‘Bridging Disparate Realms’

An exegesis

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## Contents – Volume Two

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Declaration</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1. Thesis: A Visual Summary</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Heart of the Quest</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Appraising the Chasm</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Selecting, Adapting and Creating Tools and Materials</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Intimate Connections and Parallel Constructions</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion: Possibilities Through Creativity</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Abstract

The thesis comprises a novel and an exegesis. The novel, ‘Embers of Time’, is inspired by a Vietnamese fable. Beginning in 1830, the story follows two young men, Lưu and Nguyễn, who embark on a hunting trip from their village in Vietnam’s northern highlands. Lost overnight in the forest, they meet a group of young women in the morning and spend a day in an otherworldly Realm. Returning at nightfall, the friends discover they have been away for a hundred years, during which the French have invaded and occupied their homeland. Gone are their family and friends, their language and culture, their work and future expectations, while the many French-introduced changes are as alienating to the young men as the French themselves. Reduced to outsiders in their own country, Lưu and Nguyễn are forced to defend their family names and history. For the friends, returning home is just the beginning of a new journey in a foreign land.

The exegesis, ‘Bridging Disparate Realms’, is a cross-cultural exploration of comparable ways of living and modes of expression, such as those represented under the broad banner of Magical Realism. The thesis explores the personal, historical, cultural and literary background that informed my creative process and investigates disparities between English and Vietnamese literary traditions. The latter are grounded in an ancient culture built over four thousand years with distinct linguistic features and cultural and religious practices shaped by specific historical and political conditions. These are often culturally untranslatable, as recognised by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, among other critics and writers. Adapting Magical Realism narrative devices and creating new tools have been conducive to my attempt at bridging intrinsically different traditions and conventions in writing the novel. The particular influence of Gabriel García Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude is examined in relation to the development of my creative work, while Salman Rushdie’s The Satanic Verses, Ben Okri’s The Famished Road, Alexis Wright’s Carpentaria, David Malouf’s An Imaginary Life and Chi Vu’s novella Anguli Ma: A Gothic Tale serve as additional illuminating examples of the power of literature to connect cultures and peoples, helping to locate ‘Embers of Time’ within a broader literary framework.
Figure 1. Thesis: A Visual Summary
Introduction

How does one represent a culture in another language with different literary traditions and conventions? This research question grew from the heart of my project, the creation of the novel, ‘Embers of Time’, as represented in the Thesis: A Visual Summary in Figure 1 overleaf. The novel contains distinctively Vietnamese linguistic, literary, cultural, historical and political features and practices that are intrinsically different from other countries, particularly English-speaking nations. Crafting ‘Embers of Time’ as a novel in English consequently involved the dual process of creating suitable devices to enable the creation of an artifact that would bridge the gap between English and Vietnamese languages and cultures.

The concentric circles in my Visual Summary reflect the approach of the exegesis, ‘Bridging Disparate Realms’: the core of the work (gold circle) encompasses critical aspects of Vietnamese literary and cultural traditions that informed the writing of the novel. These traditions, in turn, were shaped by Vietnam’s ancient history, supported by Buddhism for over two thousand years, sustained by a specific ‘brand’ of locally defined feminism, moulded by social and familial practices and affected by internal and external political forces. These crucial elements in the Vietnamese way of living feed every aspect of my creative work, while also limiting it and presenting challenges as to how they can be authentically conveyed to non-Vietnamese readers. This calls for the precise and delicate work of creative bridging, drawing upon the collective efforts of academics and writers who have shed light on complex processes of cultural-through-literary translation.

Spanning over a hundred years, ‘Embers of Time’ begins in the nineteenth century prior to the French colonisation of Vietnam, following which traditional scripts were abolished and a Romanised national language was installed, severing the country from its ancient culture built over four thousand years. Research into the French colonial time in Vietnam has been crucial in the reimagining of Vietnamese lives and survival strategies during this momentous, yet relatively obscure, time in Vietnam’s history. That knowledge was examined against my personal experience of post-Vietnam War years in Vietnam, in relation to literary influences that have informed my critical and literary processes. Along with background and development of the novel, narrative devices adapted from Magical Realism and newly crafted tools have
been instrumental in creating ‘Embers of Time’. These integrated mechanisms form the support structure (green circle) of my core work.

The outermost circle (in blue) represents the five broad areas that frame and contextualise my project. Each area is an immense domain in its own right, thus only pertinent aspects directly connected to the project can be included in the exegesis. The concentric relationship between the topics can be seen as forming a complete sphere, where each ‘ring’ is in continual, dynamic interaction with others. The thesis aims to bridge elements of different cultures, times and practices in a meaningful, coherent and persuasive project through literary connections and endeavours. Literature, in its diversity, is a means of communication between different regions and is particularly important for regions less visible on the global scene (such as South East Asia as a region, and Vietnam as an individual country).

The exegesis, ‘Bridging Disparate Realms’, is presented in four chapters. Drawing upon my lived experience in both Vietnam and Australia, chapter one explores the personal, historical, cultural and literary background that informed my creative process.

Chapter two identifies disparities between English and Vietnamese literary traditions; the latter are grounded in an ancient culture influenced by Buddhism, sustained by a strong oral tradition and reinvented through reincarnations of the Vietnamese language from its Chinese-adapted script to the current Romanised form. Inherent in the process of ‘translating’ cultures are many untranslatable qualities, such as those recognised by Gayatri Spivak and Lawrence Venuti, among other writers and scholars. As a writer-as-translator, I was constantly challenged to find ways to negotiate these problems.

Chapter three investigates specific requirements and constraints (linguistic, historical and cultural) that have bound me as a writer. I discuss how I have adapted narrative devices from Magical Realism and created new tools in an attempt to bridge intrinsically different traditions and conventions.

Chapter four examines the particular influence of Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* on the development of my creative work. Cultural ‘links’ between Columbian and Vietnamese ways of living, particularly under oppressive regimes and traumatic circumstances, are explored through comparable approaches to survival as viewed through the
lens of Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialism. The final chapter briefly acknowledges links, under
the broad banner of Magical Realism, with Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, Ben Okri’s
*The Famished Road*, Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*, David Malouf’s *An Imaginary Life* and Chi
Vu’s novella *Anguli Ma: A Gothic Tale*. These works serve as illuminating examples of the
power of literature to connect cultures and peoples, and help locate ‘Embers of Time’ within a
broader literary framework.
Chapter 1: Heart of the Quest

How one arrives at a new place is predetermined by actions, events and decisions made, not only by oneself, but also by others known and unknown to the traveller. Aside from human factors, natural occurrences such as inclement weather, traffic congestion or mechanical breakdown, to name just a few potential complications, could have a significant impact on how or when the arrival takes place, or, in extreme conditions, whether an arrival is made at all. What if the trip was not planned? What if the destination is not at all what it was anticipated? What if getting there is all that matters?

‘Embers of Time’ raises all these questions, and more, about journeys. Begun in 2004 as a short story, written in Vietnamese, anticipating Vietnamese readers, it grew into a novella, took a detour for almost ten years and was reincarnated as a novel in English, written for the creative component of my PhD. The germ of the story, though, began over forty years ago in our hometown in Nha Trang in southern Vietnam, when I lay in my mother’s lap listening to her singing in the dim light of the kerosene lamp. The song painted pictures of angelic maidens with ethereal voices that enchanted two young men who had strayed into a magical realm and sailed through a glorious country. Complicated words hid the rest of the story from me and the music turned sad at the end. I asked about the song and learned that it was called ‘Thiên Thái’ (‘Heavenly Realm’). My mother told me about the fable of Lư and Nguyễn, who were lost for a day in a fairy realm and returned home to find they had been away for a hundred years. The sadness towards the end of the song told of their losses. Seeing me concerned and sad, my mother sang another song, a lively, happy piece, ‘Tiếng Sáo Thiên Thái’ (‘Flute Melodies in the Heavenly Realm’), about the young men’s wondrous time in the Realm. But the seed of disquiet had been sown in my mind. Among countless fables and legends I was brought up on, this story stood apart.

Until my early teen years, my preoccupation with the story centred on the time the young men were in the magic realm. Although I devoured many books that took me to other worlds, every time I returned to the fable of Lưu and Nguyễn, I was haunted by a growing number of questions surrounding their circumstances. My story grew as I attempted to answer these questions. I explored people, places, curious incidents in the fabric of everyday life. I instinctively stored profiles, postures, fragments of conversations; I noted unearthly scenery,
changes in light at various times of the day; shapes of things, textures of clothing, sensations aroused by sights, sounds, tastes and smells that fitted what I had imagined when I was gripped by that enchanting and equally troubling tale.

My version of the story grew over the years, but stayed locked in my mind. After years of reading (in translation) so many books by celebrated authors (Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Pasternak, Cervantes, Hesse, Kafka, Dickens, Bronte, Kipling, Austen, Hemmingway, Hugo, Gide, Saint-Exupéry, Tagore and Twain, among others) I felt like a child wanting to sing but unable to find my voice. I had begun creating stories when I was around seven but I had kept them all to myself. My stories were so different from Vietnamese and translated literature I had read.

In 1982, Gabriel García Márquez won the Nobel Prize for Literature. In the following year, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) was translated into Vietnamese for the first time, triggering a wave of Latin American books translated into Vietnamese. It was a strange, yet intimate kind of experience reading *One Hundred Years of Solitude*; although telling stories of people in a different time and place, Márquez magically managed to connect with a way of living that I was familiar with. He gave voice to the Macondo people, who, despite the absurdity of their living conditions, continued to survive, love, quarrel, learn, teach, share and progress through every day, no matter how accidental or contingent their circumstances. The works of Márquez, Borges and other Latin American writers freed me from the binds of realism, and encouraged me to write about the many absurd things that were taking place in our lives. Reading Márquez’s novel opened a new world of possibilities for me. In the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam War, our lives were ‘stranger than fiction’.

Consider just one aspect of our lives in Vietnam in the 1980s: crime. Among the first acts implemented by the newly formed communist government was the confiscation and destruction of foreign and local books considered to bear the hallmark of free thinking. Scholars, writers and intellectuals were sent to ‘re-education’ camps. We had to hide our precious books, risking detention and punishment by the cultural police. Most families across the nation were hungry; our family lived on books when there was no food.

With no infrastructure or any economic plan, the once guerrilla-fighter leaders had ordered every state to be self-sufficient, exacerbating the already crippled economy resulting
from the void left by the missing men who had died, become incapacitated in the Vietnam War, been sent to prisons or land-clearing camps, or escaped overseas. Thousands of tons of rice lay rotting at the deltas and people were starving along the length of the country, while coal, salt, oil, metals, textiles and other products continued to be produced. It was left to the women to carry out ‘illegal’ exchanges of local products for food in amounts that could be carried in their bags. My mother and millions of other women participated in this ‘crime’, spending nights in train stations attempting to smuggle food across the states’ borders to make a living. The women were beaten, detained and dispossessed if their stashes were found. From time to time, women threw themselves into the train’s path, when it was too much to take.

It was a crime to visit your family without a permit. My oldest brother, Tuấn was forced out of university because my parents had been employed by the ex-government. Tuấn’s name was struck from the family’s residential roll when he missed his boat for a planned sea-escape. He risked arrest, beating and interrogation every time he visited us at home, often late at night, moving in the shadows. He would sleep on the roof or hide among his siblings to evade arrest. Those nights were as precious as they were frightful: any sound from the street, any random dog barking could mean the arrival of the local police. Our mother did not sleep for most of those nights; the joy of having her son back under the same roof was punctured by any night noises in our crowded residential area.

Vietnam became a country of slogans. ‘We are proud of our clean, tidy environment’ declared posters above mounds of rubbish. ‘Welcome to our cultural quarter’ more signs declared at entrances to sites where children were selling cigarette and lollies packages, competing for attention among beggars and scantily dressed young women loitering around corners. Even the simplest communication, such as a parental note to notify the school of a child’s absence, had to be preceded with the full declaration: Cộng Hoà Xã Hội Chủ Nghĩa Việt Nam: Độc Lập, Tự Do, Hạnh Phúc (The Socialist Republic of Vietnam: Independent, Freedom, Happiness). Words were taken away from us or abused until they meant nothing. Any kind of realism or ‘telling it like it was’ was aborted from our creative system before it was fully formed.

Reading Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude showed me a kind of ‘magic mirror’ that allowed me to see strangeness in another place and helped me to reflect on what was happening in Vietnam. In Márquez’s fictional town of Macondo, myths, fables and memories –
old, new and questionable – were retold and shared by people in ways that were integral to their lives. Exposure to such narrative interweavings freed me from the realist imperative I had absorbed through the masters I had read. If our lives in Vietnam at that time made no sense even to ourselves, what hope did we have, as a people, to make realist stories? Reading Márquez and other Latin American writers in my teen years opened a ‘new’ door for me. I felt empowered by writing that connected with Vietnamese modes of expression: speaking in metaphors, using images when words were inadequate, letting fables and myths convey how struggling people find their way in a tumultuous world.

During my school years in Vietnam, I won a consolation prize in a national literature competition in 1985, along with feedback that it was a ‘pity that [my work] did not include any reference to the Party’s or our Leader’s creative works’. I quit specialist Literature studies and focussed on Mathematics and Physics soon after. The first reason was simple: it was not easy, but easier, to achieve perfect marks for Mathematics and Physics than for Literature. I had conquered all the complex grammar and intricate Vietnamese language structures, and been drilled with military-style rigour at the Specialist Literature School for two years in preparation for the abovementioned competition. Yet even with painstaking effort and no corrections required, any piece of Vietnamese Literature was subjected to too many variables: how many and which quote(s) had I chosen from Our Leaders or the Party’s ‘literature’ to include in my work? Had I met the marker’s preference for favourite pieces? Knowing how far their ideals were from reality, I could not include any. As a teen, it was simpler for me to switch direction. But the reasons ran deeper than just scores and grades: for me, literature is sacred. I believe that literature, like all forms of creative art, is the essence of humanity. Although it may never be ‘perfect’, it always remains the best the creators have been able to glean from their hearts and minds, often paid for with their pains: emotional, psychological and even physical, sometimes with their lives. Under cruel regimes, the persecution of artists has marred many countries’ history; this is still ongoing in Vietnam.

Mathematics and Sciences were, and still are, my ‘other’ loves. The simplicity, elegance and absolute precision of Mathematics have always held my attention. Physics, the ‘practical twin’ to ‘pure thinking’ Mathematics, provides an extra dimension, helping me ‘see’ how our physical world operates and verify my understanding through experiments. Together, they provide the solid, reliable structure of logic, precision and stability that I can always count on, offering a cerebral, rational, dependable kind of love that has enabled me to thrive, particularly
when doubt, sorrow and disillusionment have taken hold of me since my teen years. My love for and commitment to them has enabled me to build a professional career in Australia.

In 1988, my mother and four children, including myself, immigrated to Australia under a family reunion scheme to join my father and our two oldest brothers, Tuấn and Diệp, leaving behind the third oldest sister, Trâm, who was not allowed to join the family for being over eighteen at the time. I completed my first Honours degree in Physics and Astronomy, got married, became a Physics and Specialist Mathematics teacher and a mother. Still, from time to time, I took out the secret pieces of my writing and sculpted them with my imagination and accumulated experience.

In 2004, almost two decades after I had first read Márquez, I returned to writing in a difficult period in my life and found my voice. Within two years, I wrote over thirty short stories and my collection, Người đi tìm bóng tôi (The Seeker of Darkness), was published by the Writers Guild Press in Vietnam in 2006. My stories were fortunately deemed ‘pure literature’ without any political references (or evidence of dissent) and were approved for publication by the government, when obtaining permits are often difficult for many Vietnamese writers.

After reading my first short story, ‘Người trong gương’ (‘The Person in the Mirror’), the scholar and literary critic Nguyễn Hưng Quốc commented that my work was surprisingly unlike that of other Vietnamese writers. He used the term ‘magical realism’. It was the first time I had seen this term. Searching for an explanation, I found illuminating descriptions of this ‘new’ realism that resonated with my writing:

In the magical realist texts … the supernatural is not a simple or obvious matter, but it is an ordinary matter, an everyday occurrence – admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materially of literary realism. Magic is no longer quixotic madness, but normative and normalising. It is a simple matter of the most complicated sort. (Zamora and Farris, 3).

Such an explanation reveals the core difference between the work of Márquez (and other Latin American writers) and the (traditional) Realists I had read as a child. I could see a clear ‘connection’ between Magical Realism and my own work, regardless of its distinctive Vietnamese ‘flavours’ and cultural particulars. Vietnam shares the historical and social impact
of colonization that compelled the people to find non-realist ways to understand and express our lived experience. P. Gabrielle Foreman has described this approach (adapted in distinct ways by different authors) as ‘[using] magic to recuperate the real, that is, to reconstruct histories that have been obscured or erased by political and social injustice’ (in Zamora and Faris, 9). Versions of Magical Realism as a mode of storytelling in these cultures, as Zamora and Faris have observed, are ‘especially alive and well in postcolonial contexts’ (2).

Perhaps due to the lack of a suitable term to describe the ‘style’ of my creative works in comparison with other Vietnamese writers, members of the Vietnamese community of readers, writers and scholars continued making associations with Magical Realism as a movement. Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, in his work Văn Học Việt Nam tại Úc: Chính trị và Thi Pháp của Lưu Vong (Vietnamese Literature in Australia: Politics and Poetics of Diaspora), has described me as the most ‘natural’ writer of Hiện thực thần kỳ (magic/magical/marvelous realism), writing stories with ‘profuse imagination ... [that is] guilelessly breezy, transparent and prolific’ (158-159). In September 2014, I was invited to an SBS Vietnamese Language radio interview for my contributions to Vietnamese Literature in Australia. The interview, including excerpts from some of my published works, was broadcast over two Sunday nights. The first part was titled ‘Hoàng Ngọc Thu and the Magical Realism’ (Hoàng, SBS Radio Interview, Part 1) and the second part ‘Hoàng Ngọc Thu on the wings of imagination’ (Hoàng, SBS Radio Interview, Part 2). While labelling may depend on critics’ views, I have no doubt that my work contains intrinsic elements of what Zamora and Faris observe as characteristic of Magical Realism: ‘disparate worlds of what we might call the historical and the imaginary’, where ‘politics collide with fantasy’ (1).

While it is difficult to quantify the significance of Márquez’s works as an influence, my strong identification with his storytelling style, and the ‘connection’ I made with the people represented in One Hundred Years of Solitude has remained crucially important to me as a reader and a writer. The potential to broaden narrative methods away from the traditional realist mode provided a much needed outlet for my creative work, especially while we were under the strict control of the Vietnamese Communist regime that had forbidden any hint of negative criticism. Having immigrated to Australia, I was faced with a different kind of inexpressible reality, living in an unfamiliar environment, learning a different language and integrating into a new culture. Magical Realism has provided essential tools for me to put together the strange story that has become ‘Embers of Time’.
History, recent and past, continues to shape our lives, and in many direct and indirect ways, has shaped my novel. On an immediate level, the Communist Party that ‘unified’ the country after the Vietnam War forcibly removed hundreds of thousands of men from their families and destroyed anything that could be a potential threat to the Party. Along with professionals across all fields who were employees of the ex-government, my father was sent to ‘re-education’ camp but he escaped and ‘volunteered’ to participate in a land-clearing team in the ‘New Economic Zones’ created after the war. My father’s and two oldest brothers’ names were struck off the residential roll in 1976. My father and brothers then took separate perilous sea journeys in a bid to escape persecution. As for hundreds of thousands of other Vietnamese at the time (Vo, Nghia, 163-180), a one-way journey, with a fifty percent chance of a future, somewhere beyond the body of water, was worth the risk of losing their lives. For them, dying at sea was considered a more merciful end than a slow ‘death’ (literally for some) on land, rendered stateless and barred from home. The months we endured waiting for their news were indescribable. I can never truly know the depth of grief my mother suffered anticipating a lifetime of separation from her sons and husband. Knowing they had survived was like being ‘reborn’ for family members on both sides of the Pacific. Although, miraculously, our family was brought together again in Sydney in 1988 after over a decade apart, leaving Vietnam and everything that had constituted our lives there was, for me, a shattering experience that continued for years afterwards. But without this rupture from our homeland, perhaps my novel would not have been written.

As prepared in every forseeable way as we could be, we were not prepared for becoming aliens in a different world. The loss of language was crippling. Nothing shouts ‘alien’ more loudly than not only looking different from others in every conceivable way, but also being unable to communicate. At sixteen, my ‘difficulties’ were so different from my peers: how to understand my teachers and friends; and how – after all the cooking, washing up and housework for our large family immediately after school – to complete all my homework, starting late at night. This was the only thing I could do to help lighten my mother’s loads with her daily 18-hours of sewing piece work in our freezing garage, while my sister Hân had a regular double-shift job. At best we hugged each other goodnight just as the SBS played its closing song, but we mostly did not make it. Yet my mother would rise again and would begin work while it was still dark. At times I longed for my ‘other’ self; returning to my books after completing homework; spending time on Nha Trang beach; or, during the summer breaks,
‘disappearing’ into the wonderland of our hidden library. These and other simple joys seemed so far away, just ghostly memories. Somehow the craziness of our lives, in another guise, had followed us to Australia.

As I grew older and learned how to navigate new terrains riddled with absurdities in Australia, I was drawn back to the fable that had fascinated me as a child. What had happened to Lưu and Nguyễn after they returned from the magical realm? I had intuitively known, even at a young age, the loss and grief the young men must have endured on their arrival home after a century of absence. To find answers would require my stepping into their situation, sharing the precariousness of their existence, something I dreaded. That formidable barrier, separating the joy and comfort of living among loved ones in a familiar environment, and the bewildering existence of newcomers in a foreign land, would have remained immovable had I not come to Australia. Somehow, the path to the future, for me, was via the past. I needed to revisit and understand our years in Vietnam in order to make sense of what we were going through in Australia.

*  

With each trip back to Vietnam, I have been confronted by how much of my former life exists only in memory. The landscape of our hometown has been all but wiped away; ‘sacred’ sites of our childhood and school years have been replaced by new buildings. Even street names have been changed depending on which (real or fictional) heroes were preferred at that time. Wandering the same streets of my childhood, ‘seeing’ our past at every corner, yet not recognising anything there, grieved me. My sense of loss was profound and nameless. How, and who, can verify what were once our lives in Nha Trang? Except for our friends and siblings, most of those we knew have passed away. Who can verify the darkness of our lives back then? Even the physical darkness in our early years shaped how we conducted our everyday activities. During the 1980s, our electricity was turned off every second day, sometimes for a month if our city was hosting an overnight event. Moonlight, kerosene lamps, even fireflies were employed strategically and innovatively wherever possible. Like most Vietnamese then, we did not have fridges, TVs or any electrical appliances until my father sent home from Sydney a radio-cassette player some years later, carrying a miracle that ‘bridged’ the ocean between us: a tape of my father and brother Diệp talking and singing.
As children in Vietnam, we were expected to contribute to nation-building and maintenance. Every school was assigned a barren (at times, rocky and/or hilly) block of land and a quota of trees to be planted. The scant funding for schools would be at risk if the quota for this ‘green school competition’ was not met; so all students, from Primary levels, had to deliver their (age-dependent) allocation. On a grander scale, to maintain our nation’s face, from middle primary levels, we were forced to march in thirty plus degrees heat several times a year in rallies to demonstrate the people’s ‘undying support’ for elections and events held by the government. Elections involving over sixty million people at the time were enormously wasteful, just for the sake of keeping up appearances internationally, while millions were starving and beggars lined the streets. There had only been one Party, and all the seats were held perpetually by long-standing communist members. It was deemed an ‘honour’ for us to ‘volunteer’ in rallies for the Party’s needs.

None of this ever appeared in any written record. We were simply not there in our history. It was as if the splintering of our lives had taken place in a vacuum. Our ‘new’ history is riddled with many omissions, such as unfolding events from the Geneva Accords in 1954 following the defeat of the French by the Việt Minh. Stakeholders had agreed on a ceasefire and a temporary demarcation line at the Seventeenth parallel was established. A reunification election that was to be called within months never eventuated. It took twenty years for the conflict to come to a brutal end in 1975 (Corfield, 50-98). All that was written about that time was that ‘the Party had unified the country’. There was no mention of newlyweds being separated while young husbands were enlisted until the new government was installed; or about family members stranded away from home when division of the country took place. For the fortunate couples who were reunited in their retirement, enlisted men found their elderly parents or siblings had passed away. Others did not make it back; some graves could not even be located. Worse still, families were split by diehard loyalty or blinded by conflicting ideologies. In the trenches, sons, brothers and cousins faced the possibility that each time they took aim and fired, it might be their father, brother, or cousin who was in the line of sight. Without our oral history, these and many more heartbreaking stories would have been lost.

That kind of history exists only in our memories, as lived stories, dismissed as myths with no place in books. With the help of captive historians, the regime wove and approved created myths about a time of endless unity and a seamless transition into Communism. It is no surprise that Vietnamese love traditional myths and fables; these tales are entertaining, often
offering some kind of hope, or teaching us some valuable lessons. History books (post-Vietnam War) are mythological siblings. Apart from the dates, their fictional accounts are not only skewed but their heroes replicate those from Russia, China, Cuba, North Korea and other comradely countries. *Vietnamese* heroes? Where are we?

Knowing we were, and are, not alone in this strange reality boosted my courage, although it was not by any means a consolation. I understood R. K. Narayan’s ‘nightmare’ in *A Writer’s Nightmare* (1988), where a ‘controller of stories’ is established in Xanadu in a ‘write-better-stories movement’. Declaring ‘we don’t want any bad stories in this country’, the government warns writers that their ink bottles will be smashed if they defy government expectations (68-70). It chilled me to read this satirical account: a fiction for others, but a description of our past and present reality in Vietnam.

Hilary Mantel, the twice Booker Prize winning historical novelist, reflects poignantly, in her essay ‘Blot, Erase, Delete’, on comparable experiences, not only in the 1980s, battling censorship in Saudi Arabia (‘the Empire of Deletion, the world capital of crossing-out’ [67]), but also on witnessing the Brexit vote and its consequences:

> politicians did not mean their promises even at the time they made them; that even though they were printed, recorded, filmed, painted on vans and driven about the streets, they could be blinked away, vanished at will. Sometimes people speak allegorically, through folk-panics: we make our mark, but they just rub us out. (67)

Across time and history, Mantel observes that the drive for oppression has been largely the same:

> oppressors don’t just want to do their deed, they want to take a bow: they want their victims to sing their praises. This doesn’t change, and it seems there are no new thoughts, no new struggles with censorship and self-censorship, only the old struggles repeating: half-animated corpses of forbidden childhood thoughts crawling out of the psychic trenches we have dug for them, and recurring denials by the great of the truths written on the bodies of the small. (68)

To combat the ‘the army of erasers’ (67) and in an effort to compensate for the ‘erasures and silences’, Mantel chooses to be a novelist, as she writes in ‘Why I Became a Historical
Novelist’, the first of her 2017 BBC Reith Lectures. Despite having read Mantel only in recent years, and although her fiction is of a different genre, her experience and aim resonate strongly with my own, and her approach and vision have become a source of inspiration for me. Mantel reflects that:

we carry the genes and the culture of our ancestors, and what we think about them shapes what we think of ourselves, and how we make sense of our time and place. ... We rely on history to tell us ... science too, help us put our small lives in context. But if we want to meet the dead looking alive, we turn to art. (1)

‘Embers of Time’ is not a ‘traditional’ historical novel, although it is set, in part, in a historical period. Nevertheless, like Mantel’s work, it aims to give hope and voice to the nameless Vietnamese people under French rule, offering a window through which glimpses of a critical but largely obscured century in Vietnam’s history, and a forgotten way of living could be shared.

For a country that has survived centuries of foreign occupation and wars, legends and fables have helped supported Vietnamese people through bewildering times. The latter half of the twentieth century alone saw Vietnam going through upheavals on many fronts with continual changes in political structures: from feudal regimes that prevailed through the French imperialism, followed by Japanese occupation, then early communism with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam established in the north in 1945. In the South, meanwhile, an American-backed republicanism and capitalism with the Republic of [South] Vietnam was formed in 1955 after the country was divided, and full-fledged communism for the ‘united’ country from 1975 (Corfield, 39-100). In our fight for survival, memories and tales were passed down the generations: to keep alive our ancestors’ struggle for independence; to uphold our belief in the people’s fabled strength and resilience; and to maintain our collective identity in the face of rapidly changing political and social conditions. Vietnamese believe human capabilities can be improved with inner cultivation and learned wisdom. In the sanctuary of homes and sacred spaces, our people turned inwards to sustain hope, guided by spiritual guidance, particularly the teachings of Buddhism. I shall argue later in the exegesis the crucial role of Buddhism in supporting Vietnamese people living through contingency. It is also integral in the shaping of my novel.
Chapter 2: Appraising the Chasm

Vietnamese cultural and literary traditions are shaped and informed by factors inherent in the way our people have lived since ancient times. Literary works, like all modes of Vietnamese communication, could not have been made without clear or hidden links to interwoven factors this chapter shall explore; their strengths have been both benefits and limitations in creating ‘Embers of Time’ and its accompanying exegesis.

To begin with, Buddhism has permeated Vietnamese life for over 2,000 years. It was introduced into the country around 200 B.C by Indian ships, often carrying Buddhist monks, when Vietnam was a convenient port (Phạm, Kim 4-5). Early Vietnamese literature includes legends and fables featuring a compassionate, divine being (Bụt, the local translation for Buddha) consistent with translated Sanskrit Sutras available since the first century in the Mahayana Buddhist centre in Luy Lâu (currently in Bắc Ninh). Buddhism was reintroduced later by the Chinese, who used the title Fo for Buddha (translated into Phật in Vietnamese), resulting in Buddhism being called Phật Giáo in modern texts (Phạm, Kim 4-8). Despite being apolitical, its gentle and resilient influence has remarkably assisted the people through wars, foreign occupation, natural and man-made disasters, while nurturing lasting traits inherent in Vietnamese culture, including traditional and folk literature, music, philosophy, social and familial practices and personal and filial values.

Throughout ten centuries of Chinese occupation (111 B.C. until Vietnam regained independence in 939 A.D), Buddhism vitally supported Vietnamese people in surviving oppression, rebuilding the country and shaking off vestiges of foreign influence. The Buddhist raised King Lý Công Uẩn (ruled 1010 – 1028), one of the first independent kings, was a champion of Vietnamese culture and literature. Besides opening national schools to raise standards for education and building new temples to facilitate the learning and practising of Buddhism (Phạm, Văn, 183-4), he also erected the Temple of Literature, Văn Miếu (Văn = literature, Miếu = shrine/temple), honouring the contributions of scholars in nation-building and centreing the role of Literature in the Vietnamese way of living.

Vietnamese cultural and literary identity was strengthened by successive kings. In the 13th century, King Trần Nhân Tông (ruled 1279-1293) founded the first Vietnamese Zen
school, Thiền Trúc Lâm (Bamboo Forest Zen) (Nguyễn, Lang, 195-7), bringing Buddhism into everyday life with its focus on ‘the congruence between the heart, the mind and the breath’ (Phạm, Kim 38). The same king also led the revival of the demotic written form, chữ Nôm (chữ = letter, Nôm= Nam: southern, as viewed from China), the ancient script formed by adapting Chinese characters to Vietnamese spoken language. This paved the way for the poet and scholar Hán Thuyên to devise a new form of poetry, Hàn luật (meaning Hàn’s rule, as distinct from Đường luật, the Chinese form) (Phạm, Thể, Vol. 1, 54). Hán Thuyên was accredited as the father of Vietnamese poetry for allowing natural rhythms and characteristics of the native oral language to be expressed in the demotic written form. From this time, Vietnamese literature broke away from sinocentric agendas (the norm under China rule) to re-embrace traditional Vietnamese culture, values and the people’s distinct way of living. Unlike the Chinese Hán, the official language at the time that was accessible only to scholars and upper class people (Phạm, Văn, 256), the demotic chữ Nôm was accessible to, and catered for every social class. This started a great boom across all traditional forms of Vietnamese literature and opened the channels for recording and composing new works, adding to the vast treasury of Vietnamese folklore and rhymed compositions that had been accumulated over 3,000 years but only transmitted orally (Phạm, Văn, 44).

In the 15th century, growing from the golden age of education and literature built by Buddhist-raised Lý - Trần dynasties (during which most kings were Buddhist Masters [Phạm, Văn 224]), King Lê Thánh Tôn (ruled 1460-1497) convened the first Literary Guild Hội Tao Đàn (Hội = guild, Tao (tão nhã) = genteel/literary, Đàn = gathering), comprised of twenty-eight leading poets, writers, ministers and scholars who peer-supported creative compositions (Phạm, Thể Ngữ, Vol.2, 101). This first royal-led creative gathering cemented the role of Literature in the life of Vietnamese people and led the way for writers and poets across the nation to join in the pursuit of literary excellence.

The Tao Đàn tradition, or Genteel Gathering for artistic and literary pursuits, remains today, despite the many wars, changed dynasties and upheavals over the past five centuries. Besides literary guilds, robust activities from school to professional levels have maintained the people’s pursuit of excellence across all creative areas. For common (even illiterate) people, oral literature and folk music have continued to be an integral part of their lives, passed down through generations. Moral values, principles, social and filial etiquettes have been disseminated through recitation of rhymed verses and excerpts from treasured tales and renowned literary works. It is
common for large families in rural areas, involving three or four generations, to gather around a storyteller, who will retell from memory or read aloud tales of ancient (or contemporary) battles, romance and adventures. People who can sing and/or play an instrument are often found at the centre of a crowd, entertaining themselves and others with local and foreign works.

My own creative writing has been nurtured by precisely this tradition. Growing up in an arts-loving family, my fondest childhood memories are of our gatherings among friends and siblings for poetry or book readings, interspersed with guitar playing and singing of local or imported French, English or Spanish songs translated into Vietnamese. It was during those nights (often without electricity) that we learned about love and life, war and death, not only through Tolstoy, Hemingway, Hugo and other masters whose works were read to us in snippets, but also from our parents’ and grandparents’ experiences, retold to us. My ‘alone time’ was filled with books, magical ‘bridges’ that granted me access to other worlds. How else could I, as a child in a war-ravaged country, have ‘travelled’ to windswept England, luxuriated in Spanish gardens, ‘spent’ days in Lilliput or ‘trekked’ through the Andes? My childhood, immersed in family-adapted Genteel Gatherings, crucially motivated my attempt to build my own ‘bridge’ in ‘Embers of Time’.

* Writing a Vietnamese story for non-Vietnamese readers has involved many difficulties, the most prominent being representing aspects of Vietnamese linguistic traits and cultural practices (some of them ancient). I have been fortunate to have been raised and schooled in Vietnam, continuing my higher education, professional work and almost three decades of living in Australia. The accumulated knowledge and experience of both English and Vietnamese cultures and languages have been crucial in enabling me to identify fundamental characteristics that set the two literary and cultural ‘spheres’ apart.

Vietnamese literature is inseparable from its oral traditions. As outlined in Phạm, Thế Ngữ’s The History of Vietnamese Literature, Vietnamese oral traditions comprise truyện cổ tích (olden tales), tục ngữ (everyday wisdom) and ca dao (sing-able poems) (Vol. 1, 25-26). Also known as phong dao (wind verses, phong = wind) for being easily transmitted and having an immediate effect on the populace, ca dao has been the most prominent and abundant among the oral traditions due to its ‘flow’, created by harmonious rhyming affecting the ‘singing without music’ quality. Covering seven broad ‘categories’ (time-honoured wisdom;
social/domestic/religious expectations; historic persons/events; human traits/psychology; moral/ethical teachings; humour/satire; and courtships/banterings), ca dao has been instrumental in preserving and propagating Vietnamese culture through the ages, with variations including đồ giao (children’s verses); vè (social/political satire on controversial events); câu đố (riddles); and sám (prophecy/oracle) (Phạm, Thế, Vol. 1, 27-34). Examples of some common ca dao are shown below. It must be noted that there have been no records of author(s) of most ca dao, as these centuries-old compositions have been transmitted orally and passed down generations since ancient times. The first one is learned by heart by all primary students on commencing school (traditional rhymes, my translation):

*Công cha như núi Thái sơn,
Nghĩa mẹ như nước trong nguồn chảy ra.
Một lòng thờ mẹ, kính cha
Cho toàn chiều mới là đạo con.*

(Father’s effort is like Thái sơn mountain,
Mother’s devotion is like water flowing from deep source.
Wholeheartedly worship your mother, respect your father
Fulfil your filial expectations is a child’s religion.)

The second is a satirical observation. The rhymed sixth word in each line demonstrates the Vietnamese six-eight poetry form (traditional rhymes, my translation):

*Con ơi nhớ lấy câu này:
Cuớp đêm là giấc, cuớp ngày là quan.*

(Darling child remember this:
Night robbers are bandits, day robbers are mandarins.)

The third is a reminder to all classes to embrace social inclusion, acknowledging the country’s diverse racial composition (traditional rhymes, my translation):

*Bầu ơi thương lấy bị cùng,
Tuy rằng khác giới, nhưng chung một gián.*

(O calabash have compassion for the melons,
Though of different breeds, you’re now sharing a scaffolding.)
Most Vietnamese works, regardless of form or genre, carry traces of oral traditions, merged with arguments or narrative, woven into dialogues and descriptions of people and settings. My work, in ‘Embers of Time’, is no exception: the influence of oral traditions appeared spontaneously as the story developed, imparting textures, colours and Vietnamese ‘essences’ into the novel, such as the villagers’ night gatherings for sharing of hunting tales and legends and in family activities, particularly in Lư’s memories of his mother singing, telling stories and teaching him poetry alongside cultural and scholarly subjects. Ca dao has also made its way into my work: an example is when Lư, captivated by an unusually large full-moon before his departure, recalls the rhyme about the ‘bad boy’ Cuội being trapped in the moon.

In order to write a novel in English about Vietnamese culture, I have had to negotiate many incompatible characteristics between the two languages and cultures; each would require an extensive body of work for a thorough treatment. In the limited scope of this project, I can only highlight some fundamental differences between Vietnamese language and its usage and English.

Vietnamese is a tonal language in which each monosyllabic word is made, and differentiated, by diacritical marking indicating its ‘pitch’ or tone. There are six distinct tones, each indicated by a specific ‘mark’ above (or below) the major vowel:

1. a ‘forward’ dash for a sharp rise tone, sác (example: má)
2. a ‘backward’ dash for a lowering tone, huỳnh (example: mè)
3. a ‘half-question mark’ for a cascading tone, hỏi (example: cò)
4. a ‘tilde’ mark for dip-rising tone, ngã (example: tà)
5. a ‘full-stop’ under the vowel for a lowest tone, nằng (example: là)
6. an unmarked word has a neutral tone.

Every word has an associated tone and words with the same spelling mean entirely different things in different tones. For example:

má = mum (informal for mother, formal is mẹ);
mà = although/but;
mã = horse (archaic);
mả = grave;
mạ = rice seedling,
ma = ghost.
Some combined vowels carry extra marks to cater for the range of sounds in the language. Some variations include: a, â, ā, e, è, o, ô, u, ur, ia, ié, oi, iei, iêu, oa, oe, oā, uru, uy, uô, uơ. A single change of the ‘hat’, such as those ‘carried’ by the vowel a in this example, could produce entirely different words: mát (cool), mätt (eye), mätt (loss).

A Vietnamese sentence (or word) without tonal mark(s) can have vastly different meanings, depending on readers’ interpretations. Possibilities for extreme variations can be exploited to produce clever wordplay, as in the works by the eighteenth century poetess Hồ Xuân Hương (pseudonym meaning ‘Spring Essence’), further discussed in chapter 3. By employing the advantage of tonal language, Hồ Xuân Hương was able to convey bold double-meanings, liberating women’s voices in relation to sexuality. In everyday writing, however, confusion (dangerous or hilarious) can result.

Discussing the disparity between the English and Vietnamese languages, Dana Sachs and Trần Hoài Bác, translators for Lê Minh Khuê’s book of short fiction, The Stars, the Earth, the Rivers, note that:

English is a language that calls for precision. But … Vietnamese offers many possibilities as certainties and refuses to be pinned down … . Unlike English, Vietnamese demands the active participation of listeners or readers in pulling together the meaning implied by the words. (xix-xxi)

The reasons Vietnamese language, to foreigners, ‘refuses to be pinned down’ are many. References to local customs, tales and legends, historic and fictional characters, and unique metaphors that have been gathered by the people over 4,000 years inevitably add hidden ‘layers’ into meanings and can become potential barriers for English readers.

Notable in the ‘non-concrete’ disposition of Vietnamese language is its monosyllabic nature. Each word has ‘core’ meanings and ‘associated’ meanings, hence compound words can have a large range of meanings, contributing to the ‘slippery’ quality of Vietnamese expression. Some archaic words also carry different meanings. For example: can (verb, common) means need, while cân (adjective, archaic) means diligent.
A single word can have different meanings depending on its context or coupling ‘partner’. An example is a simple word, Bình. On its own, it could mean medium/average (Bình hạng = medium grade); peace (thời Bình = peace-time, Bình lạnh = peaceful/quiet); calm (Bình thản = at heart), unruffled (Bình chân thắn), tranquil (yến Bình/ tịnh), stabilize (Bình ổn), safe and sound (Bình an/ yên); normal/ordinary (Bình thường); commoner (Bình dân); everyday (Bình nhật); plain/level ground (Bình nguyên/Bình địa); equal/fair (equality = Bình đẳng, equal rights = Bình quyền, fairness = công Bình); pitcher/decanter/container (Bình thủy = thermos flask, Bình nước = water pitcher, Bình trà = teapot); comment/critique (Bình luận/ phảm, archaic). Some exceptions to commonly known meanings include: lifetime (Bình sinh); screen (Bình phong); recovery (Bình phục), dawn (Bình minh); square power in Mathematics (Bình phương), stratosphere (tầng Bình lưu). In the Vietnamese-English dictionary there are fifty five combinations containing this commonplace word. Depending on whether it is used alone, or in a creative/non-conventional way, a single word can present challenge to readers unfamiliar with Vietnamese language and culture.

Vietnamese customs are also reflected in its language conventions. For example, there are words carrying ‘shadow meanings’ (nghĩa bóng) that serve as metaphors and figures of speech in Vietnamese and another group carrying ‘black meanings’ (nghĩa đen) for concrete or direct meaning. The term ‘literal’ (‘văn vẻ’), used creatively, dramatises or romanticises situations, as in, ‘He literally killed her with his book’ (meaning: ‘his book was so good/bad, it stole/broke her heart’, but he did not physically harm her). I learned, with dismay, after arriving in Australia, that ‘literal’ in English means ‘actual’. Another difference is in the repetition of an adjective: in English, this strengthens the quality, whereas in Vietnamese, it lessens it. For example: a blue blue (sky) in English indicates a deep blue colour, whereas in Vietnamese the repeated adjective represents a somewhat blue or bluish hue.

Disparities between literary and language conventions in English and Vietnamese, since each is founded on entirely different cultural and linguistic histories, comprise a broad field of study that is too complex to address here. Nevertheless, it is important for Vietnamese writers for an English audience to be constantly aware of the disparities and strive to negotiate them, even at sentence level.

The major challenge in writing in English (as a second language) about Vietnam, a country
very different from most English-speaking countries, is to negotiate different modes of communication. Writing in Vietnamese, for me, is like walking: while I need to be vigilant at all times, the skills have been naturally acquired, practised and improved over almost the length of my life; the necessary actions to remain surefooted and on track, while making progress, are automatic. Writing in English, however, is like riding a bike; I have had to acquire completely new skills and manage limbs in ‘unnatural’ ways in order to remain on the bike. Making progress requires immense effort in keeping balance, knowing road rules and navigating traffic. I have had to learn not only an entirely new vocabulary but also incompatible and extensive (at times illogical) new rules of grammar, to negotiate the idiosyncrasies of usage and learn to identify clichés (in order to avoid them). These are ‘natural’ skills attained by English-speaking writers through their schooling and living experience, but for me, they represent chasms that must be bridged if any progress is to be made. This requires mental stamina and the containment of fear.

I came across a remarkable passage written by William H. Cropper on what he refers to as the ‘tangled intellectual problem’ that closely describes my situation:

[H]ow are we to form an image of a world that [is] totally different from our own … we have nothing in common with these other-world beings, not even the same perception of colour, sound and form … Yet we have no choice but to extract words from some earthly vocabulary and fit them as well as possible to our limited impressions. To some extent, these words and descriptions will be appropriate but there will always be an element of ambiguity. A world so remote and different can never be understood completely. (1)

Cropper, the author of The Quantum Physicists, was describing a hypothetical situation in which physicists receive extra-terrestrial radio messages coming from outer space and have to interpret their meanings. Although the situation is far-fetched and may appear unrelated to my project, in fact Cropper summarises exactly the conditions I had to work under in writing my novel. My built-in knowledge of Vietnamese language and culture have been invaluable in recreating an authentic experience that forms the core of my story, but sharing that knowledge with unfamiliar readers is an immense task requiring far more time and scope than candidature affords. Immediate problems I faced included countless instances when there were no English words for unique Vietnamese objects, rituals and practices. Đám giỗ (Death Anniversary), Lễ
Báo Hiệu (Filial Piety Ceremony), cúng rằm (full-moon offering), ān chay (Buddhist vegetarian days) are only a few examples of customs that are everyday practices for Vietnamese people who know precisely what each term encompasses. Non-Vietnamese readers, however, would find it difficult to grasp the cultural significance of the translated descriptors without background knowledge or experience.

There are unique foods, customs, clothing, idioms, proverbs and locally created words that cannot be directly translated into English. Any attempt to translate such words risks either, at best, generalising the specifics with a clumsy product, or at worst, assimilating them into something foreign and inherently different. Further to Cropper’s intuitive ‘tangled intellectual problem’ of comprehending an alien culture, Erwin Schrodinger concludes that a model, based on our own language and experience, to fit what we observe in an ‘other world’ is:

not only practically inaccessible but not even thinkable ... we can, of course, think it, but however we think it, it is wrong; not perhaps quite as meaningless as a ‘triangular circle,’ but much more so than a ‘winged lion.’ (Schrodinger in Cropper, 2)

Take, for example, the (culturally shaped) perception of colour. A tan skin tone is not desirable for traditional Vietnamese; especially during, and after, the French occupation, darker skin tones were associated with coolies (used as a degrading term) employed in plantations, and labourers working outdoors. Fair skin, however, is highly desirable, as it has always been associated with high-class people who occupied themselves indoors. Thus a description of a Vietnamese character’s skin tone (especially a woman’s) draws attention to the character’s social class or dis/advantageous occupation. There is little such emphasis in Western cultures, except in relation to sun- or artificially-tanned bodies, which, depending on the context, could imply sexiness or a privileged background with regular holidays outdoors (in the past), or in light of skin cancer awareness, can connote ignorance or carelessness. These, among other possible implications, nevertheless, contribute to very different characterisation, depending on whether the perspective of the reader is Vietnamese or Western.

There are a large number of hidden cultural ‘codes’ observed by Vietnamese and learned through our upbringing. For example, as children, when my mother was trying to dress us to attend a Buddhist cầu an (peace-praying ceremony) for a critically ill family friend, she frantically rejected many outfits, which seemed so unlike her extremely efficient self. I later
learned that we could not have worn white (mourning clothes), black (inviting death), yellow (for royalty, arrogant) or red (festive, celebration). Low necklines, short-length dresses and sleeves were also ruled out, as were unsuitable types of materials or styles that might create an impression of overdressing (self-importance) or underdressing (lack of respect). In a Vietnamese story, what a character wears carries succinct but noteworthy information about intentions, attitude and even the kind of relationship s/he has with a family or host. To attempt to explain the significance of such details could turn a work translated into English into a clumsy artefact.

I have asked myself, how did other writers from non-English speaking backgrounds navigate such challenges? My first line of inquiry naturally looked into issues of ‘translation’. Writers like myself share challenges faced by translators, although translating a foreign text into English has distinct advantages (the work has already been done and salient decisions made regarding narrative devices) and disadvantages (if the author is unable or unavailable to make the best choice from a range of makeshift alternatives).

Regardless of genre, the work of ‘translating’ customs specific to one culture into another is problematic. Words carry meanings, roles and qualities integral to a particular culture. For example, the words kangaroo and vegemite cannot be replaced with any word in Vietnamese. Minute details are embedded in a narrative and affect the shape and form of the story. From grammatical specificities to peculiarities in the way people speak, details and traditions familiar to the native speaker underpin the integrity of literary works. For a translator to use words that ‘make it easier’ for English readers is, to me, taking a defeatist approach that robs readers of an opportunity to truly experience the ‘flavour’ of the foreign place they are exploring. For example, translations of different Vietnamese desserts simply as ‘puddings’ fails to convey the uniqueness of (dozens of different types of) Vietnamese sweets (different ingredients, cooking methods, tastes and appearances) that have nothing in common with English puddings!

Inaccurate translations from Vietnamese into English can be found even in Vietnamese government approved dictionaries, reflecting both misrepresentations of Vietnamese culture and misunderstandings of English culture and/or contexts. An example is the common Vietnamese saying, ‘Bụt chùa nhà không thiêng’ (‘home temple’s Buddha is not powerful/magical’) noting that local talents are often not revered due to their familiarity; yet a
bafflingly wrong, if not unrelated, translation is produced: ‘a prophet is not without honour save in his own country’!(78). Erroneous translations from English are also found in the English-Vietnamese dictionary. For example, ‘He withheld the letter out of sheer vindictiveness’ is translated to mean, in Vietnamese, ‘He has withdrawn the letter full of vindictiveness’ (1958). Both dictionaries were produced by the Institute of Language, the absolute authority in language guidance people rely on for accurate usage and meaning, yet each is riddled with errors that highlight the need for close collaboration between contributors speaking different languages.

The challenges that apply to translators also apply to me, but the ‘translation’ is an internal process that takes place prior to, and throughout, my writing. My task as writer-as-translator required that I avoid borrowing words vaguely similar or familiar to English readers, while creating suitable ways to introduce foreign objects or concepts without overexplaining or compromising. What, and whose, advice could I seek?

In ‘Translating in a World of Languages’, Gayatri Chakravory Spivak recognises that the tasks of translation are ‘abstract and plural’ due to the ongoing need to meet demands of globalization that effectively ‘reduce all linguistic performance to equivalents … homogenizing them into a dominant’ (36). Spivak strongly advises all language and literary contributors thus: ‘If you were born in a world of so-called less-taught languages, pick up the challenges, make a decision’ (41). The ‘decision’ here, Spivak emphasises, must centre on ‘translating before translation’ (41), that is, knowing a language and its culture before attempting to assign, where possible, ‘equivalence’ in another language. Spivak points out that ‘you do not learn culture as content, you learn language as practice’ (38). Arguing that the notion of ‘humanities’ is grounded in the particulars of distinct cultures and therefore not something can be globalised, Spivak reframes the roles of contributors as ‘supplement[ing] the uniformization necessary for globality’ (36). She advocates that all contributors should ‘think of ourselves as the custodians of the world’s wealth of languages, not impresarios of a multicultural circus in English’ (36). Noting the ‘unending negotiation with the untranslatable’, Spivak proposes instead a productive shift in perspective to take ‘the untranslatable as not something that one cannot translate but something one never stops (not) translating’ (39).

Through her own experience as an academic, writer and translator of Bengali, Spivak points out that knowing the linguistic and customary practices of a people is only the first step
toward ‘bridging’ cultures. I am fortunate that Vietnamese is my first language and culture, so the ‘learning’ part is ‘in place’. Nevertheless, I am obliged, like all writers, translators and language contributors, to continually negotiate and accommodate the exigencies of both the source- and receiving-cultures. At the same time, I am subject to imperatives prescribed by ‘institutions anchored in a transnational capitalist economy’ (Spivak, ‘Teaching for the Times’, 4). These institutions are, sadly, driven by the ever-present demand of globalization that ‘takes place only in capital and data’ (Spivak, ‘Translating in a World of Languages’, 36). Citing instances where ‘there is no market demand’ for her own translations, so that she has to ‘put [them] aside in a long-term way’, Spivak persists, nevertheless, in continuing to translate ‘as an act of transgression, because I cannot not do it’ (39), actively contributing toward what she terms ‘an epistemological change’ (38) required for a successful and inclusive globalization of world literature. This is how and what Spivak sees she can, and must, do to redress the unbalanced demands of globalization, pointing out that ‘the lack of parity that currently exists between established and less-taught languages goes against the very spirit of an enlightened globalization of the curriculum’ (39). Spivak’s decisive and enduring response has been a vital support for the ‘recalibration’ of my creative processes, although how and what I must do to facilitate this enlightened approach to my own work has been a continually evolving practice, further strengthened by learning from my predecessors across different fields.

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Lawrence Venuti’s research and experience as an academic, writer and translator are both illuminating and pertinent to my aims. In ‘Translation, Publishing and World Literature’, Venuti observes the ‘global hegemony of English reduces every language to minority status in relation to it’ (12). This practice is enforced by publishers from English-speaking countries, regardless of their ability to edit a translation against a source text, since editors usually can’t read all languages. Insistence on translations conforming to a house style results in copyeditors routinely standardizing the writing of translated works, regardless of the translators’ efforts to retain the source texts’ stylistic features through appropriately chosen discursive strategies (10). Venuti terms this approach ‘the regime of fluency’, a practice driven by an uncompromising assumption that a translation is publishable only if it is ‘fluent’; what is presented to translators as a ‘choice’ is categorically not. In The Translator’s Invisibility, Venuti explicates this stipulation, which requires that the translated work should be:
immediately recognizable and intelligible, “familiarised”, domesticated, not “disconcerting[ly]” foreign, capable of giving the readers unobstructed “access to great thoughts” to what is “present in the original.” (5)

The emphasis on providing readers with ‘easy access’ to foreign works is insidiously damaging to the efforts of individuals, the traditions of communities and global literature overall. It is achieved through creating an illusion of naturalness and transparency that renders translators ‘invisible’ (5). ‘Irregularities’ or unfamiliar stylistic features in the foreign works are ‘smoothed out’ and ‘regulated’, in other words, assimilated and reduced to ensure an untroubled experience for conditioned readers. Venuti describes this as ‘domesticating translation’, a prevailing practice that has been continually consolidated since the seventeenth century (Venuti, ‘Translation as cultural politics’, 211), becoming ‘firmly entrenched as a canon ... linked to a valorization of transparent discourse’ from the nineteenth century (211).

A case in point is an example in Venuti’s ‘Translation, Publishing and World Literature’ on his translation of Catalan poet-writer J.V. Foix’s Gertrudis that was rejected by one editor for being ‘far too specialized for our list’ (11) and, more peculiarly, by another editor, for ‘distracting’ features and the author’s ‘gear-shifter’ narrative, preferring ‘a more sober Foix’ (12) despite her praising the work as ‘full of wonders … a gem’ (12). In other words, the translator is expected to suppress and ‘correct’ the author’s ‘peculiar’ voice by applying standardized current English usage to meet the prescribed ‘plain style’ writing. Noncompliances, through adhering to authors’ voices and styles, are rejected by publishers in what Venuti calls the ‘strangeness of minority’.

It was clear to me even before I commenced writing my novel that I must make considerable adjustments to my creative processes in order to meet my new English readership’s expectations. It was also clear that any compromises I was willing to make would risk producing a ‘westernised’ Vietnamese story. How far was I willing to compromise my work to make it ‘work’? The question returned at every stage of my writing, yet the answers were not easily found and not always the same.

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In *Global Modernisms*, edited by Wollaeger and Eatough, Rebecca Beasley dissects and highlights contentious issues in translating foreign texts – the very same challenges I have faced in my creative work. Through illuminating examples of Russian translations in Britain, Beasley explores compromises made by translators: in particular, Sologub’s novel *Melkii bes (The Little Demon)*, translated respectively by Andrew Field, Ronald Wilks, S. D. Cioran and John Cournos. Beasley notes that each translator imbued the original work with a very different look and feel especially with respect to translation (or avoidance) of Russian slang, puns and rhymes (562-564). Of the four versions, it was noted that Cournos’ retained the most Russian terms, resorting to ‘unavoidable footnotes’ when translation proved impossible. Beasley acknowledges this as a difficult choice, since ‘footnotes inevitably undermine the domestication and fluency of a text’ (563), becoming an unwanted reminder that the reading experience is less than ‘natural’. This has been a constant challenge in writing my novel, knowing that contemporary readers dislike footnotes. I have chosen instead to incorporate simple explanations of Vietnamese terms and practices as unobtrusively as possible, including English translations immediately following any unfamiliar Vietnamese word, where this can be done without interrupting the narrative. I eventually, removed the comprehensive Glossary I had initially annexed to the novel.

A more complex issue is the ‘faithful’ translation of style(s) specific to an author. In further examples of Russian translations into English, Beasley points out instances, such as Constance Garnett’s assessment of Tolstoy’s style as ‘simple’, while Dostoevsky’s is deemed as ‘obscure’ and needing to be ‘corrected’ to ‘bring out what he is trying to say’ (560). Paradoxically, if translators achieved the goal of minimizing stylistic particularity to improve readability, critics, as happened with the Russian novels, were likely to consider the works ‘lacking in artistry and style’ (560). Virginia Woolf voiced her concern regarding Russian translations, observing that, ‘we have judged a whole literature stripped of its style. When you have changed every word in a sentence from Russian to English ... nothing remains except a crude and coarsened version of the sense’ (Woolf in Beasley, 560). Richard Aldington also questioned this approach from a practical point of view in his letter to T.S. Eliot: ‘how can we criticise style when we don’t know the language a book is written in?’ (in Beasley, 561).

Why has there been such continuing insistence on standardised style, language usage and ‘fluency’ in translations into English? I can clearly recall – and hugely enjoyed – distinct styles in translations into Vietnamese works by Dickens, Hesse, Tagore and the Bronte sisters,
and for that matter, the Russian and American novelists I read in my younger years. I have learned a great deal about diverse narrative techniques, and could tell, for example, the difference between the styles of Latin American writers, especially Márquez, from their North American counterparts. Translators of ‘minor’ languages’ share Venuti’s disenchantment with the prevalence of ‘domestication’ in English translations of foreign works. In ‘Translation as cultural politics’, Venuti asserts that the domestication regime is:

both intense and damaging, [it] intimidates and coerces, usually in the service of social interests and political agendas, often under the aegis of reason or truth [effecting] a second-order discourse illustrating a prior stereotype […] pathetic in its destructiveness, its reductive and exclusionary relation to a person or a social group. (208)

Venuti agrees with Roland Barthes who likens this approach to terrorism: ‘a metalanguage is always a terrorist’ (Barthes in Venuti, 208). Such applications ‘cheapen foreign texts, trivialize and exclude foreign cultures’ (Venuti, 208). Venuti has voiced my fear and the very reason for my resistance to ‘domesticating’ my work, especially given my dual role as writer and translator of not only my work but also aspects of Vietnamese culture. Venuti and Spivak have convincingly articulated the scale and complexity of difficulties faced by writers and translators working with a ‘minor’ language. On the positive side, they have strengthened my resolve to do my best to deliver distinctive cultural and literary qualities from my country of origin.

I have been willing to rework aspects of my novel, such as dialogue, to find common ground between English and Vietnamese ways of speaking. I have developed descriptions that are more concrete to replace Vietnamese metaphors or allusions that are freely used in Vietnamese literature but not generally accessible to English readers. At the same time, I have striven to retain my Vietnamese narrative ‘voice’ and the authentic ‘essence’ of Vietnamese culture. These adjustments have required many layers of preparation and intervention. For example, I have chosen to elucidate traditional practices through representing local actions interwoven with strands of explanation or snippets of crucial description in dialogue. In order to make informed choices, I looked into what has been employed by, and ‘worked’ for, others in terms of successfully ‘translating’ style and cultural particulars into English.

Particularly helpful in my endeavour to bridge my own literary and cultural needs and beliefs and those of my English readers is the ‘adaptation’, where possible, of Venuti’s
constructive strategies in response to the ‘regime of fluency’. Describing the process of ‘foreignizing translation’, Venuti cautions that it is ‘beset with risks’ (*The Translator’s Invisibility*, 273). He nevertheless suggests an active resistance to the tendency to gloss over, omit or assimilate ‘foreign’ features (at some cost to fluency) so that the resulting translation, besides being faithful to the author’s style and intention, can achieve larger goals. Through challenging the target-language culture, stereotypes can gradually be removed and replaced with better knowledge of the source culture. This enables the broadening of discursive modes to include new techniques and devices that are often used in other cultures but less known in English. Useful strategies include: archaism, alliteration and accentuated metres that ‘echo’ a particular language’s phonology; varying current standard English with regional dialects; poetical archaisms, neologisms and foreign loan words; and restoring phrases, mannerisms and verbal tics featured in the original text to achieve ‘truer rendering’ (*Venuti, Translation Changes Everything*, 114).

The authoritative German theologian and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher argued that ‘there are only two [methods]: either the translator leaves the author in peace as much as possible and moves the reader towards him; or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him’ (in *Venuti*, 15). I would propose, and choose for myself, a meeting half-way. As a writer-cum-translator of a minority culture, my aim has always been to create a work with Vietnamese features that may be unfamiliar to English readers, presented in ways that are comprehensible and relevant to the audience but also encouraging readers to leave their ‘comfort zone’ while actively participating in this experience. My ‘half-way’ may be a contentious zone; some readers may disagree on how much of their baggage (cultural and social beliefs) they have to manage (or leave behind), and how far they have to travel in order to reach the half-way point.

My attempt to ‘bridge’ the vast gap between two languages and cultures has created a precarious pathway. To ‘translate’ what the novel could have been, if it was written in Vietnamese, into what it can be in English, with relevance for non-Vietnamese readers, is far more than finding equivalent words or terms to slot into the same places. There are two fundamental differences between what might have been the Vietnamese version of my novel, and what I have written as the English ‘version’. The first would have been written *for* Vietnamese readers (or non-Vietnamese persons who can read the language, and therefore, can be assumed to have been relatively informed of the culture and customs). This would have been
written in my ‘natural’ writing ‘style’, wholly immersed in Vietnamese literary conventions and traditions, where I could freely use any cultural or historical reference, and employ the ‘power’ of the tonal language that enables each monosyllabic word to be paired creatively with others for a desired effect. The result would have been a succinct and nuanced creative work that looked, sounded and felt Vietnamese, authentic to both its literary tradition and my own way of writing. This would not have worked in the English ‘version’, given the disparity between English and Vietnamese literary and cultural traditions.

It is encouraging, but not surprising, to know that writers from other non-English speaking backgrounds share comparable experiences to mine in ‘translating’ their cultures into English. An example is the Russian poet and Nobel laureate Joseph Brodsky, whose early life under communist Russia and whose works, bearing signs of ambiguous losses, resonate strongly with my own experience. In an interview with Eva Burch, Brodsky described English as ‘an analytical language [that] does not really allow for much nuance’ (Brodsky and Burch, 54). He elaborated further on this point in another interview with Anna Husarska:

In Russian, what matters is the combination … whether it sounds good. In English you ask yourself whether it makes sense … . It’s a language of reason, whereas Russian is basically a language of texture. (Brodsky and Husarska, 8)

Despite a common religion (Catholicism) that aligned Russia’s system of belief and largely ‘Christendom culture’ (Brodsky’s term) with most European countries, Brodsky still found significant challenges in expressing in English his experience of communism and particulars of the Russian way of living. This influenced his choice to write mostly in Russian, even while living in America. In an interview with Elizabeth Roth, Brodsky alluded to the complexity of ‘translating’ cultures:

What creates the barrier is some historical reality … [Russia] was politically different from the realms [of other Western countries] … simply because what transpired in our part was indeed untranslatable. … So translating a sentence from Russian prose depicting life in the communal apartment into English is practically impossible … every sentence would require a substantial footnote. The disparity of life is what conspiring [sic] against being translated successfully into English, not the language itself. (Brodsky and Roth, 6)
Vietnamese culture is yet another step away from Brodsky’s ‘disparity of life’. Two thousand years of Buddhism as the main religion, and seven hundred years of Zen practice (since Trúc Lâm [Bamboo Forest] Zen was founded in 13th century) widen the already large ‘gap’ between English and Vietnamese literature traditions. In his foreword to Daisetz T. Suzuki’s *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, Carl G. Jung appraised the essence of Buddhist Zen or the *Satori* as:

>a mysterium ineffabile ... [that] between the [Zen masters’] anecdotes and the mystical enlightenment there is, for our understanding, a gulf, the possibility of bridging which can at best be indicated but never in practice achieved. (xi)

Jung elucidated his assessment further, observing that: ‘The original Buddhist writings themselves contain views and ideas which are more or less unassimilable by the average Western understanding’ (ix). The ‘strange perception’ of *Satori* (translated as ‘Enlightenment’), to Jung, ‘depicts an art and a way of enlightenment which is practically impossible for the European to appreciate’ (x). On his findings on Zen, Jung reflected that: ‘One has the feeling of touching upon a true secret, not something that has been imagined or pretended; this is not a case of mystifying secrecy, but rather of an experience that baffles all languages’(xi-xii).

Brodsky and Jung, describing disparities between social and political realities, and between Buddhism and other religious systems, respectively, use strong terms such as ‘untranslatable’, ‘unassimilable’, ‘impossible to appreciate’. These words suggest the challenges I have been working with throughout the completion of both components of my project. At every stage of my creative work, even in constructing a single sentence, I have been faced by the dilemma of risking alienating readers through maintaining the ‘Vietnamese way’ of writing, allowing language structure, conventions and cultural particulars to appear ‘naturally’ on the page – or striving to minimize what comes naturally to me in order to improve the transparency of my written work for non-Vietnamese readers, while avoiding lengthy explanations and disruptive footnotes.

*In searching for ways to deliver my Vietnamese story in the form of an English novel, I looked to other writers and academics (themselves creative art practitioners in their own fields) and
learned from the processes they have come up with in negotiating unforeseen challenges in delivering their works. While the difficulties were more or less unique for each practitioner and his/her own project, learning about various methods explored, tried and tested in practice have encouraged me to experiment with different creative processes. Facing many roadblocks as I started writing my novel, I resolved to first put my basic ideas together, almost like carving roughly into a hard, unfamiliar wood. I then set out to test out different ‘tools’ in subsequent reshaping and refining processes. Each new draft of the manuscript was then used to gauge not only how well (or not) a tool worked on what needed to be improved on, but also how the project, as a whole, changed as a result. Time and again, what was available to me did not produce the desired result(s). I discovered the need to adapt, modify and create new tools in order to produce specific features required to achieve the aims of my project. I would not have known what tools and materials were most appropriate for my purposes unless I had actively engaged in the making process, testing and eliminating what did not work, while applying and further refining productive devices.

My negotiating of obstacles at times seemed to be a circular process. It was reassuring to learn that this experience is in fact shared by other creative practitioners. An example that closely mirrors my approach can be found in Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts, edited by Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean, where a model called the ‘iterative cyclic web of practice-led research and research-led practice’ (Smith and Dean, 8) is presented. While this model might be viewed and applied in different ways by creative practitioners in different fields, for me, it offers a wholistic and dynamic view of the synergistic cycle of practice and research that continually feed both the artefact and the creative process (19-25). This is a very helpful way of appraising and negotiating challenges involved in creating a new work. Reflecting on this model, I came to understand the organic nature of any creative work; the work itself cannot be separated from how it was put together, for any change to the process or devices employed would more likely than not affect the final outcome. Yet the how is rarely known in advance; in fact, it is often discovered en route to the destination (what the creator initially aimed for, which might turn out to be something different, often better).

In his paper, ‘Making Space: The Purpose and Place of Practice-led Research’, Graeme Sullivan offers a wider view on this approach, suggesting that, ‘in many instances it is productive to explore creative possibilities that are informed by, but not captive to, existing frameworks of knowledge … Serendipity and intuition that direct attention to unanticipated
possibilities has long been a valued part of experimental inquiry’ (48). In *Practice as Research Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, edited by Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt, Bolt explicates further in her paper, ‘The Magic is in Handling’, that ‘[the] “new” knowledge in creative arts research can be seen to emerge in the involvement with materials, methods, tools and ideas of practice’ (31). Bolt, herself both a researcher and creative artist, succinctly summarises this productive approach as the ‘double articulation between theory and practice, whereby theory emerges from a reflexive practice at the same time that practice is informed by theory. This double articulation is central to practice-led research’ (29). The rewards of such articulation are manifold. In addition to helping practitioners to achieve their primary aim of negotiating roadblocks in the process of creating new works, practice-led research enables creative artists to contribute directly to the collective wealth and understanding of artmaking knowledge. These skills and knowledge are precisely what Hans-Peter Schwarz identifies as the ‘toolbox’ for creative works. Although his discussion is centred on fine arts, Schwarz’s observation nevertheless rings true across creative art disciplines, as he asserts in his foreword to *The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts*, edited by Michael Biggs and Henrik Karlsson, that ‘[t]here undeniably is a need … an internal need in terms of research that aims at developing the toolbox further, the instrumental resources of art production” (xxviii).

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My writing process could be seen, perhaps, as analogous to carpentry. It has been as if I have had to carve an artefact from a foreign hardwood (Vietnamese culture) with local tools (English language) that were not designed for such unfamiliar grain and dense texture. The ‘toolkit’ I had to use does not contain the precise instruments I needed to create the specific patterns I wanted to produce to represent the country (Vietnam) from which the ‘wood’ (raw material) comes. So I have had to concurrently create both tools and artefact, adapting and adding to my ‘tools’ from locally available resources. In completing my novel, I have tried to resolve the dual and interdependent tasks of creating the necessary devices to create a literary artefact that can serve as a ‘bridge’ between the disparate ‘realms’ of English and Vietnamese cultures.
Creating ‘Embers of Time’ has been as dramatic as an attempt to connect planets. I would have reconsidered doing it had I known how easily I might have fallen into outer space. Blind passion and irrepressible curiosity compelled me to embark on and persist with this perilous journey. Why would I do such a thing? The truth is, I was carrying a story, germinated from a fable that had ‘chosen’ me when I was very young. Once I turned to writing in my search for strength and clarity in a dark time in Australia, this story demanded to be told, offering in return a chance for me to understand my own experience of displacement.

Having been constrained by a history of oppression and agenda-driven modes of expression, I was drawn to alternatives to realism as a means both to escape and create. As a young reader, I escaped through *The Arabian Nights* (translated into Vietnamese from English translation by Sir Richard Burton) and tales from different cultures: Hans Christian Anderson’s fairy tales, Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, Jules Verne’s stories of extraordinary voyages and Arthur Conan Doyle’s *Sherlock Holmes*, which is packed with ingenious applications of the science of deduction. In my teens, Gabriel García Márquez and other Latin American writers ‘nourished’ me through years of disillusionment. After moving to Australia, I read works that represent ‘alternative realities’: by Salman Rushdie, Toni Morrison, Ben Okri, Günter Grass, Philip Pullman, J. R. R. Tolkien, and more recently, Alexis Wright and Yann Martel. My understanding of the diversity of narrative techniques beyond the sphere of realism was broadened through fiction associated (specifically or loosely) with Magical Realism. I absorbed and intuitively adapted methods that were closest to my natural storytelling style.

The simple fable that had haunted me conveyed only scant impressions of situations and people, without any reference to history or locale. As a child, my understanding of the fable was that it was yet another lesson to warn young people not to stray from the safely trodden path. I was deeply troubled, however, by what would have been devastating losses and challenges faced by anyone returning after a hundred years of absence to their homeland. (A ‘lifetime’ in Vietnamese culture is commonly expressed as a hundred years.)

In creating my novel, all I had to begin with were a fable that could be expressed in a single sentence and the romanticised lyrics of two 1940s songs based on it. My task, in
producing a novel-length work, involved building central and supporting characters, finding a 
‘reason’ for the young men’s fateful trip and imagining how they experienced their day in the 
fairy realm. An even bigger challenge was to imagine what happened after the fable’s ending. I 
had to ‘build’ a different ‘world’, based on research, and imagine how my main characters 
would have lived and carried on, despite their heartbreaks and obstacles. But first, I had to 
decide where and when my story would take place.

It would have been easier to imagine Lư and Nguyễn returning to Vietnam in the 
1970s and 1980s. I could have drawn on my intimate knowledge of Vietnam’s social, political 
and cultural conditions, having lived my first fifteen years there. Yet, it is still difficult for me 
to write about our early years in Vietnam, when fear and sorrow muted our inner voices. My 
choice to set the story in the nineteenth century was also driven by my fascination with this 
obscure time in Vietnam’s history. The French occupation had severed the country from its four 
thousand years of traditional ways of living, permanently altering the landscape of people’s 
lives and reconfiguring crucial aspects of Vietnamese culture. When, in 1906, the French 
abolished our traditional scripts and imposed the Romanised chữ quốc ngữ (national language) 
(Dào, Duy Anh, 271), devised by Portuguese Jesuit missionaries in the late sixteenth 
century and later formalised by Alexandre de Rhodes in 1649 (Phạm, Văn Sơn, 577), traditional texts 
were rendered inaccessible to future generations. The ‘new’ Vietnamese language, along with 
foreign terms and concepts, was only accessible to a small sector of people who worked for, or 
were educated by, the French. The majority of the people languished in cultural, social, 
educational and professional displacement and alienation during the French occupation.

For people like myself, apart from our oral history and scant written records, not much 
was known about this time. From a young age, I burned to know how Vietnamese people coped 
under French rule, and my two separate interests somehow merged as I put together my novel. 
Once I had imagined Lư and Nguyễn returning to French occupied Vietnam, the characters 
suddenly came alive. I could see what they saw and feel what they must have felt: a changed 
landscape, unfamiliar people speaking in a foreign language, alien customs. Through my past 
and present experiences, I was able to empathize with the young men, sharing their loss and 
grief on returning from a magical realm to find their homeland occupied and everything they 
onece had, gone. But to reimagine their story in a historical context, I needed more than my 
imagination: I needed facts.
I funded my own trip to Vietnam for archival research and a field trip to Sa Pa in the far northern highlands, where I had imagined the story would be located. After hours selecting specific topics at the National Archive Centre in Hà Nội, I was numbed to discover, upon delivery, that they were either in the ancient (Chinese characters) scripts, or in French, all inaccessible to me (as for most Vietnamese). This explained the scant resources across all media in my initial research from Australia. The unsuccessful archival research meant I had to trawl through Vietnam’s national university libraries for specific information in texts translated from French or ancient scripts to modern Vietnamese, across many disciplines including: Law, Politics, Medicine, Architecture, Social and Natural Sciences and Religion. Back in Australia, I extended my research to works in English by Vietnamese and other scholars. I learned far more about life in French occupied Vietnam than the specifics required for the novel, having to sift through so much information to find the needed details.

Presenting Lư’s mother as a talented young artist raised many questions, such as, in which court would she have performed? Vietnam had been torn apart during the eighteenth century by civil wars between three ruling houses: the Nguyễn lords in the south, the Trịnh lords in the north, and the powerless Lê kings, whose last cowardly king had actually invited Chinese forces to help him retain his corrupt rule. The phenomenal successes of the Tây Sơn (Rebel) brothers in clearing out the feuding lords and defeating 200,000 of Lê’s invited Chinese troops ushered in the fourth ruling house, the Tây Sơn dynasty. Each ruling house had set up court in a different location, so to authenticate Lư’s parents’ back stories and their accessibility to a court (small details in the novel), I had to check if a court was within their reach, travelling on foot or at best, on horseback. It worked out for my story that the court at the time was at Hà Nội. Perhaps readers would not care, or pick up on details such as these, but I wanted to ensure that the logistics of movements in my story were historically accurate. I believe novelists must strive for accuracy, just as scientists must strive for precision in calculations and experiments.

Scientific knowledge and research methods have been useful in solving different (some self-inflicted) problems, such as naming the constellations from the Fansipan mountain on the night my two young protagonists decided to go hunting on their own. I had decided that it would be in summer around a time of full moon, when the nights are warm, favouring outdoor activities. Entering the Eastern lunar calendar into modern Astronomy software, I found 28 August 1830 as a suitable date within the 1820s to 1830s period. Entering the coordinates of Hà
Nôi into the Skylab software with parameters allowing naked eyes to detect the moon and planets and deep sky objects among constellations, I was able to ‘see’ what the young men had ‘seen’ that night. The calculated date also verified the accuracy of my intention to choose the seventh lunar month (northern hemisphere’s mid-summer) for the friends’ fateful trip. This decision meant that they would have missed Lễ Vu Lan, the traditional Buddhist ceremony which is connected with the Vietnamese filial piety ceremony to honor living parents and/or commemorate deceased parents. This led to unforeseen irreparable consequences for the young men in breaking such a tradition.

The impact would be worse for Lưu, who would be tormented for the rest of his life, knowing that missing Lễ Vu Lan would have had a profound effect on his parents, not just on the day, but also in their remaining years. Being the only surviving son of eight children, his absence would have meant that his parents died in grief with no children to care for them in their old age or to carry out cúng thất, the release ceremonies in the seven weeks after their deaths, leaving them languishing in despair and darkness with no hope of reaching the safety of the afterlife. Lưu’s absence would also have meant that no Đám gió (annual Death Anniversary) would be held for his parents, so memories of them would have been forever lost, unshared by anyone.

Determining 1830 as the year the young men set out on their journey sowed a new ‘seed’ in the story. The results of my fact-finding, delivering remarkable coincidences, enabled my story to grow further. Through my research, I ‘discovered’ a very different ‘world’ of Vietnam under French rule. I could only offer a glimpse of the reality of Vietnamese lives during a bizarre and traumatic century (1858-1954), but hoped it could spark interest in readers, Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese alike, encouraging them to look further into this time in Vietnamese history. Among many areas that were difficult to investigate and comprehend was the dual legal system that involved both local mandarins applying feudal rules and French laws enforced by foreign officers. I had to consult many different sources to ensure historical accuracy, since each of the three regions of Vietnam (north, central and south) had a different ruling structure. The irregular distributions of power under the French meant that Vietnamese people were subjected to different legal systems depending on where they lived (Nguyễn, Thê-Anh, 140-143).
It was crucial to know the legal system under which Lư and Nguyên were detained and suffered. It was important to know that they each would have needed a French issued tiểu-bạ, the compulsory passbook that served as an official identification and work registration, used by authorities to monitor people’s movements (Nguyễn, Thê-Anh, 258). Although detained in their homeland, interrogated by mandarins, the young men, like all Vietnamese at the time, had to answer to French laws. Unfamiliar with the rules, they were rendered voiceless and defenceless. My research also unearthed many disturbing facts about life under French rule, such as the stingray whip used as an instrument of torture during interrogations. I saw one in a display case in the War Museum in Hà Nội and it haunted me, eventually appearing in ‘Embers of Time’.

My field trip to Sa Pa was most rewarding as I ‘discovered’ that many things I had imagined since my childhood were actually there! I was delighted to find a ‘Cloud Street’ meandering up the mountain (like the path to the ‘Cloud Castle’ in my novel). I saw a waterfall over a clear pond in a lush area, a terraced landscape, a misty mountain disappearing into the clouds: all things I had never seen until that trip. Buildings I saw, including the mountain village’s communal hall, became unexpected sources of concrete details for the novel.

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In developing the main characters in my story, I was guided by the meaning of names: a strong Vietnamese tradition. Keeping the names of the young men in the fable, I imagined Lư (as in phong lư: refined/gentrified people) as someone not only born to an upper-class family but also well-educated, compassionate, reflective, eloquent, rational and artistic. This reflects the traditional Vietnamese idea of ‘natural ranking’ that is still very much part of the people’s psyche: sĩ (scholars), nông (farmers), công (manual workers) and thương (merchants).

Nguyễn, a common Vietnamese (sur)name, embodies the largest sector of the population: farmers and skilled labours. Physically strong, reliable, hospitable, loyal, Nguyễn represents the common Vietnamese people, whose hard work and dependability have formed the backbone of the nation. Despite being ‘cursed’ with hardships, suffering rejection and being bullied by a bigger and older distant cousin (an unconscious construct on my part that nevertheless mirrors the long history of conflict between Vietnam and China), Nguyễn remains a faithful friend and a survivor. His family have survived the upheavals that took place during his long absence: an allusion to the strength and resilience of the Vietnamese people, secured
by close and sustaining bonds between family and friends. The naming tradition is also reflected in the ‘new’ identities given to Lư and Nguyễn by the mandarins. In Nguyễn’s case, his surname, Tạ (thank) was changed to Tử (farewell): a reference to the common parting phrase, tạ tử (thankyou and goodbye); yet his new name, Tử Minh Quyền, also means ‘farewell bright/clear loved ones’ (quyền = close persons/attachment), while his family connection is honoured through the retention of his father’s middle name, Minh.

Lư’s family are shown to have suffered an unknown ‘curse’ that saw all seven of his older siblings die very young from mysterious illnesses: a cruel irony for the family of a renowned physician. Yet, in the bigger picture, this has been the shared fate of generations of scholars and artists in Vietnam: many died young or mysteriously ‘disappeared’; others suffered ongoing harrassment or imprisonment for voicing their disenchantment with the government. For Lư’s parents, the family ‘curse’ could perhaps be seen as a consequence of their breaking tradition by marrying someone their parents disapproved of. Furthermore, by moving away from their extended families, they weakened the most important ties, bringing upon themselves (or so they believed) the ‘curse’ of isolation that subsequently manifested itself as illnesses, losses and grief. This is something I understand through an ‘inherited’ isolation resulting from my parents living away from their extended families. I was torn, twice, from secure networks of support: first in immigrating to Australia in 1988, and again when I left my extended family in Sydney to follow my husband to Adelaide in 2001, where we raised our family ‘alone’.

In my novel, most major (good or bad) decisions and solutions are made by Lư, the genteel thinker-cum-tradition-breaker. This developed intuitively rather than as a conscious decision at the start. Initially, any awareness I had of social and political structures would have been ‘felt’ rather than ‘reasoned’. Yet the development of Lư as the decision maker ‘fitted’ with Vietnamese traditions and remained as his defining characteristic. He represents Vietnamese scholars who have driven the nation forward through the ages, while at the same time suffering persecution and tremendous personal losses. The discontinuation of Lư’s family and professional standing, on a larger scale, can be seen as representing the end of the traditional way of life for Vietnamese intellectuals as a result of French occupation. Farmers and skilled labourers, like Nguyễn’s family, were also affected, but to a lesser extent.

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The female characters in ‘Embers of Time’ were added gradually over the years as my story grew. While each character plays a distinct role, collectively they represent the source of Vietnamese life. In the magical realm, the perpetual water fountain in the shape of a lotus bud can be read as a symbol (created intuitively) of Vietnamese feminism. My portrayal of the female collective grew organically from my understanding of the roles of women in Vietnamese culture – roles that have remained largely unchanged despite foreign presences and influences. The roles of women in Vietnamese culture are quite different from those of women in China or other Asian countries that I am familiar with. Alexander Woodside has noted that the ‘rights of women had always been more the mark of Vietnamese social conventions than Chinese’ (45). Nor do they reflect contemporary feminist ideals of Western countries. More than four thousand years of Vietnam’s unique history, with an expansive store of folk and contemporary literature, celebrate the contributions of women in all spheres of Vietnamese life.

Since the first century, matriarchal rulers, such as the Trung Sisters (ruled 40-43) and Triệu Thị Trinh (Lady Triệu) (ruled in 248), inspired the people to rise up against Chinese regimes to free Vietnam. Even if they were successful only for a short time, their heroic efforts remained strong examples for the people’s ongoing resistance that eventually, after ten centuries, reclaimed independence from China. The famed elephant rider, Lady Triệu, replying to her brother’s counsel not to take arms against the Chinese forces for fear of their strength and brutality, reputedly said: ‘I want to ride the strong wind, tread on fierce waves, cut down monster-fish in the Eastern Sea, clean out oppressors to save our people, [we] cannot stoop down to be slaves or concubines to others’ (translated from quote in Phạm, Văn, 128). Lady Triệu’s defiant statement was engraved on a stone wall in her homeland, recorded in history books and taught in schools. Prominent streets and central districts in capital cities are named after these heroic women.

There has been a long history of talented and celebrated Vietnamese women. The poetess Bà Huyền Thanh Quan (Madame District Chief of Thanh Quan), a Dux Laureate in 1783, held the Superintendent of Education position in Sơn Tây province (Phạm, Thế, Vol.2, 287). Princess Lê Ngọc Hân, who became Queen on marrying King Quang Trung of Tây Sơn in 1770, inspired the people through her literary works and contributed to progressive ruling by assisting the King (Vol.2, 243-247). The previously mentioned poetess Hồ Xuân Hương (‘Spring Essence’) was renowned for her satirical and unflinching take on sexuality and
women’s subjectivity. Her works, containing powerful wordplay carrying dual meanings (Vol.2, 273), have been translated into English by John Balaban. Her mystique is so enchanting that American historian Frances FitzGerald imagines her as ‘the brilliant bad girl of eighteenth century Vietnam, throwing her erotically charged darts into the sexual hypocrisy of all ages and cultures’ (quoted on the back cover of Balaban’s book). My portrayal of Lưu’s mother as a young artist might have been inspired (unconsciously) by Dào nương (Lady Dào), the renowned eleventh century singer-songwriter who is credited with creating hát Â-Dào (Dào’s poetry songs), a unique northern Vietnamese folk singing style (Phạm, Vân, 226).

Vietnamese fables are also rich with strong female figures, beginning with the country’s ‘Founding Legend’ (the ‘100 Eggs Legend’) that tells of the marriage between the Dragon King, Lạc Long Quân and the Fairy Queen Âu Cơ of the Air (bird realm). Queen Âu Cơ gave birth to 100 eggs that became the first children of the nation (Phạm, Văn Sơn, 45). Later in life, the Dragon King missed the sea, and the Queen missed the air, so each took fifty children with them back to their original realms, while still maintaining close contact and assisting each other when needed. Those who followed the Dragon King became the Vietnamese coastal people and those who went with the Fairy Queen became the mountain clans. Besides ‘explaining’ the origins of the Vietnamese people, the legend also affirms the equal roles of the ancestral Father and Mother in nation-building: each parent had equal authority and responsibility for the same number of children.

Vietnamese feminism is also well-presented in the large body of folk literature. An example is the legend Bồi Liên tiên (Shared King’s Carriage Fairy) associated with King Lê Thánh Tôn, the fifteenth century poet and founder of the Genteel Gathering Guild. This King met a poetess-nun in Ngọc Hồ temple. Believing her to be a fairy, he commissioned the Vọng tiên lầu (Fairy lookout tower) in the palace’s foreground, to commemorate her extraordinary talent (Phạm, Thê, Vol.2, 103). Strong female characters also appear in many works of fiction. Among the most famous and enduring of the Vietnamese literary heroines is Kiều, in Truyện Kiều (Tale of Kiều), an epic poem of 75 chapters written in the traditional form of poetry by Nguyễn Du (1765-1820) (Vol.2, 348-385). This work has been translated into English by Huỳnh Sanh Thông and published in a bilingual edition. A pinnacle of literary achievement and subject of scholarly studies, the epic poem Truyện Kiều remains relevant in Vietnamese lives after more than two centuries, learned by heart and recited by the populace as the most loved and quoted Vietnamese work of all times.
Folk poems about women’s strength and values are numerous in all regions in Vietnam, such as this ca dao from my parents’ hometown, Bình Định, the heartland of the Vietnamese martial art Võ Bình Định and homeland of the (Rebel) King Quang Trung of the Tây Sơn dynasty (traditional rhymes, my translation):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ai về Bình Định mà coi,} \\
\text{Đàn bà cũng biết múa roi, đi quỳ nền.} \\
(\text{Come to Bình Định to see,} \\
\text{Women are also versed in using whips, martial arts.)}
\end{align*}
\]

The locals, however, have made some (bold) variations, such as this (traditional rhymes, my translation):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ai về Bình Định mà coi,} \\
\text{Đàn bà cũng biết xách roi trị chồng.} \\
(\text{Come to Bình Định to see,} \\
\text{Women are also versed in using whips to discipline their husbands.)}
\end{align*}
\]

Or this northern ca dao, one of many that extol the virtues and values of women, some at the expense of men or poking fun at them good-naturedly (in Phạm, Thế, Vol. 1, 32, my translation):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ba đờ mót mỏ đàn ông,} \\
\text{Đem về mà bỏ vào lòng cho kiến nó tha.} \\
\text{Ba trăm mót mụ đàn bà,} \\
\text{Đem về mà trái chiều hoa cho ngời.} \\
(\text{Three đờng for a bunch of men,} \\
\text{Leave them in the cage for the ants to take away.} \\
\text{Three hundred đờng for a woman,} \\
\text{Bring her home and set her on a flower mat.)}
\end{align*}
\]

Vietnamese folk literature is a rich tapestry, revealing the people’s perception and expression of a particular kind of Vietnamese feminism that has been evident since ancient times. Chivalry has also been strong but has been grounded in respect for, and valuing of, women, rather than in
a sense of male superiority. While Vietnamese women (occupied with raising children and caring for elderly parents/grandparents) still have a gap to bridge with the male population on professional and political fronts, both sexes have been considered more or less ‘equal’ in everyday living.

Real women have been the most influential figures in shaping my understanding of Vietnamese feminism. The first and foremost ‘female chieftain’ in my life is my mother, who has always been the embodiment of the Vietnamese nội trưởng (nội = interior, trưởng = general), the title bestowed by the people on the mother/matriarch of the family. Born into a long-line family of scholars, my mother raised her children to the standards that she was brought up to expect, extending her influence and responsibilities beyond her immediate family, to other relatives and in-laws. Maintaining her independence by holding a professional position in the local government’s finance department, she concurrently raised seven (surviving out of ten) children and half a dozen nieces and nephews from the village, some until they had completed tertiary education.

It may appear at odds with Western feminists’ notions of ‘liberated’ women that my mother undertook all domestic chores, including making everything by hand and feeding us freshly cooked meals every day. However, she fulfilled her tasks with the same dedication and enthusiasm she brought to teaching us all Literature, Poetry, History and Mathematics. As girls and young women, we were raised to be equally capable in our domestic environment as in school and in workplaces, and were praised equally for achievements in any domain. This is quite different from ‘models’ of ‘successful’ women, in Western cultures. We were empowered through honing practical skills that enabled us to be self-reliant, and with competencies in professional spheres that gave us the chance of independence. This, perhaps, is a different ‘key’ to our ‘liberation’: through training and effort, we were enabled to make choices, both at home and in the world.

Other women in my life (grandmothers, aunties, sisters, teachers, cousins and family friends) have reinforced my understanding of the collective efforts of Vietnamese women, who have been instrumental in the survival of the people throughout Vietnam’s countless wars. While men were fighting at the frontline, women raised children and ‘fought’ for their living back home, taking on the roles of breadwinners, educators, traders, fenders, and effective ‘all-rounders’. They continued steering the nation forward while passing on their knowledge to
future generations and maintaining the values of their forebears. These real ‘models’ have undoubtedly shaped the way I understand the roles of women in the family and society, and have subsequently influenced my construction of different female characters in ‘Embers of Time’.

* 

In my novel, the represented ‘day’ in the magical realm was an opportunity for me to focus on the wisdom, hospitality, friendship and potency of women. Not only do these ‘fairy’ hostesses enjoy admirable efficiency in the governance of their domains, they also inspire respect, trust and a desire to attain ‘higher order’ interactions between people, creatures and their shared environment. Initially, I was not fully aware of the significance of this section, concentrating only on bringing to life the impressions painted by the songs I had heard about the young men’s time in the Realm. In revising subsequent drafts, I came to recognise this intuitive construct as my paying homage to the traditional multi-faceted roles of Vietnamese women – prior to foreign influences. The ‘powers’ of the fairy women can be seen as a manifestation of the women’s deep understanding of, and respect for, every living thing, evident in their intelligent interactions across different domains. This approach inherently brings out the best qualities and contributions from everyone, undoubtedly influenced by my Buddhist background. In fact, life in the magical realm could be loosely defined as the common people’s vision of nirvana, where peace and harmony preside, where there is no pain or cruelty. Despite being brought up in a Buddhist tradition, Lưu and Nguyễn only become aware of the impact of hunting and killing during their time in the Realm. This sheds light on how their people in Tịnh Vân village have interpreted the Five Precepts differently from ‘pure’ Buddhist teachings to eradicate suffering, the first of which is to abstain from killing.

The representation of Buddhism in the magical realm reflects the permeation of Buddhism, over 2000 years, into every sphere of Vietnamese living and cultural beliefs (including ancestral worshipping, filial piety, shrines for national heroes, local deities and spiritual guardians). Buddhism is responsible for the ‘adoption’ of the Boddhisattava of Compassion as the ‘spiritual’ mother of all Buddhist people. Appearing in different guises in myths and legends, the Bhoddisattva of Compassion is believed to have come to the aid of the poor and disadvantaged and saved innocents from unfortunate circumstances, being the compassionate all-seeing-always-capable mother who is able to tend to everyone in need. An unassailable ‘connection’ between Buddhist Vietnamese mothers and the Boddhisattava of
Compassion is the absolute faith of the former that praying to the latter will assist with any situation involving their families’ safety or well-being. ‘Embers of Time’ is inevitably steeped in such rituals. Lư’s mother, for example, is tireless in her efforts to keep him safe throughout his childhood, and her precious gift of the Bhoddisattva statue on his departure reflects her faith.

Re-editing the final draft of my novel, years after it was first created, I realised how much my own memories, experiences and practices have fed my work. As a wedding gift over twenty years ago, my mother gave me a gold-trimmed jade statue of the Buddha as a blessing and an enduring wish for our safety and happiness. Other fragments of our past have also found their way into my work, such as Nguyễn’s rampant garden, unconsciously modelled on my maternal grandparents’ estate, while Lư has ‘inherited’ crucial traits from my maternal grandfather, a scholar and dedicated physician.

Through my researching and writing, I have come to understand that there is no such thing as pure imagination. Our lives – experienced, shared and reimagined in literature, plays and movies – invariably ‘feed’ our creative work. What we produce on the page does not come from a vacuum. I have come across similar reflections by Márquez, who recounts in his autobiography, Living to Tell the Tale (2002), that the name Macondo (appearing in three of his works) came from his fascination with a banana plantation with a train station, standing alone, with no surrounding town or signs of occupation, near his childhood home in Aracataca (19). In the same volume, Márquez writes about his mother with love and reverence, using words such as ‘exquisite skills’ and ‘tremendous strength of character’. Her ‘matriarchal power’, he writes, ‘extended to the most distant relatives ... like a planetary system’ (7). These are exact descriptions (among many) he uses in portraying the matriarch Úrsula in One Hundred Years of Solitude, further discussed in chapter 4. Márquez reaffirms the importance of lived experiences as inspiration for his creative works in the 1981 Paris Review interview, insisting that ‘there’s not a single line in all my work that does not have a basis in reality’ (186). In completing my novel and reflecting on my creative processes, it is beyond doubt that writing is, for me, an organic process: absorbing, digesting and growing from the experience of life. New stories are created in the hope that I can represent its richness in new ways, shaped by my understanding and appreciation of the world in infinite intersections of individuals’ and communities’ contributions.
Chapter 4: Intimate Connections and Parallel Constructions

Reader-response theories since the 1970s have focussed attention on the possibility of a wide spectrum of readers’ interpretations of any given literary work. ‘Natural’ reactions to aspects of a work may overshadow other aspects that are other people’s foci, especially if that work is ‘new’, whether in its style, contents or mode(s) of expression. A ‘foreign’ work is another step further, having been informed by, set and created in a framework unfamiliar to the reader. Given the large spectrum of cultural, literary, religious, political and social practices across the globe, seen through personal ‘lenses’, readers might arrive at very different observations or interpretations of a ‘foreign’ work from those intended by the creator(s). Due to this exegesis’ limited scope, I will focus only on two major aspects of Gabriel García Márquez’s novel, One Hundred Years of Solitude, that resonate strongly with the Vietnamese way of living and with which my novel, ‘Embers of Time’, shares considerable parallels. The first is a particular ‘brand’ of locally defined feminism. The second is approaches to surviving trauma and grief.

* * *

Among the many Western critics who have negative views about the ‘secondary’ status of women in One Hundred Years of Solitude is Irvin Solomon. In ‘Latin American Women in Literature and Reality: García Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude’ (1993), Solomon’s disapproval of the treatment of women in the novel is strongly expressed: ‘As a whole, the women of Macondo are pictured as male-defined, biological reproducers or sexually pleasing objects who are treated thematically as accessories to the men who actually shape and control the world’ (200). My perception of the women’s roles and their representation in the novel is the direct opposite of Solomon’s, having read them through the lens of Vietnamese feminism.

The roles of the Buendía family matriarch, Úrsula Iguarán, bear strong resemblance to the Vietnamese concept of nội trúng or the ‘Interior General’. With the same strength and endurance of the Vietnamese ‘Interior General’, Úrsula is able ‘with … mad tenacity [to watch] over the survival of the line’ (213). It could be argued that Úrsula’s extraordinary long life, surviving generations of her offspring, fulfilled the very purpose of survival, ensuring her loved ones were properly fed and cared for in any way they needed. Throughout her life, Úrsula’s
strength and accomplishments are unmistakable, well ‘documented’ and acknowledged, if not revered, by her family and the Macondo people.

There could not be stronger indications of high regard for a woman than the respect commanded by Úrsula immediately from her introduction as an ‘active, small, severe … woman of unbreakable nerves’ (9). These traits, combined with her ‘capacity for work the same as that of her husband … José Acadio Buendía, … the most enterprising man ever to be seen in the village’ (9), known for his ‘extraordinary strength which permitted him to pull down a horse by grabbing its ears’ (5), enable Úrsula to execute her tasks with the ‘implacable labor of a small ant’ (13). Such qualities see Úrsula not only accomplishing remarkable feats of maintaining and providing for generations of her family, but also withstanding adversities, natural and man-made disasters, as well as standing up to men’s disagreeable decisions.

From the early days in their marriage, Úrsula resists her husband’s intention to move away from Macondo, insisting ‘with a soft firmness’ that ‘If I have to die for the rest of you to stay here, I will die’ (14). Later, when her husband is ‘too absorbed in his fantastic speculations’ (16) that see him ‘completely abandon his domestic obligations’ (4), she singlehandedly raises her children, breaking her back in the garden, growing a range of food. She then sets up and expands a prosperous enterprise of making candies, producing ‘a prodigious variety’ of baked goods to support a growing family, while her husband is lost in the ‘chimerical world’ (57) of his ‘scientific experiments’ that bring more harm than good: burning himself with concentrated sun rays (3); staying up all night to watch the stars (4); succumbing to insomnia (45-50); eventually falling into an irrecoverable madness. José squanders the family savings in his pursuits, almost destroying their home, emotionally, mentally, and physically through his experiments. Úrsula, on the other hand, takes the initiative to renovate and extend their home to nine bedrooms with formal spaces for receiving guests in anticipation of her adult children’s needs (56-58).

Throughout her long life, Úrsula stands up to men’s unacceptable decisions time and again. She shouts at, whips and chases her grandson, Arcadio, for his brutality in wielding his power with the rebel force. Úrsula takes control of Macondo, restores its order and rules the town from that day (108-109). She stands up to Father Nicanor, who disallows the burial of Pietro Crespi – former fiancé of Úrsula’s adopted daughter Rebeca and current lover of her daughter Amaranta – because Crespi committed suicide after being rejected by Amaranta.
Declaring Crespi ‘a saint’, Úrsula conducts a ‘magnificent funeral’ with the whole town’s support and buries him against the strict Father’s order (113). With her body, Úrsula protects her grandson, Acardio, from the aim of soldiers’ rifles in the last siege of the rebel force (121); and later, without permission, she visits her son, Colonel Aureliano Buendía in prison, prior to his impending execution. Úrsula pushes her way in against the sentries, warning them: ‘I’m going in in any case ... so if you have orders to shoot, start right in’ (126). Even past a hundred years of age, Úrsula perseveres against attempts by generations of men to persuade, cajole and trick her into revealing the location of buried gold left with her for safekeeping, while continuing to search for the rightful owner to return his gold (334). These are just a few of many examples of Ursula’s power, but they suffice to contest Solomon’s view that that Garcia Márquez’s women are all ‘male-defined ... (objects) to the men who actually shape and control the world’.

In One Hundred Years of Solitude, in a way that exactly befits my understanding of the ‘Interior General’ roles of Vietnamese mothers, Úrsula’s strength, resilience and steadfast heart see her become the centre of her ‘planetary system’ (267). Úrsula’s love and dedication, expressed through meaningful actions, enable her to excel simultaneously in multiple roles: wife, mother, adoptive mother, mother-in-law, grand- to great-great-grandmother and generous hostess. Very much like a Vietnamese mother, Úrsula’s heroic efforts are focussed on providing the best for her family, including a sanctuary-like home in which she works ‘from dawn until quite late at night’ (340), ensuring that ‘the floors ... the unwhitewashed mud walls ... the rustic wooden furniture ... were always clean, and the old chests [...for] their clothes exhaled the warm smell of basil’ (9). Even when she is over a hundred years old and blind, the same ‘spirit of her invincible heart’ (340) sees her waging battles against natural disasters. After the four-year rain she is ‘up before dawn’ to restore her ruined home and she ‘[does] not have a moment of repose’, determined to ‘knock down every obstacle in her path’ and consequently succeeding (340-1).

Úrsula’s qualities of leadership enable her to take unforeseen challenges in her stride. Her generous and hospitable spirit endures into her very old age; she feeds ‘the avalanche of foreigners’ who come to her home following the opening of Macondo train station (234-235); she caters for her great-great-granddaughter Meme’s seventy-two guests during summer vacation (265-267); she welcomes generations of illegitimate offspring to her home, raising them as her own. (In this context, I cannot help but remember my mother’s experience of
housing and feeding dozens of relatives for months during the war evacuations: welcoming the arrivals of friends and acquaintances at any time; inviting stranded strangers to our home, especially during her ‘food-smuggling’ trips; raising her stepchildren as her own).

Úrsula’s enduring love, constancy and accomplishments become a nurturing source and foundation of security for all the people in her life, who are drawn to her like planets to a central sun. Her husband, José Acadio Buendía, founder of Macondo, despite being an independent and strong-willed man, confers with and defers only to his wife. In his final years, Úrsula is the only person who can communicate with him, when his mind has ‘sunk in an abyss of unawareness’ (109). Similar love and respect for Úrsula are also shown by her sons. The oldest, José Acadio, after years living abroad and surviving sixty-five dangerous trips sailing around the world, endures yet another long journey that stops only when he has reached his mother in her kitchen (92-93). This son of ‘monumental size’ is no ordinary man. José Acadio’s presence gives ‘the quaking impression of a seismic tremor’; his ‘cyclonic power’ is displayed by his ‘bestial belching’ and ‘volcanic breathing’. He eats sixteen raw eggs at once and when he removes a counter from a bar it takes eleven men to put it back (93-95). Despite his immense physique and general disregard for rules and proprieties – such as ‘raffling himself off’ to red-light district women for cash (93), then marrying his adopted sister, Rebeca (96), and continuing his carefree living until his sudden death – his love and respect for his mother is deeply ingrained. After he is mysterious killed in his bedroom, a line of his blood runs from under the door across the village, trails around obstacles, climbs slopes and stairs to reach his mother in the kitchen to ‘inform’ her of his death (135). Furthermore, Úrsula’s second son, Colonel Aureliano Buendía, writes letters only to her during the wars. Here is the testament to Úrsula’s status as the centre of her ‘planetary system’.

In *A Hundred Years of Solitude*, the love and attachment of the men for their mothers (or mother-figures) at times crosses the border of filial/familial love. José Acadio’s affection for Úrsula seeps into the young man’s unconscious fantasy so that, in his first sexual encounter, he tries to recall the face of his mature lover, Pilar Ternera, but sees instead his mother’s face (28). This pattern continues in later generations, manifest in the intimate relationship between Úrsula’s daughter Amaranta and her nephew, Aureliano José, who so passionately adores her that, even after she has severed the impossible relationship, he continues fantasizing over other older women, ‘idealized in the darkness and changed into Amaranta’ (147). It must be acknowledged that while these devotions reflect the power of women in Macondo people’s
lives, without self-control, such confused obsessions become a curse and the root of self-destruction, manifesting in a ‘biblical hurricane’ that wipes out Macondo (422).

There is a spectrum of characters in *A Hundred Years of Solitude*, but it can be argued that, among the central figures, the female characters are portrayed as more responsible, hardworking, self-disciplined, dependable, and resilient – both physically and mentally – than their male counterparts. While Úrsula and her female descendants continue in their roles as carers, providers and supporters of others and their environment until their old age, the male characters – Úrsula’s husband and male descendants – chase their personal interests. They obsess over pseudo-scientific investigations (husband), seek fortune and adventures (first son), go to wars and remain psychologically ‘missing’ even after returning from battle fields and prisons (second son, the Colonel). Úrsula’s husband goes mad, her first son dies young, the second is unreachable. The surviving males continue focusing on personal interests: the retired Colonel locks himself up to make little gold fishes; other male descendants occupy themselves with cock fights, gaming and womanizing among other frivolous pursuits. They are then killed or go missing in revolutions. One with a lucid mind, Aureliano, resolves to lock himself in a room to decipher an ancient parchment. In terms of positive traits, the women contribute far more to the collective good than the men.

*There are considerable parallels between ‘Embers of Time’ and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. First and foremost is the respect and affection of the men for their mothers or maternal figures. For Nguyễn, the only person he defers to is his oldest sister-in-law, Sương, who has raised him as her own since taking on the role of the family matriarch, following her marriage to the oldest brother, Long. Nguyễn concedes to her wishes for a large, formal engagement to his fiancée and, later, agrees to pray to the village Guardians before the hunting trip. Nguyễn makes these concessions out of love and respect, for Sương’s peace of mind.

Lưu’s love and reverence for his mother are close to idolisation. He unconsciously looks for similar traits and accomplishments in potential brides, only to find no young lady can match his expectations or entrance him, as his mother does, through her talents and exceptional qualities. That he has fallen in love with a maiden in the Realm reveals his unconscious need for extraordinary qualities in a young woman: not only beauty, privilege and refinement, but also something mystical, such as the mystique surrounding his mother’s early years. Nga’s
primary attractions, combined with the potential difficulties (language barrier, family and social expectations) Lư has to overcome to establish a relationship with her as a maiden from the Realm, paradoxically heighten his desire. Fear of, and anxieties about, a possible failure intensify Lư’s excitement and determination to make this relationship work. These are very similar conditions to those Lư’s father had to overcome in order to marry Lư’s high-class mother. Evidently, Lư’s affection and reverence for his mother have shaped his emotional and romantic responses to women to an extent that he himself might not be aware of. In the Realm, Lư recognises noble features in the Mistress of the Cloud Castle, Lady Minh, that are similar to his mother’s. Admittedly, his natural tendency to associate admiration with affection for women (and putting them on pedestals) is potentially a weakness and a possible source of disappointment and disillusionment in his personal life.

The second, and major, aspect of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* that resonates closely with the Vietnamese way of living, is the people’s approach to surviving trauma and grief. In Márquez’s novel, the drive behind the desire of the young couple, Úrsula and José Acadio Buen día, to search for a new land is the need for healing from their shared grief. In an outburst after losing a cockfight to José, an acquaintance, Prudencio Aguilar, insinuates that the winner is impotent and is killed by José. Thereafter, both Úrsula and José continue to ‘see’ Prudencio’s ghost and ‘talk’ to him; grieving for the dead man’s pain and loss, they decide to leave their hometown to let the ghost rest in peace (23). Hoping that they can start anew in a distant land, the couple find, to their dismay, that the ghost has ‘followed’ them to Macondo. In his later years, when José resides under the chestnut tree, the ghost becomes his only contact, keeping José company in ‘the house of infinite rooms’ until, and beyond, his death (143). Such enduring companionship, although strange to ‘outsiders’ (Western readers, in particular), can be seen as a manifestation of unresolved grief: the sufferer attempts to find closure by making peace with the ghost through an unusual friendship.

Maintaining ‘relationships’ with ghosts is among coping mechanisms Vietnamese reach for in surviving loss and grief. Survivors believe, through ‘communication’ with the dead, they can console them or seek their forgiveness, resolve their differences and make amends for past mistakes or misdeeds. When ghost(s) follow their survivors to a new land, however, it becomes apparent that the sufferers are unable to shed their emotional and psychological burdens from
their past traumatic experience. Works in Vietnamese represent characters in comparable situations of grief, particularly in the aftermath of wars or unresolved death(s) of loved one(s). Most of these works, however, were written by authors in my parents’ generation (such as Nguyễn Tuân’s renowned novel, Chùa Đàn (Đàn Temple), first published in 1945). These writers had not yet been constrained by communist censorship or driven by the anti-war and anti-communist sentiments that heavily influenced fiction and non-fiction works during, and post, Vietnam War years.

There are relatively few works in English (apart from the recognised genre of ‘ghost’ stories) that allude to ‘interactions’ with ghosts (or beings from a spiritual realm). It is important to note that, in Vietnamese literature, not all ‘communications’ with ghosts are healing, or indeed, sought by participants. The novella Anguli Ma: A Gothic Tale, by Vietnamese-Australian author Chi Vu, tells a layered survival story of a group of Vietnamese boat people in suburban Melbourne. Fleeing the country in the tumultuous post-Vietnam War period, a group of women arrive empty-handed and without any support in Australia. Bearing heavy loads of traumatic wartime experience compounded by their harrowing boat trips, the immigrants’ attempts at leaving their past behind and building a new life in Australia are thwarted when a malevolent ghost, Anguli Ma, turns up and seeks lodging at their place. The ghost is a maimed and tormented victim of war, turned killer, who wears his victims’ fingers as a necklace to salve his physical and psychological pain. Having followed the vulnerable women to their new country, he preys on them. The ‘communication’ and ‘interactions’ between Anguli Ma and the women are ‘real’, just like those between José Acadio Buen día and the ghost of Prudencio Aguilar in One Hundred Years of Solitude.

When displaced people navigate unfamiliar terrains, physically and psychologically, unresolved loss and grief are often among their hidden burdens. In seeking pathways to healing, Columbian and Vietnamese communities appear to be open to interpretations of, and belief in, the possible existence of a ‘spiritual realm’. This results in remarkable parallels between the Vietnamese and Columbian people’s unconventional approaches to mitigation of psychological pain, by turning to traditional practices. While these might seem strange to Western rationalists, such approaches can be productive for people seeking alternative means to progress beyond a bewildering reality, when rational, scientific solutions are not available. In One Hundred Years of Solitude, in the wake of political, social, familial or personal upheavals, members of the Macondo community instinctively turn to ‘spiritual’ means to find possible ways forward from
an impasse. This can be seen even in crucial decisions impacting the whole community: the patriarch José Arcadio Buendía, for example, follows his ‘guiding dream’ of the houses of mirrors and the name Macondo that rings with a ‘supernatural echo’ (24), halting the exploration party after almost two years and founding the town by the river. On a personal level, the practical, strong-minded and scientifically-oriented Buendía patriarch (he had independently and painstakingly observed planetary movements to deduce the scientific fact, still unknown in Macondo at the time, that ‘the earth is round, like an orange’ (5)) turns to a ‘spiritual’ solution for his unresolved grief by forming a close friendship with the ghost of Prudencio Aguilar, whom he had killed as a young man. This enduring companionship affords José much needed peace later in life. He wholeheartedly believes that the ghost has not only forgiven him, but also ‘end[s] up loving his worst enemy’ (79). In difficult times, unconventional means of coping are naturally sought by Macondo people, such as consulting the cards (often offered by Pilar Ternera), conferring with ghosts and seeking wise counsel from revered (dead) elders, including Melquíades, the gypsy with an extraordinary reservoir of scientific and ancient knowledge.

Very similar practices have been (and still are) engaged in by Vietnamese people, such as those outlined in Chánh Công Phan’s paper, ‘The Vietnamese Concept of the Human Souls and the Rituals and Birth and Death’. While the people may not be actively seeking ghosts, or attempting to ‘prove’ their existence, it is still common practice for them to pray to their ancestors in milestone ceremonies (weddings, births and deaths of family members), to hold (Buddhist) release ceremonies following a loved one’s funeral (to send him/her off safely to the new ‘destination’) and to prepare annual remembrance offerings to commemorate his/her life. On a practical level, these rituals enable grieving people to gradually heal from their losses, through completing specific tasks and milestones (Phan, 175-182). But by the same token, these rituals ‘allow’ people to interpret, or believe in, the possibility of their ‘seeing’ or ‘communicating’ with ghosts (172-3). This is a common aspect of Vietnamese living, well presented in oral story-telling, legends, fables and myths.

This aspect of ‘unreality’ in a story or story-telling approach, viewed from the rational perspective inherent in most Western cultures, might be questioned. Yet as Gabriel García Márquez recounted in a 1981 interview with The Paris Review, he could only write his novel after he had ‘discovered the right tone’: that is, the voice of his grandmother, who ‘told things that sounded supernatural and fantastic ... with complete naturalness’ (188). The secret to this
narrative method, Márquez recalled, was ‘to believe in them myself and write them with the same expression with which my grandmother told them: with a brick face’ (188). Recognising that ‘the Caribbean reality resembles the wildest imagination’ (186), Márquez identified the need to convey the Columbia story through the local story-telling mode. This not only facilitated the creation of authentic voices and particular responses to unpredictable circumstances, but it also secured coherence by matching an unconventional tale with an unconventional (locally available) narrative style. With personal inventions and adaptations, Márquez was able to create authentic stories without the constraints of Western rationalism.

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Columbia has a complex history as a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual country, whose languages, cultures and beliefs are mixed and fed by local literature, politics and social conditions (Galbraith, 8-40, 135-168, and Reichel-Dolmatoff, 80-168). The bizarre reality of Columbian life, reimagined by Márquez in One Hundred Years of Solitude, is very relatable to the political dimensions of Vietnamese life. In Márquez’s novel, the people’s dissent, presented in a peaceful gathering of workers and their families during the banana strike, is ‘solved’ by the swift silencing of more than three thousand people, whose bodies are then transported by train for disposal: ‘the man corpses, woman corpses, child corpses ... thrown into the sea like rejected bananas’ (312). Predictably, the government’s official statement on the event is: ‘Nothing has happened in Macondo, nothing has ever happened, and nothing ever will happen. This is a happy town’ (316). While insisting that the workers ‘had returned home in peaceful groups’, the government continues with nightly raids during which ‘they knocked doors down with their rifle butts, hauled suspects out of their beds and took them off on trips from which there was no return. The search for and extermination of ... rebels was still going on, but the military denied it even to the relatives of the victims’ (315-316). Prior to the strike, when the retired Colonel Aureliano Buendia expresses anger at the regime’s brutal treatment of the people, all of his seventeen sons are ‘hunted down like rabbits by invisible criminals who aimed at the centre of their crosses of ash’ (245). The ‘crosses of ashes’ on the young men’s foreheads are the symbol of their father’s ‘sin’ in speaking out against the all-powerful regime.

It shook me to read this, over thirty years ago in Vietnam, because both the broad picture and the finer details of the political situation in Macondo reminded me so much of our own (post-Vietnam War) reality. On the large scale, as a precautionary measure against the
people’s potential or presumed dissent, based purely on their history of employment by the ex-government, hundreds of thousands of men were sent to ‘re-education’ camps, or on land-clearing missions in inhabitable jungle or bomb destroyed areas, labelled as the ‘New Economic Zones’. Others who protested or escaped the directive were hunted down; many ‘disappeared’ during this turbulent time. My oldest brother, Tuân, was one of the many men who lived years without a home, moving in shadows and seeking shelter in roof spaces and train stations. My family endured raids and feared for his life, witnessing over the years the brutality of the communist government. The political scene in One Hundred Years of Solitude resonated closely with our way of living.

A repercussion of living under duress is allegorised by Márquez in the novel as an ‘insomnia plague’ that takes hold of Macondo (45). The terrible consequence of this condition is the ‘irrevocable sinking into the quicksand of forgetfulness’ (50) that leads to memory loss: an inescapable path to amnesia. This metaphor for the impact of psychological and emotional strain is strikingly relevant to the Vietnamese way of living as I was growing up. Sleepless nights were a reality for our mother, as for millions of other mothers, wives and grandparents, who missed and feared for their absent sons, husbands and male relatives living in dangerous or impoverished conditions away from home. Others grieved for family members missing since the turbulent last days of the war, when tens of thousands of people fled the besieged cities. Many died along the way, some were picked up by retreating US armies, but without news from them or any help from an indifferent government, there was little hope of locating them, dead or alive.

Similar suffering was shared by families whose members escaped the country on boats (Ha, 3-5); their loved ones’ lives hung in the balance, but they would not ever be seen again, either way. It was unimaginable at the time that the government would ever allow escapees to return for visits, so the fear for their lives and the grief of losing them were doubly crippling. Amnesia could have been a ‘solution’ to the people’s suffering; some had in fact succumbed to grief and continued living a shell-shocked kind of existence. Furthermore, we were subjected to another, enforced or ‘induced’ form of amnesia: the rewriting of our history. The deliberate blanking out of events and people’s lives ensured the documentation of a ‘flawless transition’ into communism. It was proclaimed on our behalf that we were ‘freed’ from the foreign-influenced ex-government; reinforced concurrently by the confiscation of unapproved literature (past and current local and translated works not subscribing to communist imperatives), arrest
and imprisonment of people who hid or shared such literature, and dissemination of communist-socialist propaganda (Nguyễn, Hùng Quốc, ‘Vietnamese Communist Literature (1975-1990)’, 123-136). Apparently we had ‘benefited’ from the ‘unifying’ armies and of course there was no loss or injustice suffered by anyone. ‘Nothing has happened or ever will happen. This is a happy town [country]’ (316): with a single word replaced, Márquez could have been writing about our country, Vietnam.

The themes of insomnia and amnesia are particularly pertinent to Vietnam’s history during the French colonial time, and consequently appear in ‘Embers of Time’. Sleepless nights are arguably a ‘natural’ consequence for the young men, Lư and Nguyễn, on returning home after a hundred years to find they have lost everyone and everything they once had, and during their nights in detention, suffering with injuries while despairing over an unknown future. In a historical context, the whole nation had already been affected by the equivalent of an ‘insomnia plague’ for over half a century prior to their returning. Millions of families had been sleepless with the loss of their former way of living; struggling with discrimination, division and hardships; planning for their survival and plotting to bring down their oppressors, which brought more grief with further losses that worsened their insomniac condition. Meanwhile, there was no better way to induce – and cement – a nationwide amnesia than to sever a people from their history. By replacing the ancient scripts with the Romanised national language, the French effected an erasure of the past by rendering thousands of years of Vietnamese literature, cultural and historical records inaccessible to future generations. Historical and political amnesia were repeatedly attempted on Vietnamese people as a means to control: by China for ten centuries (111 B.C. to 939 A.D); three invasion campaigns by Mongolia in the thirteenth century (Phạm, Vạn 258-9); by the French and other foreign forces in ‘modern’ times. It seemed that, having survived persistent attempts at assimilation and annihilation by foreigners, our people have developed some ‘immunity’ against the latest attempt by the communist government to erase and rewrite our recent painful past.

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From a philosophically perspective, the Macondo people’s approach to living (like the Vietnamese, in comparable circumstances) could be viewed through the lens of the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialism. Faced with unexpected challenges and hardships, the Macondo people, quintessentially represented by the Buendía family members, take the
precise approach that Sartre posits in *Existentialism and Human Emotions*: ‘You are nothing else than your life’ (33). The patriarch José Arcadio Buendía strives to find a habitable land in which to resettle his family and friends. He then rebuilds from the ground not only his own home but the entire Macondo village. The patriarch is determined to improve living conditions for his people through scientific knowledge, driven by the fear that, being so isolated from the mainland, ‘we’re going to rot our lives away here without receiving the benefits of science’ (13). His every act and decision, although not always rational or indeed beneficial for himself, is dedicated (if ineffectually) to a greater cause. His efforts are conducted ‘with the abnegation of a scientist and even at the risk of his own life’ (3). This approach to living reflects Sartre’s existential definition: ‘Man is nothing else than his plan; he exists only to the extent that he fulfils himself […] nothing else than a series of undertakings, that he is the sum, the organization, the ensemble of the relationships which make up these undertakings’ (32-33).

The same approach is evident in the way Úrsula conducts her life. At over a hundred years of age and blind, Úrsula ‘concentrated on a silent schooling in the distances of things and people’s voices, so that she would still be able to see with her memory … later on she was to discover the unforeseen help of odors’ (252). Unlike her husband, she keeps ‘her mental balance intact’ (194). The endeavours of both husband and wife, while quite different and not always successful according to their plans and hopes, nevertheless strongly demonstrate the essence of Sartre’s existentialism: a rejection of quietism, an attitude that says: ‘Let others do what I can’t do’ (Sartre, 31). The Macondo people have what Sartre termed ‘an optimistic toughness’ (33) in the face of existential crises.

Above all facets of living, ‘optimistic toughness’ is perhaps the strongest ‘connection’ between the people of Macondo and the Vietnamese. For a people conditioned through so many wars and foreign occupations, to *exist* implicitly entails having some purpose in living. Actions, no matter how small or disconnected at the start, can add up, just as ripples of similar frequencies reinforce one another and create larger waves. In Vietnam, such ‘ripples’ have brought observable results, particularly in post-Vietnam War years and in the resettlement of Vietnamese immigrants abroad. Despite losses and failures, what Sartre termed the ‘quietism attitude’ has been largely rejected by the Vietnamese people. Recognising that success can be achieved with collective effort, the people have chosen persistent action to accomplish what needs to be done. This, the essence of Sartre’s existential principle, has given meaning to their
lives: ‘the only hope [for man] is in his acting and that action is the only thing that enables a man to live’ (Sartre, 36).

‘Embers of Time’ represents the Vietnamese people’s ‘optimistic toughness’ (although mostly on a subconscious level), reflected in the decisions and actions of characters in each generation. Lư’s parents’ decision to cross social barriers, defy social stigma and marry against their families’ advice, then moving away to raise a family on their own despite unforeseen hardships are all difficult choices to make, but their actions match their aim to achieve a meaningful and rewarding existence. Their courage is consistent with their values: approaching challenges constructively, raising Lư in a happy family and contributing in meaningful ways to the community. Their principles and decisions are good examples for Lư, who not only loves and respects his parents as a good son, but also seeks their advice in difficult times. Facing a very different world on his return from the Realm, Lư continues to imagine how his parents would have navigated the new challenges he faces.

Lư’s and Nguyễn’s choices and actions, which lie at the centre of the story, reflect what Sartre proposed as the core of existence: ‘There is no reality except in action’ (32). Throughout the novel, the friends prove, time and again, that actions are what count. Even as a young boy, Nguyễn’s persistence in searching for his missing friend saves Lư’s life. Likewise, Lư’s automatic response saves Nguyễn from the giant tropical snakes. Lư carries his concussed friend home from the forest, defends Nguyễn from bullies and speaks for him at critical moments, not only saving Nguyễn from difficult situations but also proving to himself his own values. While Lư’s impulsive decision for the breakaway hunting trip costs them much and irrevocably alters their lives, it is also his immediate action – against his dislike of cold water and fear of fast currents – that saves his best friend and others in the storm. Despite unalterable circumstances and heartbreaks – from losing his family and losing hope of reuniting with his first love, Nga – Lư perseveres with making a meaningful existence by planning for the future and making pathways towards a new life. Likewise, Nguyễn strives to find suitable work, planning to use his skills and strength in an effort to secure independence and autonomy for them both (in planning to build them a home, a workshop for himself and a work space for Lư), and to contribute to the community. Nguyễn’s decision to move away for new work and mentally to prepare to join the revolution is in keeping with the farmers’ collective effort to keep the nation moving forward.

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I have made many wonderful literary discoveries in the course of completing this project. The list is too long to include, but I would like to acknowledge four additional works that have expanded my horizons on literature and supported the construction of my novel. These are *The Satanic Verses* (1988) by Salman Rushdie, *Carpentaria* (2006) by Alexis Wright, *The Famished Road* (1991) by Ben Okri and *An Imaginary Life* (1978) by David Malouf. While each of these novels resonates with different aspects of my experience and understanding of Vietnamese reality, the narrative devices employed by these authors share common features in adapting traditional story-telling methods to deliver culturally specific contents.

As with many of his novels, Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* contains elements of Magical Realism, albeit delivered in Rushdie’s distinct style and execution. Commanding a range of versatile tools of Magical Realism, Rushdie creates an immediately different setting from traditional realist works in narrating the fantastic, tragicomic immigration journey of two Indian protagonists, Saladin Chamcha and Gibreel Farishta, who begin their immigrant lives literally tumbling from the sky among the debris of a hi-jacked plane headed for London (3). If this bizarre reality is deemed acceptable by readers from different backgrounds, then their subsequent acceptance of other unusual occurrences will follow. The opening of this ‘magical’ survival tale encourages readers to put aside any notion of ‘common knowledge’, assumptions, and known traditions, while opening themselves to unexpected developments as the story unfolds.

While the narrative devices of Magical Realism are more prominent in some cultures than others (and are often tied to local traditions), they nevertheless offer similarly persuasive means of conveying what would be indescribable in the realist mode. They are particularly conducive to portraying immigrants’ bizarre journeys to new lands and their bewildering experiences, underpinned by unfamiliar circumstances and hardships. As Márquez reflected in his 1981 interview with *The Paris Review*, he ‘took a long time to make [unusual incidents in the novel] credible’, acknowledging that: ‘The problem for every writer is credibility. Anybody can write anything so long as it’s believed’ (189). Like Márquez, Rushdie has appropriately selected and adapted narrative tools specific to his background in crafting *The Satanic Verses* to deliver an extremely unconventional tale, achieving ‘credibility’ for a work that is filled with improbable occurrences. A notable incident, among many such instances, is the spontaneous metamorphosis of the talented voice actor, Chamcha, into a goat-like creature complete with
hoofs, horns and a tail: a consequence, according to his friends, of his ‘psychological breakdown, loss of sense of self, inability to cope’ from having suffered ‘wrongful arrest, intimidation, violence ... illegal detention’ (252-3) as part of his settling in experience in the ‘Alien Nation’.

Exploring many factors impeding newcomers in a strange land, *The Satanic Verses* also brings attention to the poor treatment and demonization of immigrants that has been affecting immigrants in regions across the globe, even in contemporary Australia. The most crucial aspect of meaningful living, however, is the ability to communicate. The crippling loss of language conveyed in *The Satanic Verses* is relatable to migration experience through the ages, evidenced in many immigrant stories (including my own). This is particularly poignant in the Vietnamese boat people’s experience, as explored in Chi Vu’s in *Anguli Ma: A Gothic Tale*. In the novella, the protagonist, Đào, a middle-aged woman who has survived harrowing times in the Vietnam War and in the boat trip to Australia, continues to struggle in the new country, yet she shelters other refugee women in similar circumstances. Returning home to a socially disadvantaged suburb of Melbourne after their long day at work, the women ‘remove their coats as though unyoking an animal muteness, a constrained vocabulary of grunts and gestures. It was then that her house performed a kind of magic … they would be able to speak as humans once again’ (8). In distressing times, the women find themselves utterly alone, knowing their neighbours ‘don’t want to hear from silly women ... idiot migrants with their tongues full of foreign troubles’ (79).

In another place and time, the poet Ovid, in David Malouf’s *An Imaginary Life*, shares a comparable plight. Central to Ovid’s despair about his existence in exile is the loss of language, ‘I am rendered dumb. I communicate ... with grunts and signs ... I am ... a crazy, comic old man, grotesque, tearful, who understands nothing, can say nothing, and whose ways ... are absurdly out of keeping with the facts of our daily existence’ (9). Ovid’s anguish is universal for all displaced people, living away from their familiar environment and unable to communicate in a new land. This anguish is shared by Rushdie’s Indian immigrants, Chi Vu’s Vietnamese refugees and the protagonists in ‘Embers of Time’. Although Lư và Nguyễn return to a village where they once belonged, time and foreign occupation have rendered them strangers in their own land, unable to read or write the Romanised language or prove who they were/are.
Both *Carpentaria* by Alexis Wright and *The Famished Road* by Ben Okri contain distinct, but comparable, elements of Indigenous story-telling practices grounded in oral traditions and demonstrating strong links to a spiritual dimension. I wavered over including such elements in creating my novel, but gained confidence from reading their works. In *Carpentaria*, for example, Wright sets the tone and direction for the novel immediately on the opening page, signalling a journey to a very different realm steeped in ancient traditions by recounting her people’s legend of the ‘ancestral serpent’ that ‘came down from the stars, laden with its creative enormity ... billions of years ago’ (1). Both novels boldly share local customs, such as invoking ancient wisdom to find possible solutions in difficult situations and, in particular, ‘interactions’ with spiritual beings. Such interactions are narrated naturally, or as Márquez has put it, with a ‘brick face’. As Márquez reflected in his *Paris Review* interview, the ‘secret’ of achieving ‘credibility’ in conveying a fantastic reality (such as Remedios the Beauty flying away with the sheets in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (242)) lies in the deliverance. Márquez insisted that, while maintaining persuasive strength with a ‘brick face’, writers must incorporate *concrete* details in their narrative (such as specifying in the novel, Mauricio Babilonia is always surrounded by *yellow* butterflies (290)).

Wright and Okri both deftly employ this ‘secret’ in creating their fictional worlds, maintaining their ‘brick face’ approach and injecting specific and concrete details into every fantastic incident, cementing readers’ acceptance of a different, ‘magical’ reality through identification with familiar objects or setting. Okri interweaves fables and myths into everyday occurrences, mirroring a Nigerian way of living that is mostly fantastic to ‘outsiders’. On the twenty fifth anniversary of *The Famished Road*, Okri reflects on the central role of the tone: ‘the genie itself’ in delivering his unconventional story. He acknowledges that it has been nourished by ‘the elixir [...from] the great seas of the African under-dreams, and myths and fables of the world’ and created ‘in the matrix of the ancestral mode’ (viii-ix). Okri’s reflection presents a remarkable parallel to my own writing experience that perhaps ‘explains’ my identification with, and connection to, his works and his people. Through his ‘ancestral mode’ of storytelling, Okri has let readers in on Nigerian traditions, just as Márquez for Columbian and Rushdie for Indian. Alexis Wright, in *Carpentaria*, also shares, from an ‘insider’s’ point of view, the historical and ongoing struggles of internally displaced people. This experience is very different from, but relatable to, the experience of Vietnamese people throughout periods of foreign occupation, particularly during French colonisation.
Each of these additional influential works has, each in its own way, shown me the vastness of possibilities writers can achieve through their creativity and inventions. Magical Realism is a borderless ‘realm’, accessible to us all. Through the narrative devices of Magical Realism, these authors (and others) have been able to ‘bridge’ considerable, if not hitherto insurmountable, ‘chasms’ between languages, cultures and traditions to bring together people from different times and places through story-making.
Conclusion: Possibilities Through Creativity

In his book of essays, *A First Place* (2014), David Malouf reflects upon story-telling, particularly in connection with Australia’s history of settlement:

One of the oldest stories we tell is the story about leaving home. … We are all voyagers … settlers; in having experienced in our bones … the painful business of leaving a first place and remaking ourselves in a new one. (4)

Malouf recognises that, despite the pressures to learn new ways and to adapt in order to survive on foreign soil, it is always the *first place* that provides the structure and stability in migrants’ lives: the foundation upon which understanding of the new culture can be built, and new relationships can be established and integrated with existing ones.

Writing ‘Embers of Time’ and putting together the exegesis are, for me, an attempt at (creatively) honouring my connection to Vietnam: my ‘shadow’ life, as Malouf would describe it (3). At the same time, my work represents a ‘second life’, which, like most Vietnamese immigrants, I am striving to build through active contributions to my *second place*. Like the character Mr Degree-holder Từ Lâm, a Vietnamese Confucian scholar in post-colonial Vietnam from the (translated) novel *Men* (1966) by the prominent Vietnamese writer Võ Phiến, I see myself as something of a ‘living anachronism’ after my ‘wandering existence’ (quoted by Schafer, 179) in Australia. Through my work, I have resurrected the past, in order to contribute to the present. I have faced many challenges, expected and unexpected, in putting together my project. Indian-American Putlitzer prize winning author, Jhumpa Lahiri, closely expresses what I have experienced as an immigrant: ‘intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new … shuttling between two dimensions that had nothing to do with one another’ (‘My Two Lives’, 43).

*Does it matter if my project exists or not?* I believe it does. First, from a historical point of view, the French colonisation of Vietnam irrevocably altered the traditional Vietnamese way of living. Beyond rendering ancient literature, history and all written records inaccessible to future generations, French colonisation resulted in identity crises for individuals, as for the whole nation. Subsequent wars, particularly the most recent Vietnam War (ended in 1975),
overshadowed the century of Vietnam’s history under French rule, as records of this period—written in the ancient scripts or in French—are largely inaccessible to Vietnamese and non-French speakers alike. In contrast, accounts of the Vietnam War were disseminated by allied personnel and Vietnamese immigrants, most of whom were resettled in English-speaking countries. These generated interest in Vietnam on a global scale, contributing to awareness that, as historian Professor Thongchai Winichakul, asserts, ‘the margins are no longer marginal’ (24), emphasizing that, ‘the most important loci and traces of cultural differences, clashes, hybrids, and shifts are in language ... which includes discourses and other forms of cultural communications’ (23).

It is important to note the clear distinction between the work of historians and fiction writers. Hilary Mantel, in ‘Why I Became a Historical Novelist’ asserts: ‘you don’t become a novelist to become a spinner of entertaining lies: you become a novelist so you can tell the truth’ (7). Mantel’s concern as a writer ‘is with memory, personal and collective: with the restless dead asserting their claims’, sensing that ‘the dead … have something to tell us, something we need to understand. Using fiction and drama, we try to gain that understanding’ (2). I empathise strongly with Mantel when she argues that, even when writing in her first language: ‘the writer of history is a walking anachronism, a displaced person, using today’s techniques to try to know things about yesterday that yesterday didn’t know itself’ (8). While ‘Embers of Time’ is less a ‘traditional’ historical fiction than a fiction set in a historical period, putting it together, I nevertheless hoped to give voice to the nameless people who endured a turbulent and almost erased time in Vietnamese history—a time with an impact not unlike that experienced by contemporary surviving refugees.

The second reason my project matters is that, as Gayatri Spivak advocates: ‘If you were born in a world of so-called less-taught languages, pick up the challenges, make a decision’ (‘Translating in a World of Languages’, 41). This is essential if we want an inclusive global literature. My project is a direct response to Spivak’s challenge, advocating inclusion of Vietnamese language and culture in the wider world. My work was possible only due to my immersion and lived experience in both Vietnam and in Australia. My approach to completing this project, solving its challenges, concurrently creating tools and artefact, also mirror the core of Sartre’s existentialism: this work is but a series of undertakings, organized in the hope of moving forward. I have been, actively and instinctively, following Sartre’s advice on facing a difficult situation: ‘You are free, choose, that is, invent’ (Sartre, 28).
It is encouraging for me to know that, while I created an independent path and negotiated hurdles and obstacles unique to my project, I am not alone. Great writers, whether writing in their first language or adopted languages, have been this way before: Gabriel García Márquez brought understanding of Columbian history and culture to the world, just as Ben Okri gave us insights into Nigeria and Alexis Wright into Indigenous Australia. It is Salman Rushdie, though, who for me has most succinctly summarised my migrant experience:

A full migrant suffers, traditionally, a triple disruption: he loses his place, he enters into an alien language, and he finds himself surrounded by beings whose social behaviour and codes are very unlike, and sometimes even offensive to, his own. And this is what makes migrants such important figures: because roots, language and social norms have been three of the most important parts of definition of what it is to be a new human being. The migrant, denied all three, is obliged to find new ways of describing himself, new ways of being human (*Imaginary Homelands*, 278).

I am not the only Vietnamese-Australian writer. Chi Vu, who shared the migration experience of our generation, has also explored the range of narrative approaches beyond realism. In her essay ‘The 1.5 Generation Vietnamese-American Writer as Post-Colonial Translator’ she comments that:

Realism is a useful strategy to communicate the content of diasporic identity, especially when communicating with monolingual English-language readers, as it confers validity to what was only recently perceived as an ontological impossibility. However, beyond describing the ‘what’ of interstitial identity, realism does not wholly convey this shifting identification (the ‘how’ of being in-between cultures), hence the need for some 1.5 Generation writers to turn to impressionism to mitigate against the invisibility of the ‘seamless translation’ (141).

While we agree on the impossibility of seamlessly translating cultures, and the usefulness of strategies beyond Realism, our writing styles, themes and foci are quite different. Chi Vu’s novella, *Anguli Ma: A Gothic Tale*, is a story of Vietnamese immigrants, set in Australia. It has a dark, menacing undertone that could be seen as representing the perils and hopelessness of newcomers in a foreign land. My work gravitates towards hope and perseverance (as have also been observed in my short stories), a possible reflection of my natural tendency to look for
solutions in challenging times, likely to be influenced by the traditional Vietnamese strategy for survival, looking towards a brighter future.

An unexpected reward in completing this project has been a rare and precious opportunity for me to gain a new understanding of a Buddhist Sutra that I had learned, at a young age, to meditate on when faced with difficulties. The Heart of Perfect Wisdom Sutra, translated from Sanskrit, means: ‘Cross over, Cross over, Cross over the other side completely, O enlightened one’. It took decades and many challenging situations for me to glimpse the meaning of this Sutra, understanding that ‘crossing over’ is an act both of faith and courage, advising us to surpass what might first appear to be insurmountable obstacles. For me, putting together this project, in effect, is a complete ‘crossing over’ the boundary of my fears to focus my strength on negotiating the many barriers I faced with writing creatively in English. This new understanding and the concrete practice in completing this project have empowered me to approach new projects in the future with more courage and confidence.

I have crossed and created a number ‘bridges’ across different areas in my life, particularly over my years integrating my ‘two lives’ in Australia. This, as Rushdie has observed, is something all immigrants and refugees have in common. He succinctly summarises our collective endeavour: ‘And while there is life, there must be analysis, struggle, persuasion, argument, polemic, rethinking, and all other longish words that add up to one very short word: hope’ (Imaginary Homelands, 281). Hope has been a steady light in the dark days after the Vietnam War, and it continues in our effort to rebuild our lives in Australia. For me, hope is also firmly linked to a childhood memory, and the Vietnamese fable that led to this project.

I once lived in Phước Hải, on the western fringe of Nha Trang, a city that backed on to farmlands. After the war, parents and farmers in Phước Hải put together resources to build an extension to our primary school, a set of classrooms among the fields that the locals referred to as the ‘farm school’. From time to time, our area suffered heavy flooding and once, the school and a cluster of homes on the far end of the field were cut off from the main road after days of heavy rain. With the children unable to attend school, the parents and farmers put together a makeshift bridge to regain access to the far fields. Many days later, when school had resumed and the water had receded, I stopped to observe for the first time the bridge that had given us access to the main road and to school. Beneath a single plank of wood, there was an unusual collection of upturned ceramic and stone plant pots, pieces of furniture and broken household
items; there was even a whole rusty bike that served as a supporting structure, holding together other pieces that fitted neatly around it. We were so poor then that we could not afford to throw anything away, let alone buy anything new. I was amazed by the bridge, impressed that somehow everything fitted together so well. It was such a strong and steady bridge, providing the strength of conventional building materials: stone, bricks, wood and metal in different packages that enabled us to return to school and the community to continue daily activities. I gazed at the bridge in wonder. Even then, I understood the power of adaptation and creativity, and I thought, ‘this is magic!’
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