelled to meet her mother and half-siblings who were then living in Boston. She learned from her mother that she had been waiting at home not understanding the gravity of the situation when the rest of the family moved quickly to escape Saigon. By sharing this story in her memoir, Nguyen evokes the dislocations associated with being a Vietnamese refugee through the prism of her own family's trauma. She resists describing her life story as representative, however, in contrast to Trinh Do. She writes in the 'Author's Note' at the end of her book, 'I do not mean to speak for all of my family, or all Vietnamese immigrants, many of whom have had entirely different experiences with, and opinions on, assimilation, culture and language …' (255–6).

As did Trinh Do, Bich Nguyen eventually returned for a visit to Vietnam. Traveling with her uncle and her paternal grandmother when she was a university student, she visited several relatives there, including her maternal grandmother. While in Vietnam, Nguyen imagines the sorrow, uncertainty and loneliness of her mother waiting for word of the family who fled without her. She suffers from conflicting impulses to both remember and forget this suffering. She also experiences a feeling of, as she puts it:

> being a tourist in the country where I was supposed to have grown up, of being a foreigner among the people who were supposed to be mine. Every girl I passed on the street was my theoretical double, a person I might have been, a life I might have had. Sitting with my aunt and grandmother, I did not feel a rush of love. I felt regret, exhaustion. I felt like an outsider, and I knew I would always be just

> that. I would fly back home to the United States and perhaps never see them again (244–45).

Nguyen's words are similar to Do's statement that he felt as 'a foreigner in my own homeland'. Both Nguyen and Do convey a sense of dislocation in Vietnam and in some ways the impossibility of being the kind of cosmopolitans who feel at home anywhere. Like my research participant, Bao and the journalist Andrew Lam, they are metaphorically 'at home' not in any physical or geographic space, but in the social space of the Vietnamese diaspora – a space being constructed in part through these autoethnographic acts of writing and witnessing. This is the space that, as Lam writes, is a space of imagination and memory.

The theme of suffering and, in particular, family tragedy, is central to both memoirs. They also contain many silences about individual and family history related to the trauma of war. For Trinh Do, suffering is associated with post-war Vietnam and the death of his parents as they tried to flee Vietnam after he had safely arrived in the United States. All of his personal suffering took place in Vietnam, and he wrote positively of his experiences as a successful immigrant in America. He tells little, however, of any struggles he had in the United States. He positions himself in the narrative as victim of communist Vietnam who has succeeded in America. In distancing himself from his past and then returning to it, he cannot feel 'at home' in Vietnam.

The main focus on suffering in Bich Nguyen's story was separation from her mother, and the silences about her absence. Nguyen's life was not without feelings of loneliness and psychological pain, but she describes many positive aspects to her life in America, where she had friends and a loving stepmother. For Nguyen, the impossibility of feeling 'at home' in Vietnam came from her having lived almost her entire life in America and having become what she calls 'Americanised'. Although she discloses her ambivalence and regret about this, Nguyen accepts that she is an outsider in Vietnam. Her position is closer to that of my research participant Thuy, who was born in the United States and feels more of a connection there than to Vietnam. Nguyen does not attribute her lack of connection to Vietnam to its having been the location of her family's suffering, in large part because she positions herself not in that 'collective' past, but in her own past growing up in America. And yet, for both Bich Nguyen and Trinh Do, Vietnam represents a place of painful memories – first-hand memories for Do and 'post-memories' (Hirsch 1997) for Nguyen. And in some ways, this influences their ability to return as fully cosmopolitan subjects due to the layering of ambivalence related to the aftermath of war for both writers.

Diasporic cosmopolitanism from below and above

The collective memories of Vietnamese Americans reflect the politics of anti-communism, associated with the first generation of refugees, which places obstacles in the path of a cosmopolitanism that can be 'open to others'. The

experiences and subjectivities of Vietnamese Americans, a population that is already quite differentiated, reflect the unique history of this refugee population, and my analysis here is not meant to apply to the Vietnamese refugee experience elsewhere or to younger generations in Vietnam itself.[7] Espiritu (2006) argues that a dominant narrative in the United States portrays former Vietnamese refugees as 'pathetic' and 'docile' subjects who were rescued by a caring America. This story, she writes, ignores the role of America in the war and positions refugees as passive victims. A second dominant narrative of anti-communism emerged in the voices of the first generation of refugees, according to Espiritu, as a way to exert social agency. 'We need to recognize', she argues, 'that this "anticommunist" stance is also a narrative, adopted in part because it is the primary political language with which Vietnamese refugees, as objects of US rescue fantasies, could tell their history and be understood from within the US social and political landscape' (2006, 425).[8] Following Espiritu, Lieu (2011) calls attention to 'ways of forgetting' about the Vietnam War practiced on a national level in the United States and by subsequent generations of Vietnamese living there. Vietnamese Americans are, she argues, caught between representations of themselves as 'traumatised victims' and a 'model minority'.

Between these two positions of victim and model minority, a potential third way of being Vietnamese American may be provided through cosmopolitan aspirations within a diasporic space. In his classic essay on Afro-Caribbean diaspora, Hall (1990) stressed the importance of not essentialising cultural identity, despite the role played by ideas about 'one culture' in post-colonial struggles. Another way of seeing identity, he wrote, is 'the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past' (225). Cultural identity is multiple, and as much about 'becoming', according to Hall, as it is about 'being'. None of the writers or research informants that were part of my research adopted a position as 'pathetic victim'; rather they expressed aspirations towards a becoming that was cosmopolitan even if that aspiration was thwarted.

Andrew Lam, Trinh Do and Bich Nguyen all responded in their writing to the ways in which being a refugee child made them cosmopolitan in a sense, experiencing a wider world beyond the local, but also to the ways that this position prohibits them from fully realising the ability to freely circulate among, in Lam's words, 'numerous particularities'. They desire a more global form of belonging linked to possibilities of transcending the homeland/host nation dichotomy but also display ambivalence about longings for, and the possibility of, a return to 'home'. Unlike the first generation, including the man I interviewed who dreamed of returning to be buried at home in Vietnam, these members of the 1.5 generation seek a return to Vietnam not as a permanent relocation but as a way of going back to revisit their past and that of their parents. Their dilemmas of return arose from emotions they experienced during their visits to Vietnam that evoked memories and post-memories of trauma and dislocation. Although these writers aspire to be diasporic cosmopolitans, what

12-13
2 notes:

Wang (2013) refers to as 'the cosmopolitan hero', the question of whether or not the Vietnamese diaspora as a whole can be cosmopolitan is one with which they struggle.

14-15
2 notes:

There are influences of a cosmopolitanism 'from above' and 'from below' on the lives of the children of Vietnamese refugees. As Hall (2008, 356) suggests, the former is composed of 'global entrepreneurs following the pathways of global corporate power', while the latter consists of 'people driven across borders, obliged to uproot themselves from home, place, and family'. Vietnamese refugees were forced migrants, but their children are making the transition to cosmopolitans 'from above' as global entrepreneurs (especially in the case of journalist Andrew Lam and corporate executive Trinh Do). The anti-communist ideology of the first generation of refugees interferes with the idea of 'living together peacefully in an international community' (Werbner 2008b, 2) by reinforcing an antagonistic ideology of nationalism (attachment to the former RSV) that permeates discourse and moral judgments. Even for those younger Vietnamese Americans, the dislocations associated with being a refugee or the child of refugees provide a memoryscape of the war that thwarts their cosmopolitan aspirations.

Conclusions

This article has focused on the ways in which storytelling about traumatic events can shape both diasporic and cosmopolitan aspirations. My juxtaposition of written texts with ethnographic material has pointed to the discursive frameworks, the narratives, through which individuals negotiate and express both diasporic and cosmopolitan aspirations. Memoirs of the refugee experience both reflect and help create collective memory, and are forms of memory making (Maguire 2012) through which the violence and trauma of the war circulate. It is, therefore, useful to supplement ethnographic research on diasporic populations with considerations of their cultural productions through memoir.

The desire to return 'home' to Vietnam, either for a visit (as in the case of younger generations) or to be buried (as in the case of the first generation) is articulated through the prism of a discursive space in which the legacy of the Vietnam War, and particularly the politics of anti-communism, is a ghostly presence. Feeling 'like a foreigner in one's homeland' (Trinh Do), like 'in the middle of nowhere, no man's land' (Bao), 'utterly alone' (Andrew Lam) or 'like a tourist in the country where I was supposed to grow up' (Bich Nguyen) are all evocations of thwarted cosmopolitan aspirations, recognising the tensions between a desire for both 'wider cosmopolitan values' (Werbner 2008a, 16) and emplacement. In conclusion, the examples provided here point to the ways in which our current scholarly efforts to expand ideas of both diaspora and cosmopolitanism to include a variety of positions and aspirations can benefit

from more attention to modes of cultural expression produced by the populations we study.

Notes

1. I use the term 'The Vietnam War', common in the United States, to refer a war that is known in Vietnam as 'The American War'. By adopting vocabularies used among my research informants, I convey, as an anthropologist, the perspectives of my interlocutors. They referred to themselves as Vietnamese Americans (without a hyphen), a usage I continue here, but are referred to in Vietnam as 'Viet Khieu'.
2. Recent book-length ethnographic studies of Vietnamese Americans include Aguilar-San Juan (2009), Lieu (2011), Reed-Danahay (in Brettell and Reed-Danahay 2012), Valverde (2012) and Thai (2014).
3. This research project was generously funded by a grant from the Russell Sage Foundation awarded to me and co-PI Caroline B. Brettell (See Brettell and Reed-Danahay 2012). Publications dealing solely with the Vietnamese material include Reed-Danahay (2008, 2010), Reed-Danahay (2012a) and Reed-Danahay (2012b).
4. See Reed-Danahay (1997) for an overview of the history of this term and its potential applications in ethnographic research.
5. This discussion is selective and it not intended as a review of all Vietnamese American memoir. On Vietnamese diasporic imaginaries in memoir, poetry, media and fiction, see Pelaud (2011), Lieu (2011), Duong (2012) and Valverde (2012). Collections of Vietnamese refugee oral histories include Chan (2006) and Nguyen (2009). See also recent graphic novel memoirs related to the Vietnamese diaspora in the United States (Tran 2010; Baloup 2012).
6. This is a frequent theme that can found in other memoirs written by members of the 1.5 generation (see Pham 1999; Su 2009; Tran 2010).
7. See, for example, Taylor (2001) and Schwenkel (2009).
8. There is a growing literature which addresses anti-communism among former Vietnamese American refugees. See also Dang (2005), Ông and Meyer (2008), Reed-Danahay (2008), Le (2011) and Valverde (2012).

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‘Like a foreigner in my own homeland’: writing the dilemmas of return in the Vietnamese American diaspora

Reed-Danahay, Deborah

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cosmopolitanism from below and Hannerz's idea of "a willingness to engage with the Other".

The recent emphasis in anthropology on forms of vernacular cosmopolitanism (Werbner 2008b) has demonstrated that cosmopolitanism is not exclusively an elite orientation to the world (see also Hannerz 2007; Schiller, Darieva, and Gruner-Domic 2011;Amitand Rapport 2012). New

author argues that return visits for 1.5 gen evoke memories and post-memories of trauma and dislocation

references stuart's idea of cosmopolitanism from above and below.

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Author's main argument that current scholarship on cosmopolitanism has not paid enough attention to barriers to cosmopolitanism among former political refugees and children.

Current scholarship that seeks to expand understandings of cosmopolitan- ism has paid insufficient attention to the barriers to cosmopolitanism among former political refugees and their children, whose experiences and subjectivities interfere with the formation of what Werbner calls ‘wider cosmopolitan values’ that transcend ‘parochial interpretations of culture, religion and ethnicity’ (2008a,

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diasporas depend on imagined community and are materialized through performance.

I draw here upon Werbner’s suggestion that while diasporas may depend on a sense of imagined community, they are materialised through ‘embodiments of cultural, political and philanthropic sentimental performances’ (2002, 125). The

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2nd generation

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consulting writings of diaspora when studying about diaspora

Robbie Goh's suggestion (2004, 1) that we consult 'literature written by diaspora writers' in our studies of diaspora.

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2nd generation does not necessarily hold these traumas.

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There are influences of a cosmopolitanism ‘from above’ and ‘from below’ on
the lives of the children of Vietnamese refugees. As Hall (2008, 356) suggests, the former is composed of ‘global entrepreneurs following the pathways of global corporate power’, while the latter consists of ‘people driven across borders, obliged to uproot themselves from home, place, and family’. Vietnamese refugees were forced migrants, but their children are making the transition to cosmopoli- tans ‘from above’ as global entrepreneurs (especially in the case of journalist Andrew Lam and corporate executive Trinh Do).

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