

Integration, Vietnamese Australian Writing, and an Unfinished Boat Story

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In memoriam

Boitran Huynh-Beattie (1957-2012)

Nam Le, in the opening story to his collection *The Boat* (2008), has one of the characters say to the story's narrator, a young man at a writing workshop who is suffering writer's block, 'but that's why I don't mind your work, Nam. Because you could just write about Vietnamese boat people all the time. Like in your third story. ... You could *totally* exploit the Vietnamese thing. But *instead*, you choose to write about lesbian vampires and Colombian assassins and Hiroshima orphans—and New York painters with hemorrhoids' (9). Readers familiar with Le's collection of stories will know that the book goes on to cover most of those topics and range in setting from Colombia, Japan and New York to Australia and Iran. In its concluding story, though, the collection fulfils the promise of its title with a powerful account of a family's harrowing journey by boat from Vietnam. Le's short story collection was the winner of at least nine major literary awards, including the Prime Minister's Literary Award for Fiction and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, South East Asia and South Pacific Region, Best First Book in 2009. And while Le's collection is not, as the first story asserts, defined or limited in any way by the ethnicity of its author, the final story of escape by sea does have the effect of situating the book among the many Vietnamese narratives that have gained remarkable exposure and circulation amongst Australian readerships and audiences in recent years. It also draws attention to the manner in which boat narratives remain a 'lingering obsession' in Vietnamese diasporic imagination (Phạm).

Boat stories have a similar hold over the Australian cultural imagination, as Wenche Ommundsen has remarked in her recent essay, 'This Story Does Not Begin on a Boat' (2011). From 'convict ships to those of free settlers, from ten-pound Poms to post-World War Two European migrants to Asian and Middle Eastern asylum seekers,' boat stories, though changing over time in accord with shifting historical and geo-political forces, continue to 'haunt' the nation (507). Ommundsen's essay interrogates both the urge to tell and the resistance against telling boat stories in literary works by Asian Australian authors, with illustration from Nam Le's work, among others. Ommundsen concludes that, although Asian Australian literary output will continue to be influenced by 'the identities, the history, and the politics which have informed the writers' life and contributed to their sense of cultural heritage', Asian Australian writing will also work to 'resist, debate and deconstruct the cultural politics of identity' (512). In this article I would like to add to the critical commentary on boat narratives through a reading of an early and little-known example of a Vietnamese Australian boat story: 'The Whitish-Grey Dove on the Disorientated Boat', a serialised novella which was published in *Integration: The Magazine for Multicultural and Vietnamese Issues* from 1994 to 1998. In bringing attention to this work, I have two objectives: the first is to make the argument that Vietnamese Australian writing has a longer

and more active history than may be commonly recognized or acknowledged and that ‘the boat’ is a significant figure in this body of writing from its beginnings; secondly, I want to use the opportunity afforded by this article to discuss the magazine *Integration* and to argue that its literary content over the decade of its publication constitutes a significant body of Vietnamese Australian writing that, for both literary scholars and other interested readers, is well worth exploring.

Vietnamese Australian narratives have recently achieved a significant profile in Australian literary and cultural spheres. Nam Le’s *The Boat* may come first to mind but it is just one of numerous Vietnamese Australian publications. Anh Do’s 2010 memoir *The Happiest Refugee* won the 2011 Indie Award for non-fiction, as well as three 2011 Australian Book Industry Awards—Australian Newcomer, Australian Biography and Australian Book of the Year. Do’s story has recently been transformed into a stage production, as well as a children’s picture book, *The Little Refugee* (2012), co-authored with his wife Suzanne Do. Also in 2010 a major anthology of writing from Vietnam was published in Western Australia, *The Perfume River* (edited by Catherine Cole), with stories and poems from Vietnamese diasporic authors—several of whom, including Nam Le, are from Australia—as well as authors from within Vietnam, and non-Vietnamese Australian writers with connections to Vietnam. Another 2010 publication was Carina Hoang’s *Boat People: Personal Stories from the Vietnamese Exodus 1975-1996*, which attracted reviews across Australian media and won a Silver Award at the Independent Publisher Book Awards. And yet another 2010 book, *Tales from a Mountain City: A Vietnam War Memoir*, by Quynh Dao, has just this year, in 2012, been shortlisted for the Stanford University’s William Saroyan International Prize for Writing and the University of Melbourne’s Asher Literary Award. These Vietnamese Australian works just cited were preceded by two other important memoirs. In 2007, there was the memoir/family history *Where the Sea Takes Us* by Canberra-based academic Kim Huynh. Also in 2007, Sydney-based restaurateur Pauline Nguyen published her combination memoir-cookbook *Secrets of the Red Lantern*, which received favourable reviews and won the Australian Book Industry Award in 2008 for Australian Newcomer of the Year. As well, there have been films such as Khoa Do’s *Mother Fish* (2009), major visual art exhibitions such as *Nam Bang!* at Casula Powerhouse (2009), curated by Boitran Huynh-Beattie, and oral histories like Nathalie Nguyen’s *Voyage of Hope: Vietnamese Australian Women’s Narratives* (2005), and her second book *Memory Is Another Country: Women of the Vietnamese Diaspora* (2009), which had an American publisher and international distribution.

While not all the work focuses on memory and trauma much of this cultural production does revisit and rework the traumatic experiences of escape from Vietnam, and the ensuing feelings of exile and loss. Nguyen’s oral histories, for example, draw on interviews with Vietnamese women in Australia and it is clear that, for most of the women interviewed, narrating the past means remembering loss, loss often marked by trauma and grief, and including: loss of home and country; loss of family members in the harrowing voyages of escape by boat; loss of daily connection to culture and language as migrants in a new country; and, again as migrants, loss of a former sense of self (*Memory is Another Country* 5).

This abundance of Vietnamese narratives and cultural representation now circulating in Australia, in print, film and visual art, is, Nathalie Nguyen suggests, a new phenomenon. Although Nguyen admits that most Australians would know that the majority of Vietnamese came here as refugees in the 1970s and 1980s, she argues that until recently there has been

scant interest in the deeper reasons for the Vietnamese exodus, and little encouragement for Vietnamese migrants to tell their stories. In patterns typical to migrants from any background, Vietnamese in Australia were for many years busy working long hours to support their families and establish their lives in a new environment, as well as learning a new language, leaving little time to reflect upon the past. ‘Three decades after the end of the war,’ Nguyen writes, ‘the time is now constitutive for Vietnamese refugees and migrants to speak of their experiences and their past, and to create a public space for their stories’ (163).

The memory work for which Nguyen claims the time has now come is, however, more of an ongoing project than her statement above indicates. Nguyen’s work is, without question, an important contribution to the English language circulation of Vietnamese narratives and memories in Australia, and one of many. But what I would like to argue is that Vietnamese Australian writers and artists have been engaging in this work for at least two decades, with the same aim: to help readers understand and come to terms with the trauma experienced by an entire generation. Most of this work has been conducted in Vietnamese, for circulation amongst Vietnamese Australian readers and in some cases reaching the wider Vietnamese diaspora. Since the establishment of the Vietnamese communities in Australia, their newspapers and magazines have carried fiction and poetry by the many writers who migrated here, or by those who have turned to writing since their arrival, in attempts to make sense of what has become of their lives. Newspapers such as *Dân Việt* and *Việt Luận*, or journals including *Tap Hop* and *Việt*, all published creative writing on a regular basis. The newspaper *Việt Luận* has recently published an anthology of the best creative writing to appear in its issues over the years. This is one of many anthologies of Vietnamese writing published in Australia in Vietnamese. The first was produced in 1997 and there have been over thirty anthologies of writing in Vietnamese published in Australia since then.

My access to this substantial body of Australian writing is limited, however, to that produced in English, as I have no Vietnamese language skill and cannot read Vietnamese. However, to continue my argument that Vietnamese cultural production has had a long history in Australia, I have been fortunate in my research to have come upon the periodical *Integration*, subtitled *The Magazine for Multicultural and Vietnamese Issues*, which was published in Bankstown from 1993 to 2003, and which ran to seventeen issues, many of more than 200 pages. The front cover carried the banner ‘Vietnamese Community in Australia’ which is the name of an association founded in 1977 whose purpose was to develop an organisational structure to represent Vietnamese Australians on national issues. In 1983 state-level associations were formed, with the NSW branch representing the interests and concerns of a number of smaller community organisations.ⁱ

The editorial opening the first issue of *Integration* in 1993 explains that the magazine was founded following the 11th National Conference of the Vietnamese Community in Australia, at which delegates recognised the need ‘to be more involved in and contribute to multiculturalism and to actively participate in the community of their new country’. Each issue called for donations to support running costs, with a donation of \$20 being the equivalent of a year’s subscription. Some sponsorship from local businesses is also acknowledged. The magazine’s editor was Dương Xuân who grew up in Vietnam under French occupation. He escaped Vietnam by boat in 1978, arrived in Indonesia and spent seven months in a refugee camp there before being allowed to settle in Australia. Since being in Australia, Dương has worked in public health and community services and has been an advocate for refugee rights and issues. *Integration* certainly provided a forum for publication

of material relating to Vietnamese refugees, who in the 1990s were continuing to leave by boat, with many detained for years in camps in other Asian countries. Also in the 1990s governments in these other Asian countries began implementing forced repatriation of many Vietnamese held in these camps, and *Integration* through these years published numerous articles in protest. It also began publishing letters, translated into English, from detainees held in these camps, in an attempt to make their plight more widely known.

Integration was a bilingual magazine; its first issues focused entirely on social and health matters relating to the Vietnamese community—there were articles in English on the academic and educational achievements in the Vietnamese community, a report on cervical cancer prevention amongst Vietnamese, an article on relationships between Vietnamese parents and their adolescent children, a column on racism in schools—but with its third issue it began to publish creative writing, with poetry in both English and Vietnamese. And over the next fourteen issues this creative component of the magazine increased in size—in some issues taking up nearly a third of the magazine—and included short stories, plays, and autobiographical narratives, as well as book reviews and critical articles—all of which appeared in English. For a literary researcher like myself *Integration* has proven to be a treasure trove of material, as well as a significant means of understanding how writing—creative writing in all its forms—is used in this particular context to disseminate Vietnamese Australian experiences and culture.

Through its literary pages, *Integration* featured the work of writers well known to Vietnamese readers, if not to the magazine's English-reading subscribers. Phùng Nhân, for example, is the author of five novels, four collections of short stories, an autobiography and numerous essays, stories and poems published in newspapers and magazines both in Australian and overseas. Almost the entirety of his published work is in Vietnamese only, but *Integration* carried one of his short stories translated into English and titled 'Mr Nam Phan Complains with Telecom'. It is a humorous story of a Vietnamese family wondering why their telephone bill is so outrageously expensive, only to find that someone in their family has been using their phone to dial for adult services. Another well-known writer is Lê Hằng who, by the 1975 defeat of South Vietnam, had published twelve novels in Vietnam and had established a reputation as being among the first Vietnamese women writers to challenge traditional Vietnamese views on marriage and women's sexuality. She arrived in Australia in 1989 and began writing again, publishing her work in Vietnamese in the United States, although much of her new writing was now set in Australia. For example, her 1998 novel *Bên Kia Là Núi*, published in San Francisco, is set in Sydney's western suburbs, and in the Australian outback. I only know of two of her short stories that have been translated into English and one of these, 'Murmur to Rocks', was published in *Integration*, demonstrating that the magazine was attempting to bring some of the best of the Vietnamese community's writers to the attention of English-language readers.

The magazine also published work by emerging Vietnamese Australian writers, and not only in translation, but also works written in English. For example, the play *Conversations with Charlie*, by Ta Binh Duy, which was produced at Sydney's Belvoir Street Theatre in 1996, and later published (in 2000) in a special edition of the *Journal of Australian Studies* edited by Jacquie Lo, Helen Gilbert and Tseen Khoo, was actually first published in *Integration* in 1996, the same year it was staged. Ta Binh Duy has continued his involvement in theatre production and, while *Integration* continued to be published, the magazine covered his work. Another emerging writer whose work was featured in *Integration* is Trần Châu. In the fourth

issue of the magazine, published in April 1994, the editor Dương Xuân wrote a lengthy review of Trần Châu's novel *Đời Nghiệt Nga*, which translates into English as 'Cruel Life'. The novel is set in mid-to-late 1970s Vietnam during the years after the fall of the South Vietnamese government. The story focuses on the experiences of a group of students from a previously privileged school who after university would have become members of the South Vietnamese elite but who now, under the communist regime, are without privilege or prospects, with many forced into homelessness and prostitution.

My summary here depends upon the review in *Integration*, as the novel has not been translated. I am aware through the AustLit records that, as well as this novel, Trần Châu is the author of a collection of short stories published in Cabramatta in the mid-1980s and a prose piece that appeared in a Vietnamese anthology from Brisbane in 2005. His novel is held at libraries in both NSW and Victoria. The review in *Integration* quotes a number of other Vietnamese writers who comment on the blunt and direct style of the writing. One of these writers, Phùng Nhân, cited above, writes that he was: 'emotionally influenced upon reading Trần Châu', and that his writing 'just let out truthfully what he had witnessed' (57). The emotive nature of the writing is highlighted again later in the review which says: 'Trần Châu could not restrain himself from letting his readers feel that he absorbed the pains of his characters in the story. This is understandable given his probable own adverse feelings growing up in such dramatic change' (57). Many Vietnamese readers here in Australia would, of course, have experienced similar circumstances in their home country and Trần Châu's novel would speak directly to their memories of adversity and pain.

Yet for English-language readers, access remains second-hand, and only possible at all through this review. In later issues of *Integration*, however, several of Trần Châu's short stories and prose pieces are published in English. 'Escape with Husband on Back' is an account of an escape from Vietnam by boat, with the husband a paraplegic war veteran being carried onto the boat on his wife's back. Twice their vessel was attacked by pirates but the couple eventually made it to a refugee camp, where the husband became ill and died. 'Lonely by the Hill' is narrated by a man now living in Australia who recalls a doomed love affair more than a decade before in Vietnam. Both stories demonstrate the frustrations and oppression experienced by their characters in post-1975 Vietnam and communicate—in their English-language versions to readers who were not there—the forces which compelled so many Vietnamese to leave as refugees. I agree with the writers cited in the review of the novel that Trần Châu writes simply and directly, but his writing in these stories, especially 'Lonely by the Hill' is also evocative and beautiful. There is, for example, a long description of the young woman sewing a hat made from leaves gathered from the forest which is referred to several times as 'a hat with a poem' (96). The image remains somewhat mysterious for this reader, but I suspect that the cultural reference would resonate for Vietnamese readers now living as migrants far from their country of birth, as it clearly does for the narrator of the story who tells his listener:

The story about our country is a long one. It never ends. We are the first generation in exile, we have a responsibility to remember and retell them to our youngsters. You must tell them every day to equip them, and do not let them forget about our country. We must also teach them the Vietnamese language, make them proud of it. (102)

The editor of *Integration* Dương Xuân frequently contributed poetry to the magazine. From the third issue onward, each publication of *Integration* carried a number of his poems, in

Vietnamese in the earlier issues, then in bilingual format, and later in English only. In an interview published in *Overland* in 2002, Duong explained that he did not come from a literary background (Leves). Although he read widely, he had no literary training, nor a particular love of writing. Instead, he says: ‘I came to literature with the intention to use it for a social purpose’ (16). He tells the interviewer that his first poems were written in response to reading of the brutal conditions faced by refugees. When he began to write poems in English he was unsure of the quality and he recounts taking a poem to a colleague: ‘An Anglo-European, a child psychologist. She was eating her lunch and I said, “Do you mind having a look at this for me?” She put down the piece of fruit she was eating and after she read the poem tears were coming out of her eyes and I said to myself “Not bad”’ (16). Duong’s poems, while aiming to impact readers emotionally, also attempt to provide context and understanding. ‘Fire at High Islands’, which appeared in both English and Vietnamese, was written in response to news of a fire in the High Island refugee camp in Hong Kong in 1995.

Like that of the short stories of Trần Châu, the language of Duong’s poem is simple and direct. Its objective is to bring a current news story to the attention of readers in an alternative form to that of the media—the newspaper or television reports they would likely have already seen—and to place it in a wider context, reminding readers of the harrowing journey by boat of the refugees—experiences which many of *Integration*’s readers would know first-hand—and pointing out, in its last line, the almost certain threat now facing refugees in Hong Kong of forced repatriation to Vietnam. The poem ‘Teaching Career’ is quite different. It relates the experiences of Vietnamese long settled in Australia, who despite the education and status they once enjoyed in Vietnam now work in factories and supermarkets and orchards and struggle to maintain their dignity. This poem, which appears only in English, effectively conveys some of the sense of loss experienced by many migrants, not only Vietnamese but from other non-English speaking backgrounds as well.

Essays and autobiographical writing were also part of the spectrum of literature appearing in *Integration*. ‘Down the Yellow Brick Road’ is an essay by a young Vietnamese Australian woman, Viet Duong, who was born in Sydney in the late 1970s and who writes of achieving a sense of belonging, of overcoming the ambivalence towards her Vietnamese heritage which she felt as a young child, and embracing Vietnamese culture and language as a young adult. After a year of studying Vietnamese at TAFE she recounts being hired by SBS Radio to voice an advertisement and she writes that they specifically wanted someone whose Vietnamese accent was hopeless in order to target western Sydney’s Vietnamese Australian youth, a condition she apparently fulfilled impressively. She goes on to write that she credits SBS Radio and the magazine *Integration* with ‘helping me fall in love with my Vietnamese heritage’ (145).

Her connection with *Integration* was that she volunteered to attend a performance of Vietnamese poetry chanting held at the NSW State Library on Australia Day 1996 and write a report for the magazine. She took with her a mini-tape recorder and interviewed audience members afterwards who spoke of the impact hearing the poetry performed had on them, with one saying that Vietnamese poetry should have a more important place in Australia (146). The writer of the article also says that experiencing Vietnamese poetry in this way encouraged her to continue to study the language, to look more acceptingly at elderly Vietnamese in Sydney’s western suburbs dressed in garments that look like pyjamas (but are actually called *ba ba* in Vietnamese), and to imagine herself an elderly woman one day, riding the bus, talking loudly in Vietnamese and tsk-*tsk*-ing about the behaviour of someone’s daughter (146).

Over the ten years of its publication, *Integration* also carried two serialised novellas, and a discussion of one of these, ‘The Whitish-Grey Dove on the Disorientated Boat’, will serve as a final illustration of the significance of the magazine as a site of literary and cultural work that remains relevant today. Appearing in eight instalments between 1994 and 1998, and written by Huong Kieu—about whom the magazine provides no biographical details—the novella narrates the escape from Vietnam by boat of Linh Chi, a young widow who had been imprisoned in Vietnam after a previously unsuccessful escape attempt. Her father had died in a re-education camp and her two brothers, we learn, had drowned in another attempt to escape by boat. The first episode recounts Linh Chi’s 3 am departure from Saigon, the anguish of her goodbye to her mother, and her being dragged aboard the Baby Boat with a handkerchief stuffed into her throat to silence her crying. This Baby Boat, however, fails to meet with the Mother Boat and Linh Chi needs to hide and try again the next night, and the next, and the next. On one of these subsequent nights, Linh Chi witnesses a mother forced to drown her nine-month-old baby to silence its crying, and still the Mother Boat does not come. Finally on the sixth night, the Mother Boat arrives and nearly 90 people crowd on board to begin their escape. The Whitish-Grey Dove of the title, we learn in this first instalment, is the bird which brought ‘Good News to the Boat People in this story’ as it came to their boat and escorted them for the final three days of their journey and was with them on their arrival in Indonesia, ‘their first Land of Freedom’ (*Integration* 6, 1994: 90).

The biblical allusions may from the outset suggest the author’s Christian orientation. They are, in fact, common features of Vietnamese refugee cultural production. A white dove was a frequent element in artwork, posters and magazines produced by refugees held in detention camps in Southeast Asia in the 1980s and 1990s; and the identification of Vietnam as hell, refugee camps as purgatory and Australia or another country of resettlement as the promised land is so common amongst post-1975 Vietnamese writing as to be referred to as ‘the official diasporic narrative’ by some scholars.ⁱⁱ It is interesting in ‘The Whitish-Grey Dove on the Disorientated Boat’ that purgatory is omitted from this trajectory, with Indonesia, and by implication the refugee camp awaiting the boat’s passengers, identified as ‘their first Land of Freedom’. It is also interesting that, as subsequent episodes were published and the narrative developed, its representations of ideologies and perspectives became increasingly complex.

Many features of the narrative will be familiar to readers of Nam Le’s ‘The Boat’, or of the many other Vietnamese narratives referenced earlier in this article. The earlier episodes establish the appalling conditions faced by Linh Chi and the others aboard their boat: the overcrowding and seasickness, the lack of food and especially water, the engine breaking down and the boat drifting, helplessly ‘disorientated’, the dread of being attacked by pirates and the terror of ocean storms. All of these are dealt with in detail and we learn, for example, that the shortage of food and water is due in part to the boat owner not trusting anyone but family with the delivery of supplies to the boat, but this then being disrupted by the confusion of the delayed departure, with the result that less than a third of the food and water required were loaded. There are details of the hierarchy of crew and passengers, and of the payments made to secure a place, with passengers discovering that not all had paid equally. With the engine broken down and the boat drifting for day after day, the narrative through the ensuing episodes shifts back and forth between life onboard the Disorientated Boat and the circumstances that led the passengers to risk their lives with this voyage.

The episodic narrative allows for shifts in perspective between characters, as well as multiple time frames and settings. As the story moves back and forth through the lives of Linh Chi's family, it includes aspects of her parents' circumstances in Hue in the 1950s, as well as accounts of life in Saigon post-1975. One of the episodes incorporates the story of a neighbour in Saigon, which has now been renamed Ho Chi Minh City, whose family had repositioned themselves as proletariat after 1975 and had seemingly escaped the worst of the oppression meted out to other middle-class South Vietnamese. The sixth instalment returns the story to the riverbank of episode one, where Linh Chi's goodbye to her mother was stifled by a handkerchief forced into her mouth. In this episode, readers remain on the riverbank with Linh Chi's mother who watches the Baby Boat carrying her daughter and setting out to attempt its rendezvous with the Mother Boat. The first half of this episode is narrated entirely from the mother's perspective, and we read of her isolation in Ho Chi Minh City, her resentment towards her brother-in-law, who somehow avoided the re-education camps where her husband had died and was now a high-ranking cadre in the new government, and her opinions of her neighbours.

Readers who have been attentive through the previous episodes will realise that some of these neighbours commented on now by Linh Chi's mother have been mentioned in previous episodes as passengers on the Disorientated Boat. The second half of the episode shifts to the perspective of a daughter—Linh Chi's younger sister—who remains at home, and then to the youngest son, An Khang, who is resentful that he is never told the truth of what happens in his family, and has difficulty reconciling his family's circumstances to his lessons at school where he is taught: 'Our country is abundant and wealthy, our people are heroic' (*Integration* 11, 1996: 175). The inclusion of this young boy's perspective—providing a point of view quite different from his mother's and his siblings'—is, again, an indication of the text's complexity, with the acknowledgement that, for many of the children growing up in post-1975 Vietnam, the exodus, even the decisions of close family members to leave, will be difficult to understand.

The novella, then, is interesting for its multiple perspectives and for the array of social and historical detail it conveys. It is also an odd text though, for a number of reasons. The first of these anomalies relates to the often unusual turns of phrase which mark the text as one produced in negotiation between cultures and languages. Many of the writers who contributed to *Integration*, as the previous examples have shown, write predominantly, or exclusively, in Vietnamese. 'The Whitish-Grey Dove on the Disorientated Boat' is in English, and its author, Huong Kieu, also had a number of poems, again in English, published in *Integration*, but these and the novella seem to be his only literary works. The English usage in the novella, as the title suggests, is inflected at times by a literalness of translation, or at other times by grammatical inaccuracies, and the resulting prose can itself be disorientating. However, it also works to remind its readers of the migrant writer's struggle for expression in the language of the majority culture. Earlier episodes contain many oddly phrased passages. We read, for example, that on the third day of the voyage, the boat had nearly reached International Waters and the passengers began to see ships on the horizon, which could mean their rescue:

The distance between the escape boat and these ships was getting closer and closer. Everyone transported with delight, was beside oneself with joy. But a sudden storm-wind abruptly rised, forming a barrier between the boat and these ships followed by huge waves. How disappointed those boat people were! No

one could imagine. Could not afford to play with violent storm and huge waves, the boat had no choice but changed its direction. (*Integration 7*, 1995: 87)

In the same episode, in a description of a young man, Tung, who was in charge of the boat, and his reaction to passengers who were pleading with him for their twice-daily water rations, we read:

He did his best for his boatmates. With the assistance of Viet or Phu—depending on who was free—Hieu and Linh Chi, he distilled water as much as possible to give out. Being one of the escape’s organisers and a responsible person in this boat, he felt sorry for what had happened yet his hand tied up. He was here to be blamed, the others were still at home to get away with the murder! (90)

The irregularities are slight, yet they build, and for native-English readers they create a somewhat uneasy reading experience. With the ongoing publication of the novella, however, over a period of more than four years, these non-native-speaker phrasings seem less frequent. In fact, by the later episodes, the writer is attempting to incorporate Australian slang into his characters’ dialogue. At one point Linh Chi says she wants to jump overboard to attempt to swim to one of the distant vessels they see, and Tung impresses on her the danger of such action.

‘You must not risk your life for Heaven’s sake Linh Chi, get rid of that idea from your mind. Otherwise I would have to bind your legs together so you cannot do that. Can I have your promise?’ Linh Chi stood still, cast down, as dumb as a statue. Silence implicated her docility. Seemingly not convinced, he repeated: ‘Can I have your promise? Fair dinkum?’ (*Integration 13*, 1997: 125)

Obviously ‘Fair dinkum’ is a choice of translation, but its incorporation here in a conversation aboard a drifting boat crammed with Vietnamese refugees adds an Australian inflection that is unsettling.

The second way in which ‘The Whitish-Grey Dove on the Disorientated Boat’ is an unusual boat narrative is in its inclusion of an onboard romance between Linh Chi and Tung. Readers learn, as the episodes progress, of the fair-mindedness of these two young people as each is involved in managing the conflicts that flair up between other passengers, regarding rations of food and water, or resulting from petty jealousies, or the anxiety and fear of storms and the constant need to bail their leaking boat. Each episode includes a lengthy conversation between the young couple, in which details of each of their pasts are revealed, and their mutual attraction grows. This focus on the love interest between Linh Chi and Tung seems quite at odds with the horrors experienced by the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese who risked, or lost, their lives in their escapes by boat. Perhaps, though, this aspect of the narrative is a result of the serialised format. Serialised novels were a feature of the Vietnamese press, and the love interest in ‘The Whitish-Grey Dove’ may reflect the expectations of the format, and should be understood as a device aimed at maintaining readers’ engagement over an extended period of time.ⁱⁱⁱ In this regard it is interesting that an earlier boat story from a completely different context, Herz Bergner’s *Between Sky and Sea* (1946; 2010; published in Yiddish as *Zwishn Himl un Waser* in 1947), which narrates the journey of Jewish refugees on

a freighter bound for Australia, likewise draws upon the device of onboard romance, and perhaps it is relevant that an early version of this narrative also appeared in serialised format.

The lengthy period of the serialisation is directly related to the third peculiarity of this boat story: the fact that the narrative remained unfinished. Over the first two years of its publication, ‘The Whitish-Grey Dove on the Disorientated Boat’ appears three times a year, as *Integration* maintained a regular four-monthly production schedule. Through this period, from 1994 to 1996, the complex plot and multiple perspectives found within the narrative were supported and sustained by this regular appearance. Beginning in 1997, however, the magazine shifted to an annual publication. Perhaps this impacted upon the writing of the novella, or upon its author’s, or its readers’, commitment to the story. For whatever reason, the Disorientated Boat never reaches the ‘Land of Freedom’ that had been signalled in its opening episode. It simply vanishes. And although the magazine went on to publish three more issues over the next four years before it too ceased in 2002, no explanation is offered to readers as to the fate of Linh Chi, Tung, or any of the others aboard the Disorientated Boat. The fact that this was exactly what happened to many thousands of Vietnamese who fled Vietnam by boat makes the novella’s sudden disappearance from the magazine’s pages even more disturbing.

What is the significance, then, of ‘The Whitish-Grey Dove on the Disorientated Boat’, either within *Integration* or in the context of the substantial body of boat narratives that have been written by Vietnamese Australians? Certainly the novella was an important contribution to the magazine over the four years and across the eight issues in which it appeared. The story of the Disorientated Boat recounted experiences common to many Vietnamese who were then living and raising families in western Sydney. For these Vietnamese Australian readers, each instalment would have touched on personal memories—of life in Vietnam during and after the war, and of the reasons for choosing to escape—that for many have remained inflected by grief.

As well, though, each episode incorporated some degree of humour and an acknowledgement of the joy to be experienced through language, as the passengers of the Disorientated Boat sing Vietnamese songs, share gossip and stories, and trade snappy, punning insults. Any one of these episodes may have provided occasion for its Vietnamese readers to talk about experiences that otherwise were difficult or impossible to express, because of the trauma involved. Although in one sense, these boat narratives are stories of escape to freedom, the horror, grief and shame experienced by many, through the rape and murder of loved ones, mean that in some families these stories remain unvoiced, too painful to be told.^{iv} In ‘The Whitish-Grey Dove on the Disorientated Boat’ the emphasis is on the journey to freedom—the boat is not attacked by pirates and the plot is lightened by romance and occasional humour; therefore, this novella may have provided a less dangerous, less threatening vehicle to facilitate a sharing of memories.

For those Australian readers at the time of publication who may have been unfamiliar with Vietnam and its history, or the circumstances faced by its citizens post-1975, the novella offered insight into those ‘deeper reasons for the Vietnamese exodus’ that Nathalie Nguyen suggests had been missing from the nation’s understanding of its Vietnamese community. The occasional non-standard English or the unusual phrasings that appear in the narrative are an indication of its aim to reach out to the majority culture and tell a Vietnamese story, a boat story, that might further cross-cultural understanding. *Integration*’s circulation was

undoubtedly limited and the story of the Disorientated Boat would not have reached a wide audience; yet it would have been available in western Sydney suburbs and likely distributed to government agencies, offices and departments with responsibilities for services to the Vietnamese community. This novella appearing in *Integration* may have helped some few dozen, perhaps as many as a hundred, non-Vietnamese Australians better understand their neighbours, their employees, or their clients.

What the novella represents now is an opportunity to acknowledge that literary production in Australia happens in forms, in communities, and in publications that have gone unnoticed by both mainstream readerships and scholarly communities. This boat story happens to be in English. What is needed is further scholarly work which traces and analyses similar narratives that have been written in Vietnamese in Australia, for these too are Australian boat stories, and a part of the nation's literary history that deserves to be better known.

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ⁱ For background to the Vietnamese Community in Australia see their website at <http://www.vietnamese.org.au/>.

ⁱⁱ For reproductions of Vietnamese refugee artworks featuring a white dove of peace or hope, see Tsang; for reference to 'the official diasporic narrative' tracing a trajectory from hell, through purgatory, to new life in a promised land, see Carruthers and Huynh-Beattie, 150.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Jacquency for references to serialised novels in Vietnam; also Peycam.

^{iv} Nathalie Nguyen (2005) remarks on the silence that often surrounds such experiences within Vietnamese Australian households. See also Carruthers and Huynh-Beattie.