Life Writing, 2015
Vol. 12, No. 4, 467–477, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14484528.2014.915285

Mẹ-search, Hauntings, and Critical Distance[1]

Vinh Nguyen

My paper reflects on the intimate and inextricable connections between my life experiences as a subject of war and my academic research on Vietnamese refugees and the Vietnamese diaspora. I juxtapose personal experiences with theoretical musings in order to position myself as a writer and scholar. The essay recounts a memory of my father's death, a return trip to Vietnam, and stumbling upon a picture of my mother in the Southeast Asian Archive in California, among others, as it makes a claim on the value and necessity of subjective experience in the process of critical, academic scholarship.

Keywords autoethnography; Vietnamese refugees; critical scholarship; hauntings

I. The Found Photograph

The image is grainy. She is the only one in the frame returning the camera's gaze, looking straight into its lens, as if prescient of this future moment in which I would witness her presence in our past. There's a smile on her face, one that I want to read as intimately conspiratory, directed specifically towards me, her son and belated viewer. I want to believe that this photo, this smile is a sent message received 25 years later. I want it to be a fortuitous sign that I'm on the right journey, the right path.

Whatever it may signify, the image only reveals so much. Is her smile hopeful? Is it defiant? What hidden fears or private sorrows does it conceal? I know that it belies the uncaptured moments that stretch before and after the singular photographic event.

She looks happy. So do the others surrounding her, who grasp their notebooks and pens, seemingly absorbed in their lesson. The caption underneath the photo reads: 'Vietnamese "boat people" in an English class at the Phanat Nikhom camp in Thailand.' It is unsurprising that this picture of 'boat people' in a Thai camp precariously awaiting resettlement, published in the *Los Angeles Times*, reproduces a 'happy' tableau. After all, these expectant refugees were in the

midst of being 'processed' to become more 'American', more likely to assimilate and be 'successful' within the national social body—they were being offered a new life, a different dream to hold on to. The photo records a pivotal moment in which our private lives, located in a much larger history, were transforming/transformed once again.

At the time, I had none of these thoughts. When I saw the photograph, my heart stood still. I'm in California on a research trip to visit the Southeast Asian Archive at the University of California, Irvine. Outside, the sky is cloudless, the sun full and bright. It is my first day, my first hour, in the archives and I sit holding a news clipping from a brown folder that contains a picture of my mother. I recognise her face first. Then the date (Tuesday, December 20, 1988) and place (Phanat Nikhom camp, Thailand) corroborate my initial flash of recognition. The possibility of such an occurrence had crossed my mind, but as it is happening all I can register is the uncanny suspension of the haunted present.

I went looking for the history of forced migration in the wake of the War in Viet Nam and I find my personal past, with its own resonances of displacement, loss, and trauma, embedded in the traditional repository of historical knowledge, of what we call 'fact.' This trace of my self reminds me that the most personal and private events are inextricably tied to history. Like the photograph, the self cannot be read without context. The archival image of my mother reminds me that our past is real, that what seemed like another lifetime did indeed happen. It is some strange proof to verify dusty memories, residual affects, and the stories that are kept in silence.

II. The Ghostly Archive

Inside the archive, a ghost returns in the shape of an image patiently dwelling in a vertical file—a ghost that reveals the profound incongruities between present self and past self, yet insists that, 'the past is never dead. It's not even past' (Faulkner 33). The past lives on. For me, it is what and whom I've lost refusing to be forgotten. If melancholia is an internally motivated process in which the subject (or group of subjects) *hangs on* to loss so that it becomes them—in Freud's sense of consumption and internalisation—haunting, on the other hand, might be seen as the loss itself not *letting go* of the subject (or group of subjects). And so, the past—filled with the myriad losses that shape subjectivity—haunts the living present through a type of mediation, one that Avery Gordon describes as 'the process that links an institution and an individual, a social structure and a subject, and history and a biography' (19).

My mother, who bears the incredible weight of history more heavily than I do, that archival photograph of her, connects me to the haunted world.

A world of lingering ghosts and flickering shadows.

III. 'Me-search' not Research

It is spectral moments like these, moments that cannot be explained as mere coincidence or through a logic unable to accommodate immateriality, that help me to position myself as a person, scholar, and writer. Indeed, it is precisely these moments that do not allow me to stand apart, to separate self and study. I am of Vietnamese descent. I'm a subject of war, a (former) refugee. I examine the legacies and afterlives of the War in Viet Nam. My investment in my research goes beyond an academic exercise or a career ambition—it is deeply personal, and necessarily so. My life experiences colour the work I do, they motivate the kinds of arguments I make or refuse to make, they are my proof and evidence before any can be found.

In my writing, I seek to make sense of my painful and complicated past, of how that past is entangled in a much larger story of war, displacement, and diaspora, and how it might provide an opening, a life-line of sorts, towards a less violent, decolonised future.

It is a desire to see myself and those like me represented in history, to be reflected in narratives that push us outside their frames.

Carolyn Ellis defines autoethnography as 'research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political' (xix). Autoethnographic engagement has the potential to open up a framework for a writer like myself to situate lived experience, to link self and history, memory and sociality. For me, the exploration of the self through writing is a pathway to collective life, a route to a site that can turn into a homeplace. Writing that does not eschew the embodied self but makes it a guiding compass becomes a critical mode of living and survival.

Yet, the intimacy between my self as subject and the subject of my scholarly work has also often been a major source of doubt throughout graduate school. It comes from within: Is my project too narrow? Do other people view my work as self-indulgent or not rigorous enough? Despite the considerable amount of success my research has enjoyed, doubts as to whether anyone actually cares about this history, this story I want to tell, remain.

It comes from without: A frustrated (writer-blocked) but well meaning colleague tells me that it must be 'easy' to study something I am so close to: that is to say, it does not take any form of psychic, emotional, or intellectual 'labour' for me to, essentially, write about 'myself.'

A member of my academic department attacks me—in a racially motivated and racist fashion—with the not-so-subtle subtext that the funding I received to pursue my project is misplaced and divests important resources from more legitimate and worthwhile research. The anxious script here is utterly familiar: the immigrant arrives and takes away the things 'we' are entitled to, and once belonged only to 'us.' A white narrative of 'limited good.'[2]

The underlying assumption is that when a *racialised*—because, more often than not it *is* a problem of skin colour—scholar like myself researches and writes about topics closely related to him or herself, he or she inevitably indulges in

'me-search' rather than 'research.' The fellow department member, who studies white, canonical American male writers, will *never* have to write this kind of paper, will *never* have to justify or defend his choice of subject matter. But for me, the 'refugee' Vietnamese who studies Vietnamese refugees, it is a continual issue—one that I can't help but internalise because I come up against it so often—that I must rehearse over and over again in a variety of different contexts.

Because, what I have hanging over me is this: 'me-search' is easy, it requires no actual 'work.' What it produces is not objective, not 'real,' not entirely trustworthy. Me-search is weighed down by the heavy baggage of the self. Biased (that is, not critical) because of the subjective (that is, uncontrollable) elements involved in its processes. Me-search is not 'research.' It is not objective, scientific, and detached in its quest for absolutes (that is, truth and universality), which are the hard stuff of knowledge.

What I intuitively know is that personal experiences and histories can become frames of analysis that are valuable to intellectual and academic work, frames that are just as illuminating, generative, and rigorous as any that rely upon 'scientific' methodologies, high theory, or forms of systematic, 'objective' analysis.[3]

The self acts as scaffolding. The self is a prism.

IV. A Memory to Begin

Faded by the passing years and remembered in the deceptive light of early dawn, the memory of the last time I saw my father provides a small glimpse into my *labouring*—what it means for me to think 'critically,' or, *why* and *how* I do what I do.

Shaped by the ceaseless waves of oblivion, I only have fragments with jagged contours to tell this story: a silhouette, an embrace, a vehicle, a spark of light, distance. I was five years old and my family, with the exception of my father, was escaping Vietnam—what the Vietnamese call *vượt biên* (literally, 'border crossing'). Because of my young age and the illegality of our leaving, I was not informed of the secret journey. And so the rupture, when it came, was sudden, leaving me confused and longing. I didn't realise at the time, but when my mother, my three older siblings, and myself got into that vehicle and it drove off, we would never again be the family that we once were. The experiences that were to come would glue us together into the tightknit unit that we are today and also shatter us into small, unmendable pieces.

Eventually, through a journey that saw us robbed by pirates at sea, wading through quicksand and landmines in jungles, and hiding for hours in dark, cramp sheds, we ended up in a refugee camp in Thailand for three years. My father, who undertook the same route some time later, never made it. To this day, we have no body. No answers.

Only a ghost in the form of a question.

And inadequate memories.

In many ways, ways that are still unclear to me, it is this lack of resolution, this feeling of being unmoored, indelibly marking me at such a young age, that led me to the peculiar world of literature, to pursue a career studying strange objects imbued with meaning.

Books guide the lost. Stories say: you are not alone.

Living has been an unending desire for meaning.

And while the privileged life of a thinker and that of a homeless refugee seems incongruent (which they are, in so many material aspects), in my case, one fundamentally shapes the other. The refugee past determines the outlines of 'post'-refugee life, it establishes the conditions of possibility.

The refugee dwells inside. Words, if you listen carefully, are the precipitations of his steady breathing.

At the refugee camp I was never told that my father had died, even when everyone came to that conclusion. Perhaps they wished to spare the youngest child the shock, delaying the inevitable trauma. All I knew was that there was now an absence in my life, a void where there wasn't one previously. I knew that life had changed radically. I sensed that things were not *only* what they seemed. There was always something unspoken, unseen, unknowable orbiting in the air, hovering just outside the flimsy mosquito nets hung across the room at night. Whirling with the spin of the oscillating fan. I understood early on that the world seen with the eyes was but one thin layer of a much bigger and more complex whole. Time was used to make sense of these overlapping layers.

I had many questions and few answers. And so I learned to *read* the cracks in the silences, to go searching for fragments, to assemble found pieces together to form any kind of coherent narrative that I could grasp. I learned to question, to observe, to speculate. To tell stories. I had to do it to survive.

I still do all of these things, albeit in a vastly different context, as a reader, a writer, an analyser of texts and culture. Those skills developed as a barefoot boy in the refugee camps have now been honed and polished to further a comfortable life in the academy. There is some sort of existential disjuncture here, some kind of irony, something that seems forever irreconcilable, I admit. But I'd like to believe that my present life is an *extension of experience*. The journey now is only just a segment of the one that began a long time ago in that indistinct grey of new day.

The grown writer who searches with words can only access broken fragments to tell his story—a story that is elliptical in style, filled with gaps of memory, knowledge, and certainty. And small glimpses of clarity.

The searching continues.

V. Critical Distance

Searching mitigates distance, even if I never find what I'm looking for. Even when I know that some things are lost forever. The act alone gathers time, it shortens spaces, it brings about intimacies.

My writing searches, it's about searching, and it is impossible to claim objective detachment when I walk into an archive and see my mother smiling back at me. It is impossible to posture scholarly 'critical distance' when my past experiences *structure* everything I do as an academic—every decision, every thought, every word—even when this structuring does not manifest in concrete, measurable, or direct ways.

My scholarly work, then, is an attempt at closing gaps and eliminating distances. Yet, as I've discussed, this closeness is often perceived as frivolous and indulgent ('me-search'), falling outside the established parameters of criticality.

I want to explore what it means to be both subjective *and* critical. I want to write in a 'critical' manner that is attached, embodied, and felt. I want to let the self facilitate criticality—in a different sense.

So I ask this: What do we mean when we use the term 'critical'? Why do we hold criticality up as a virtue? Michael Warner points out that our definition of 'critical' pivots on the very concept of distance.

For example, to read critically requires a form of 'distanciation' from the text. This remove means our field of vision is larger and clearer, our boundaries more secure, our evaluations and judgments more tempered. When the text is objectified, the reader as subject is *produced*—he or she approaches the text-object as a free agent. Critical reading, thus, becomes associated with values of agency, freedom, citisenship, and democracy. What the critical reader exerts is the faculty of reason. He or she transforms into the subject of objectivity.

'Uncritical' reading, on the other hand, is tied to the things of the self—experiences, affects, desires, attachments, predispositions, affiliations, prejudices, and so on. According to this logic, the messy, inconvenient processes that make up quotidian life halt true reflection.

Yet, Warner reminds us that what we call 'critical reading' has a history full of contingencies rather than being immanent to the act of reading itself. It is not to be regarded as the only, proper, or superior way of reading. He writes: 'Critical reading is the pious labor of a historically unusual sort of person' (36).

And what of 'critical writing'? Is writing from a distance the pious work of an unusual person?

To write critically it is critical for me to shorten distance. (There are so many distances in my life already). When I am able to place my self, to put my own body on the line to defend what I've written is when I'm most 'critical.' When I can conjure my experiences as a wager, I know the stakes are worth fighting for.

Writing intimately is—has to be—critical. Writing critically has to be intimate. For me an understanding of criticality must not be divorced from the self. As a writer on the borderlines of scholar and subject, who must navigate both sides, my writing is a bridge that makes them a little less demarcated, less separate. Criticality is something that resonates with and beyond the personal.

VI. A Method of Experience

A return trip, Viet Nam, 2008
(Cham ruins near Da Nang)[4]

It is not rainy season but it's spitting and an unusual chill runs through my body. The warm fog blends into the tip of Cat's Tooth Mountain. It's hard to tell with human eyes where the sky ends and this earth begins.

As a caution, my mother has told me not to go into the Vietnamese jungle. I won't tell her that I rode to the ancient Cham ruins in an old military jeep brought over by the Americans some 40 years ago. It's because she's been in both jeep and jungle and realises the dangers that entail. But I'm young, light, and at times reckless. I don't shoulder history like she does so I play with danger the way I used to drag myself on the hems of her *áo dài* (traditional Vietnamese dress) as a child. An invented memory, perhaps—it doesn't matter. I will hide myself from the world (and my siblings) underneath the back flap of her fluttering tunic. Too protected is sometimes also dangerous, I think, but I haven't been through all that she has and I can't profess to understand her need.

But she's wise and she knows that if fortresses aren't built cities get pillaged and bombed. In my hardheadedness I counter that there's no preventing history. And so these once magnificent red sandstone temples lie crumbling and scattered; a pillar here, some bricks there, acting now as stepping stones for old women climbing atop to get the perfect photograph.

***

At a tin-roofed, plastic-chaired rest stop I buy a bottle of 7-Up and sit sipping on a thin straw. The intermittent raindrops make spattering sounds up above.
Someone asks me, 'Where do you live?'
'Canada,' I reply.
'Oh. For how long?'
'About 15 years.'
'How old are you?'
'25.'
'You weren't young when you went to Canada then. That's why you can speak Vietnamese.'
I take this as a compliment.
'You don't look like a *Việt Kiều* though.'[5]
I laugh and say, 'It's probably because I'm skinny and dark.'
'That's right, usually they are bigger…'
I laugh again and the stranger tells me: 'You haven't changed at all.'
I'm taken aback and don't know what to believe.
There are things more treacherous than jungles, jeeps and bombs.
Things my mother cannot anticipate or shelter me from.

VII. A Labour of Telling

The peril of telling one's story, of turning one's gaze inward, is that any sense or semblance of a unified, coherent self begins to crack, to fissure, to break. The simple fact is that writing one's 'life' is not simple.

Recounting a moment of violent displacement, of losing home over again, of the distances that splinter intimacy, the narrator of le thi diem thuy's novel *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* writes, 'there's no blood anywhere, except here in my throat where I'm telling you this' (99). That single line bleeds into the lyrical fragments that string together a woman's coming of age narrative, set against a backdrop of war, refuge seeking, and difficult (re)settlements.

It has taken me close to three decades to draw up the courage to approach my own stories, to put them down on paper in words. To tell. And, if you look carefully, you will see the faint traces of blood that stain this process of arrival. Writing about my experience of loss has at times punctured old wounds and called into question the durability of thick skin grown to protect the vulnerable self.

After reading a short story about the Mỹ Lai massacre his son had written as a final assignment for the Iowa Writers' Workshop, the father in Nam Le's "Love and Honor and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice" burns the typewritten pages. He, who had experienced the trauma first-hand, tells the writer: 'Only you'll remember. I'll remember. They will read and clap their hands and forget […] Sometimes it's better to forget, no?' (24). The story should not, indeed cannot, be told: it's not meant for outsiders; words, in the end, fail to capture the reality of trauma and the textures of experience; the act of remembering is often too painful. The story, which was supposed to bring father and son closer, to make the father proud of his son's writerly ambitions, to heal, became a point of rupture.

In my mind I'd like my research and writing to be a way back to some seemingly safe place (or to some one), to, like Le's narrator, reconcile the disparities and disjunctions that come with trauma. But remembering can often be the very cause of distance. It can show me just how far I've drifted, how the urge to tell has left me behind family members who prefer silence as a way of moving on.

Both semi-autobiographical pieces speak to the difficulty of telling—its violence and impossibility. While it is important for historically marginalised subjects to have a voice, to be able to speak, the act of speaking or telling is not straightforward. At times it involves isolation from family and community. Often it is met with resistance. Always it shakes the foundation of selfhood.

Yet both texts insist on telling. They *say* that writing, however inadequate or painful, is necessary.

As it hurts, as it keeps the self from experiencing itself as whole or complete, as it leaves me with moments of intense loneliness, writing is necessary. It is what I've chosen as *my* way of moving forward.

The searching continues.

VIII. Writing Ghost Stories

> To engage in war and refugee studies then is to look for things that are seemingly not there, or barely there; and to listen 'to fragmentary testimonies, to barely distinguishable testimonies, to testimonies that never reach us.' That is, to write ghost stories. (Espiritu xx)

For me, allowing the personal to guide academic writing opens up the possibility of a familial history, one grafted onto the history of the larger Vietnamese diaspora. This history is about personal and collective survival, a concept and material experience particularly resonant for Vietnamese refugees and immigrants. I/we write to survive, we/I write so that those who have not survived are not erased from memory. In this way our writing can 'turn away from the seemingly inexorable march of history and towards the secret of memories embedded within the intimacies of the everyday' (Cho 28).

Espiritu's epigraph, quoted above, identifies scholars, alongside artists and other cultural producers, as tellers of *ghost stories*. The present struggle is one of writing my own ghost story, which will unravel like the curls of smoke that rise from the incense I light to remember the ones who have died but refuse to leave me. In many ways, my story is a refusal to let them go. It is a prayer, an invocation to the ghosts who will agree to come and inhabit the pages and tell their tales, even though I am an inadequate translator. There are those solitary moments of acute pain—reading ghostly texts, writing ghostly words, and musing ghostly thoughts—when I unsuccessfully hold back tears. I am, however, reminded and comforted by the thought that, as I fall asleep with an open book on the pillow, as I spend hours in front of an empty screen, as I attempt to bend words in a language that is not mine into stories I do not own, I am not alone.

IX. Politics and Positionality

In a short preamble to his seminal essay 'Diaspora and Cultural Identity', Stuart Hall—whose work I admire deeply—writes: '[I]t is worth remembering that all discourse is "placed," and the heart has its reasons' (223). Expressed in beautifully plain and direct language, Hall reminds us that every enunciation—oral or written, public or private, theoretical or personal—is *positioned*.

That is, our ideas, judgments, and opinions emerge from a particular standpoint, shaped by a specific perspective, set of experiences, parameters of understanding, and politics of interest. To borrow a phrase from Canadian poet Dionne Brand (who borrowed it from Derek Walcott), *no language is neutral*. The ever-present subjective element of critical work, whether it is acknowledged, made explicit, or is conscious to the writer, seeps into what we do. One's work is informed by how one has been placed, how one places oneself, the places one comes out of, and the places one desires to go.

Critical scholarship is not distanced but placed. My memories, my scars, my survival, my utter joy for life are all anchorings that position me to observe, to think, to write. I cannot empty the self (or pretend to) as I move through the world and write about it. In order to speak, to tell, I first need to recognise that I'm grounded. The war that broke up my family, the forced migration that altered life, the second chance for a new beginning, critically shape my perspective, allowing me to learn, to teach, and ultimately to travel.

X. The Telephone Call

That night from my hotel room I call my mother long distance, reaching her in a house on a snowy street of an Albertan winter. I tell her that I've found a miraculous photograph of her. I send it to her through email and she opens the file. She laughs and can't believe it herself. She asks whether I've eaten—it is her way of telling me that she loves me.

For the next few minutes we chat about the weather, everyone's health, the food she's been cooking—our standard topics of conversation.

We come back to the photo again, and again she laughs, saying that she does not recognise herself: that young, thin, poor refugee. Her memory does not hold that moment.

But for a moment I forget that there are miles of distance, a national border, and years of silence that separate us.

Outside the heat of day has abated with the slow coming of night.

Notes

[1] In Vietnamese, 'mẹ' is the word for 'mother'.

[2] George M. Foster discusses the 'image of limited good' as a societal belief that there are insufficient goods to go around. It is this discourse that feeds into fear of foreigners and immigrants, who ostensibly 'take away' already scarce resources.

[3] A body of scholarly work that supports this conviction exists, especially from areas of feminist and autoethnography research. See for example, works by Carolyn Ellis, Jane Tompkins, and Diane P. Freedman, among others.

[4] Constructed in between the 4th and 13th centuries CE, the Mỹ Sơn temple complex was the religious and cultural center of the Hindu-influenced Champa Kingdom that ruled what is now central Vietnam. During the Vietnam War many of the temples were damaged and destroyed by American bombing. It is now a protected UNESCO World Heritage Site.

[5] 'Việt Kiều' is the term for overseas Vietnamese.

References

Brand, Dionne. *No Language is Neutral*. Toronto: McClelland, 1998.
Cho, Lily. 'The Turn to Diaspora.' *Topia* 17 (2007): 11–30.

Ellis, Carolyn. *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography.* Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 2004.
Espiritu, Yen Le. 'Thirty Years AfterWARd: The Endings That Are Not Over.' *Amerasia Journal* 31.2 (2005): xiii–xxiii.
Faulkner, William. *Requiem For a Nun: A Play.* Adapted by Ruth Ford. New York: Random House, 1959.
Foster, George M. 'Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good.' *Peasant Society: A Reader.* Ed. Jack M. Potter et al. Boston: Little Brown, 1967. 300–23.
Freud, Sigmund. 'Mourning and Melancholia.' *The Penguin Freud Reader.* Ed. Adam Phillips. London: Penguin, 2006. 310–27.
Gordon, Avery. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2008.
Hall, Stuart. 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora.' *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. Ed. Jonathan Rutherford. London: Lawrence, 1990. 222–37.
Le, Nam. *The Boat*. Toronto: Bond Street, 2008.
le, thi diem thuy. *The Gangster We Are All Looking For.* New York: Anchor, 2004.
Warner, Michael. 'Uncritical Reading.' *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*. Ed. Jane Gallop. New York: Routledge, 2004.