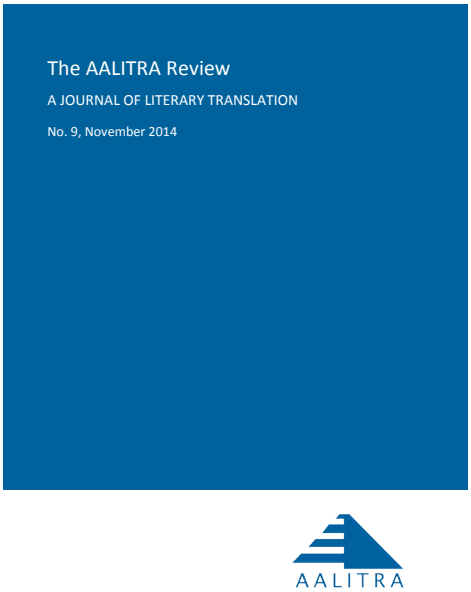

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The 1.5-Generation Vietnamese-American Writer as Post-Colonial Translator[1*]

CHI VU

Abstract
This essay explores contemporary transnationalism through the creative texts written by Vietnamese-born 1.5-Generation authors residing in the USA, in order to define the generational impact on this emerging literature. I use post-colonial translation theory to examine how the process of migration produces a cultural and linguistic gap for these authors in relation to their readership, and to identify the creative strategies used by these authors in response to it.

Introduction

The 1.5 Generation is a cultural construct that has become increasingly used within a variety of academic disciplines. This diasporic generation is comprised of those who have memories of their birth country, are conscious of being bicultural and are at least conversationally bilingual (Danico 6). They are technically part of the first generation, in that they were born overseas and are immigrants themselves. Earlier literature describes characteristics of this population without using the specific term, as the concept of the 1.5 Generation is relatively new; it has therefore yet to develop agreed-upon parameters (Bartley and Spoonley 67). Different theorists have applied the concept to those who migrated before the age of twelve, middle to late adolescence, or even to young adults; many theorists consider very young children who migrated before school age to be second generation (Park 141). Given the significance of the linguistic and cultural knowledge involved in literary production, the term "1.5 Generation" in this essay refers to authors who experienced migration as children aged between six and sixteen years, including experiencing some of their formative socialization, and therefore language acquisition, in the country of origin. Conversely, members of this Generation need to have arrived in the country of settlement at a young enough age to attend school and to experience non-work related socialization.

In the first section of this article, I propose that the Vietnamese diaspora is not only dispersed geographically but also linguistically; each generation internalizes the dominant language to a different extent, and this results in a linguistic dispersal across generations in each country of settlement. I explore how a cultural and linguistic gap exists for diasporic writers. Strikingly, the cultural and linguistic gap experienced by first-generation authors differs from that experienced by the 1.5 Generation. In subsequent sections, I examine texts by 1.5-Generation authors Lan Cao and Linh Dinh to identify the creative strategies they use to resist invisibility, stereotyping or linguistic colonization, and propose that these strategies change as the cultural and linguistic gap shifts over time and in diverse circumstances of cultural production. I suggest that 1.5-Generation authors do, indeed, have to redefine their positioning with each new creative work, to (re)translate themselves along a shifting continuum of otherness. The article concludes by theorizing the 1.5 Generation's relationship to language itself.

The Vietnamese diaspora is said to have emerged in 1975 after the Vietnam War,[2] in which the communist North defeated the pro-western South Vietnamese government and unified Viet Nam after 1975. Vietnam's post-colonial status is contextualized by French colonialism,

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[1] *This article first appeared in *Kunapipi: Journal of Postcolonial Writing and Culture* 32.1 (2010): 130-146. We are grateful to Anne Collett, editor of *Kunapipi*, for permission to reprint it here.

[2] I use the phrase "Vietnam War" not in the Western sense of a war fought by the USA and its allies against North Vietnam (mirrored by Vietnam's description of it as the "American War"). Instead, I use "Vietnam War" to recognize that it was also a civil war between North Vietnam and South Vietnam.

American neo-colonialism during modern times, and nearly a thousand years of Chinese domination in pre-modern times. As with other post-colonial nations, structures of inequity and oppression remain in place after Vietnam achieved independence from foreign powers. In the late 1970s and 1980s, over one million people fled South Viet Nam to settle in countries such as the USA, Australia, France and Canada. The result is a Vietnamese diaspora as social form which remains "an identified group characterized by their relationship-despite-dispersal" (Vertovec 3).

The Vietnamese diaspora is not only dispersed geographically but also linguistically. After settlement, Vietnamese migrant communities increasingly adopt the dominant language of the host country. Generally, first-generation migrants do not become as assimilated as their second-generation children. The linguistic diaspora therefore occurs both geographically as well as across the generations within each country of settlement. In between the first and second generation is the 1.5 Generation.

Linguistic dispersal

Post-colonial theory describes how the process of migration "translates" the subject into object; first- and 1.5-Generation authors would have been members of the dominant culture if they had remained in Vietnam, but post migration and settlement they became members of a minority culture. Unlike the first generation, however, the 1.5-Generation authors re-orientate themselves linguistically after migration to produce Anglophone creative texts. These texts are therefore consumed by a readership that is partially or primarily from a different culture. I suggest these authors are faced with a cultural and linguistic gap that requires their performance as "translators" between the mainstream and minority cultures.

Post-colonial theorists are increasingly reappropriating and reassessing the term "translation" itself, and recognizing the role that translation played during colonization. "Who translates whom becomes a crucial issue. Questions of cultural familiarity, the implied construction of the audience, the problems of constructing the 'other' have particular relevance in this context" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 204). Unequal power relations between cultures were supported by centuries of translation as a one-way process for the benefit of the colonizer, rather than as part of a reciprocal process of exchange:

> As a practice, translation begins as a matter of intercultural communication, but also always involves questions of power relations, and of forms of domination [...] No act of translation takes place in an entirely neutral space of absolute equality. Someone is translating something or someone. Someone or something is being translated, transformed from a subject to an object.
>
> (Young 140)

The creative writing produced by 1.5-Generation writers can be said to be directed toward a readership that is "partially or primarily of people from a different culture" (Tymoczko 21). For this generation the gap is specifically between the mainstream culture in the country of settlement and the minority culture of the Vietnamese diaspora. Post-colonial translation theorist Maria Tymoczko compares the task required of translators with that required of post-colonial writers. Her assertion is that while translators transport a text, post-colonial writers must transpose a culture, which includes the various systems that enable the text to be grasped by readers:

> As background to their literary works, they are transposing a culture – to be understood as a language, a cognitive system, a literature [...] a material culture, a social system and legal framework, a history, and so forth. In the case of many former colonies, there may even be more than one culture or one language that stand behind a text.
>
> (Tymoczko 20)

These are the elements that make up the cultural and linguistic gap that members of the 1.5 Generation must attempt to overcome. Otherwise, their literary production may result in invisibility, stereotyping and linguistic colonization. While the 1.5 Generation exhibits some characteristics of the first generation, the cultural and linguistic gap does, however, impact differently on the first generation as compared to the 1.5 Generation. I spend the remainder of this section examining this so as to apprehend the publication context that is the inheritance of the 1.5 Generation.

I propose that first-generation diasporic authors face, simultaneously, a smaller and larger cultural-linguistic gap than the 1.5 Generation. The first generation face a smaller gap when writing in Vietnamese for the Vietnamese diaspora, because there is generally a shared cognitive system, history, literature and social system. Conversely, the first generation face a much wider gap when they write in English for a mainstream readership in the country of settlement, where a shared culture between author and audience does not yet exist. Researchers note that immediately after the end of the Vietnam War and until the early 1990s literary production written in Vietnamese by first-generation authors, for a Vietnamese readership, was full of "wrath and anger" (Qui Phan Thiet, quoted in Janette 271). In contrast, works written in English, for a mainstream North American readership, adopted a calmer tone, one that was "characterized by patience and tact" (Janette 272). The boundary between insiders and outsiders is clearly demarcated for the first generation of writers.

For the first generation, the fact of displacement also imposes a barrier to writing creatively in the country of settlement, irrespective of the language used. Writing about American eminent first-generation author Võ Phiến, John Schafer explains that "trying to apply his descriptive powers, honed in Vietnam, to local scenes and culture in the United States [...] is not easy for him. In Vietnam he was the insider, reporting on the things he knew well [...] In the United States he is an outsider, trying to understand a strange land inhabited by a people whose language he barely speaks" (Schafer 217). Creative writing relies on evocation and familiarity with not just the language, but also the environment and context. Even when Võ Phiến is impressed by his newly adopted land, it has no resonance for him; he experiences a sense of alienation from place:

> In Vietnam, he says, "we had scenery but also feeling, the bright present but also memories of the past". But in America, when we stand "in this field, on that hillside, or beside that river, we don't yet have any memories at all. We have the scenery, but not the feeling".
>
> (Võ Phiến, quoted in Schafer 219-20)

Despite this challenge, Võ Phiến continued his creative output in the USA, writing for the emerging Vietnamese global diaspora. The essays he wrote during the early period of settlement were aimed at fellow refugees and take the form of letters to a "dear friend". I suggest that Võ Phiến's strategy of highly personalized and intimate writing is a response to the sense of dispersal and alienation from place. The effectiveness of this strategy is heightened by the fact that Võ Phiến writes in Vietnamese for first-generation migrants, like himself, who are surrounded by the dominance of English.

Schafer is not of Vietnamese heritage but is able to read Vietnamese-language texts. He describes his feelings as an "outsider" reading Võ Phiến's essays, written not long after he settled in America.

> [W]hen someone like myself reads his works it is like eavesdropping on a private conversation [...] Reading [the essays] you feel as if you are perusing a bundle of old letters found in the attic. When you discover that the people talking in the letters are talking about you – about Americans – the strangeness of your situation increases, but, of course, so does your curiosity.
>
> (Schafer 14-15)

These "overheard stories" confirm how wide the cultural and linguistic gap is for first-generation Vietnamese writers when communicating to a mainstream American readership. The value of such works is that "they allow us to encounter the feelings and thoughts of a leading Vietnamese exile writer before they are edited to accommodate American sensitivities" (Schafer 14-15). These early works by first-generation writers are valuable documents in the face of North American hegemony; they provide a unique opportunity for readers in a powerful country like the USA to see themselves through genuinely new eyes, if and when these works are eventually translated into English.

In addition to the sense of displacement caused by migration, first-generation writers found it almost impossible to gain a wider readership. Critic Nguyễn Hưng Quốc notes that works written in Vietnamese are not studied in Asian-American studies, which only focus on English-language publications (263). Schafer suggests that first-generation writers are most often classified under "Asian Studies" rather than Asian-American studies, and that only works written from an American-Asian perspective achieve recognition in mainstream North America (9). "It's us to us only. There's no way to reach them [English-language readers]; every road is blocked, every door is shut" (Mai Thảo, quoted in Schafer 8-9).

Anglophone works by first-generation writers are not very well known. Having crossed the linguistic gap by writing and publishing in English, these first-generation pioneers do not, on the whole, overcome the cultural gap. Michele Janette argues that

> in practice, many who teach and research in this field have found obstacles to working with Vietnamese American literature, not least of which is the simple lack of knowledge about what is available. Since 1963, over 100 volumes of literature in English have been published by Vietnamese American authors, a figure that may surprise even scholars in the field.
>
> (Janette 267)

When the first generation did write and publish in English, it did not ensure that the mainstream readership took any notice. Janette suggests that "obstacles to this literature becoming well known have had an ideological as well as practical edge, in that these narratives by Vietnamese Americans were not heard because they were not useful to either the American left or right in the years that followed the war in Viet Nam" (267). The cultural and linguistic gap makes post-colonial migrant writers invisible, especially those from the first generation. These works profoundly challenge North American assumptions about itself:

> Vietnamese American literature muddies this picture. If what was lost in the war was innocent faith in the American right, it is embarrassing to face the insistent belief in the American Dream that is present in much of this literature. If American forces are the primary victims, it is awkward to listen to the accusations of betrayal from South Vietnamese soldiers. And if the war was really all about America, then accounts that center on Vietnamese experience are phenomenological impossibilities.
>
> (Janette 278)

It was this context of publishing and reading that the 1.5 Generation inherited. Post-colonial migrant literature is transformed over time, starting with the exilic, which becomes migrant and then diasporic literature, with affiliations "renegotiated by every generation" (Trouilloud 21). The salient transformation between the generations in the diaspora is that the majority of 1.5-Generation writers cannot write in Vietnamese at the level required to create literary works.[3] For this cohort of writers, the proposal to resist the dominant culture by writing

[3] 1.5-Generation American-Vietnamese writer, Linh Dinh is the exception that proves the rule. He has translated his poems into Vietnamese and has edited collections of translated short stories. To date, he has only composed one poem directly in Vietnamese. http://www.talawas.org/talaDB/showFile.php?res=961&rb=07

in Vietnamese is not even an option. By creating works in English, the 1.5 Generation have the opportunity for exposure to a world audience, while also being exposed to the dangers of translating themselves. The risk is captured in the aphorism "traduttore, traditore – translator, traitor" (Young 141).

But who is being betrayed, and by whom? I propose that as the demarcation between insider and outsider is often blurred for the 1.5 Generation, these authors may feel as though they are betraying themselves in their performance as cultural translators. In the next section, I examine some of the strategies that 1.5-Generation authors use to resist invisibility, stereotyping and linguistic colonization, while maximizing opportunities for creative invention that arise from their positioning as translators.

Strategies against invisibility

Given that the 1.5 Generation is usually more fluent in English than in the "mother-tongue", they would seem to be furnished with opportunities that are denied first-generation writers. But having crossed the linguistic gap, these authors must ensure that they are able to cross the gap of invisibility to reach a mainstream readership composed "partially or primarily of people from a different culture" (Tymoczko 21).

In Lan Cao's novel, *The Monkey Bridge*, published in 1997, the young 1.5-Generation narrator experiences the culture shock of arriving in the USA just months before the fall of Saigon. The teenaged Mai indicates her positioning within the novel: "My mother had already begun to see me as someone volatile and unreliable, an outsider with inside information" (41). However, as a member of the 1.5 Generation, Mai is able to switch from the mother-tongue to embrace the English language with relative effortlessness:

> This was my realization: we have only to let one thing go – the language we think in, or the composition of our dream, the grass roots clinging underneath its rocks – and all at once everything goes [...] Suddenly, out of that difficult space between here and there, English revealed itself to me with the ease of thread unspooled.
>
> (Cao 36-37)

The ease of acquiring a new tongue is contrasted with the difficulty of reversing Mai's cultural positioning. The cultural switch is depicted as being extremely difficult and fraught. In order to create and maintain a new American identity, the 1.5-Generation narrator has to "adopt a different posture, to reach deep enough into the folds of the earth to relocate one's roots and bend one's body in a new direction" (39). She makes use of elements found in nature that do not ordinarily change: the trunk of a tree, the pull of gravity, the flowing of a river. Then she applies verbs such as "realign", "shifting", "motion", and "moved" to highlight the impossibility of such a task. "The process, which was as surprising as a river reversing course and flowing upstream, was easier said than done" (39). And yet, *The Monkey Bridge* is proof that the task of bridging the cultural and linguistic gap is possible for the 1.5 Generation, with the qualification that it is somewhat easier to switch to "thinking in another language" than it is to entirely "feel" in another culture.

The tension of intimately knowing a language while being distanced culturally from its corresponding mainstream society is what marks the 1.5 Generation as unique, compared with the first or second generations. In *The Monkey Bridge*, Mai repeatedly encounters the dilemma of being the cultural translator. In the following passage, she is living with her American host family. She is given some newspaper articles by her "Aunt" Mary, who is encouraging her to learn English. The articles contain early representations of the newly arrived Vietnamese community in America. They include stories of Vietnamese high-achievers, the model minorities who pose no danger to America's cultural hegemony: "a Vietnamese boy smiled contemplatively as he was inducted into the school's National Honor Society" (87). Then, the narrator sees another article in the newspaper:

> It began unspectacularly, with standard descriptions of homeowners and shopkeepers. Then, following the introductory paragraph, in clear inexorable print, neutral as the news itself, was a story about how a Vietnamese family had been suspected of eating an old neighbor's dog. The orphan pup had been the old man's only companion. What was I supposed to say to this? It wasn't Aunt Mary's fault. My dilemma was that, seeing both sides to everything, I belonged to neither.
>
> (Cao 87-88)

Mai is trapped by the cultural and linguistic gap, and is unable to identify completely with either perspective. For the 1.5 Generation, reality can be perceived as two entirely different versions of the same event, both of which can be "as neutral as the news itself". It just depends on whose "news" they are reading.

The dilemma of double-identity is inherent in the structure of the novel itself: the story jumps between Mai's narration (first-person point of view) and Mai's mother, Thanh (first-person point of view filtered through Thanh's diary). These two narratives are delineated by the use of two different fonts. Mai's narration takes place in the present, while Thanh's narration is historical in its retelling of the events prior to the family's departure from Vietnam. The main purpose of Thanh's diary excerpts is to provide Mai with answers to Thanh's actions in the present, and ultimately to reveal the terrible secret about Mai's grandfather, Baba Quan. The fact that this secret is kept from Mai for most of the novel marks her as an unreliable narrator with incomplete information about her half of the story. It also suggests that in Thanh's eyes, Mai is positioned as the translator/traitor, someone who is simultaneously an insider-outsider.

Throughout the novel, Thanh is correlated with Vietnam and the past, both in plotting and description: "[s]he was bent over the sink, her S-shaped spine twisted like a crooked coast-line. I felt a spate of feelings – guilt, pity, love – crowd inside my chest" (205). Later, when Mai watches the final days of the Fall of Saigon from the physical safety of North America, the paralleling of Vietnam and Thanh is further emphasized. "It was on TV, a luminous color origami cut from the dark of night, that I witnessed my own untranslatable world unfold to Americans half a globe away [...] It was as if all of America were holding its breath, waiting for a diseased body, ravaged and fatigued, and now all too demanding, to let go. Death must be nudged, hurried, if only it could be" (98).

The "monkey bridge" in the novel's title represents, at different points, the interstitial space between Vietnam and America, life and death, and childhood and adulthood. While Mai's "monkey bridge" is clearly positioned between the two cultures, her grandfather Baba Quan's "monkey bridge" is the power of a man to save US soldiers from land mines thanks to his intimate knowledge of the ancestral land (112). When Thanh as an adolescent girl sees her future husband for the first time while he is crossing a "monkey bridge", it becomes a metonym for the interstitial space between childhood and adulthood.

By the end of the novel, Mai's mother performs two irrevocable acts; she reveals to Mai the terrible secret about Baba Quan, and she commits suicide. These acts free Mai to pursue a materially and intellectually brighter future – although at great emotional and spiritual cost. As Trouilloud points out: "unlike early Vietnamese American novels which were most concerned with keeping the past alive alongside the present to prevent the traditional lifestyle from disappearing, *Monkey Bridge* states the act of unearthing a past to break free from its chains" (209). Cao seems to suggest that one cannot stay in the interstitial space of the "monkey bridge" forever.

As groundbreaking and accomplished as this novel is, it does raise the question of who is translating whom and for what purpose. Mai's narration is contemporary to the time-period depicted in the novel, and is thus given greater importance by the mainstream reader. The dual narration allows readers to hear the first generation's voice, but ultimately privileges the voice of the more assimilated 1.5 Generation. *The Monkey Bridge* has to resist invisibility, and draws on the method of "over-telling" culturally-specific information, in order for the dominant-culture

readership to comprehend the significance of minority-culture practices or objects in the scene. It is a strategy which is perhaps understandable when the cultural gap is great.

There are instances in *The Monkey Bridge* where the strategy of "over-explaining" sits comfortably within the work and adds to its impact. It works particularly well when the reader is able to identify with Mai's exasperation at the cultural distance between her and another character in the novel, and does not feel distanced or "interrupted" by the "over-telling". In this passage, Mai is at an interview for entry into an American college, and has been asked by the interviewer where she lived in Vietnam: "I'd concocted a habit of silence where Vietnam was concerned" (127). The cultural gap silences the migrant, renders her invisible. Yet despite this, Mai feels an urge to reveal "something that would make the country crack open so she could see the tender, vital, and, most important, mundane parts" (127-28). It is what is mundane and ordinary that becomes obscured amongst the media-translated images of the Vietnam War. Mai recalls childhood games, the texture of walls and sidewalks, the feeling after it rained, "over-explaining" her memories. "I wanted to tell her: it was not all about rocket fires and body bags [...] The Vietnam delivered to America had truly passed beyond reclamation. It was no longer mine to explain" (128). At the college interview Mai finds that she is unable to communicate across the cultural gap, yet the novel successfully conveys this to its readers.

However, the novel does contain a small number of instances of "over-telling" that do not sit comfortably in the work. These occur where the narrator is directly communicating with the reader rather than with another character. Reading this novel nearly fifteen years after its publication, one can sense some imbalance of power in its act of transposing a culture. *The Monkey Bridge* inevitably contains explanations of Vietnamese cultural practices that are now widely known by many readers in cosmopolitan Western cities. In this case, "over-telling" has the effect of privileging the mainstream readership over the "insider" minority community in a way that disrupts the narrative and distances the narrator from the reader. Mai describes the Mekong Grocery, delighting in all the items that can be purchased there, such as silk fabric, tropical fruit and even apothecary jars. As the list continues, the description becomes longer because the items are so unfamiliar to the mainstream American readership that the narrator has to resort to outright exposition: "even the vats of nuoc mam, salted fish compressed for four months to a year into a pungent, fermented liquid used as a dipping sauce mixed with lime, minced garlic, hot peppers, and a dash of sugar" (64).

The narrator lists every single ingredient in nuoc mam, she tells us what fish sauce is, how it is made and how it is consumed. She has to do this because the target readership is not primarily the Vietnamese diasporic community, who already know this information and possess memories of this quintessential Vietnamese sauce. The novel has to work hard to overcome the invisibility caused by the cultural and linguistic gap at the time of publication. Consequently, a debt is owed to pioneer works such as *The Monkey Bridge* that have contributed to the narrowing of this gap between mainstream- and minority-culture readers.

Strategies against stereotyping

In many ways, 1.5-Generation authors must negotiate the use of existing stereotypes in order to cross the cultural and linguistic gap. Writers wishing to resist invisibility by writing Vietnamese-American characters risk being categorized as an "ethnic writer". Invisibility and stereotyping can be different sides of the same coin.

A strategy that 1.5-Generation memoirists use to resist ethnic stereotyping is to emphasize the constantly shifting "I" in their works. A second strategy of resistance is to write a collection of stories that emphasize differences in world perception from a diverse range of narrators. I suggest that 1.5-Generation author Linh Dinh uses a combination of both of these strategies in his collection of short stories, *Fake House*, to resist stereotyping as well as to highlight that "[c]ultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation [...] they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power" (Hall 255).

Fake House was written after Linh Dinh returned to Vietnam to live for two and a half years. The collection is divided into two parts – the first half of the collection is set in the USA, while the second is set in Vietnam. Alienation and the abject are explored through "the unchosen", such as Viet Kieus ("overseas" Vietnamese), gays, dwarves, ugly girls and other socially outcast characters. Dinh deploys a multi-racial heterogeneous cast to resist being categorized as an "ethnic writer". Pelaud contends that *Fake House* is a rejection of the expected refugee narrative "that emphasize[s] development and progress" and a "transgression of essentialist assumptions" (45).

Even when Dinh creates characters vastly different to himself, the emphasis is still on the characters' shifting positionality, rather than on their culturally fixed identities. His characters' status changes simply through the presence of other characters. In Dinh's short story "Fritz Glatman", the eponymous character considers marrying an Asian mail order bride:

> Before this idée fixe, if you will, took hold, I was never partial to Asian women. Never even thought about them. But with mental exertion came a gradual, grudging appreciation. Stare at anything long enough, I suppose, and beauty will rise to the surface. The girls in *Origami Geishas* are mostly plain, their faces plain, their hair plain. Some are outright ugly. But my future wife must be unequivocably beautiful, though not too beautiful. Son of an immigrant, I was taught to be modest, to shy away from luxuries, and to shun all ostentatious displays. Indeed, even with a six-figure salary, I drive an old-model Ford.
>
> (Dinh, *Fake House* 20)

Stuart Hall proposes that diasporic communities exist in a continuum of otherness: "[w]e do not stand in the same relation of "otherness" to the metropolitan centre. Each has negotiated its economic, political and cultural dependency differently" (228).

Dinh explores this through his main character, who essentializes other cultures, and believes in his higher place in the racial/cultural hierarchy, yet is (comically) shown to be shifting in relation to the metropolitan centre. "Fritz Glatman" is a character sketch – its purpose is not to develop a plot but to let the character demonstrate his ever-changing positioning. The story reveals the power imbalances between newly arrived migrants, and those whose family had arrived a generation earlier. Fritz Glatman is relatively more central (or less peripheral) than the oriental bride he will eventually select. Glatman's white male identity is, to borrow from Stuart Hall, "not an essence but a *positioning*" (226).

In another work from the same collection, "The Ugliest Girl", Dinh distils the notion of a constantly shifting positioning to reveal society's ever-changing perceptions of what is acceptable and what is not. In this story, the first-person narrator is a very ugly girl:

> At a party, should there be another ugly girl in the room – perhaps someone only half as ugly as I am – it would be me who would be embarrassed. I would be embarrassed for her because as soon as she sees me, I become her mirror. By being there, I expose her, interfere with her attempt to pass. My presence would ground her. Without me there is a possibility that she could forget, for a moment, who she is. Surrounded by beautiful people, she might even lapse into the illusion that she is one of them, that she belongs to them and not to her own ugliness. But with me in the room, this possibility is eliminated. Suddenly there is a subgroup, a minority of two, a sorority of ugliness.
>
> (Dinh, *Fake House* 31-32)

The plain girl is reclassified as ugly the moment the narrator, an even uglier girl, turns up. Dinh's story disrupts the notion of binary essentialism (ugly/beautiful, white/black, tall/short) and suggests that what is designated as "other" is not fixed. "The Ugliest Girl" ends with the narrator finding true love, or extreme lust, with another marginal figure, the midget who walks into the bar.

For the 1.5-Generation writer, multiple first-person points of view are used not to convince readers of the essentialized identities (ethnic or otherwise) of a diverse range of characters, for to do so would be a self-defeating project.

> The stories [in *Fake House*] suggest that who does the speaking and from which location alter the meaning conveyed by seemingly similar experiences, and demonstrate the human aberrations caused by transnational capital.
>
> (Pelaud 39)

Linh Dinh's stories resist stereotyping by emphasizing and foregrounding his characters as identities that are constantly shifting in their interplay of otherness (and power) in relation to one another.

Strategies against linguistic colonization

Access to the dominant language provides many 1.5-Generation authors such as Lan Cao, Linh Dinh and Andrew Lam with opportunities to reach a wider audience, and yet their writing demonstrates a desire to remain culturally distinct. It appears that the 1.5-Generation author, like other post-colonial writers before them, seeks to "convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own" (Rao, quoted in Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 38). However, it would be incorrect to suggest that the 1.5 Generation simply write from a first-generation perspective except in English. Indeed, the defining feature of this cohort is a striking cultural and linguistic transformation; writers such as Dinh and Cao blur the boundary between insiders and outsiders that the first generation had previously found to be all too clearly demarcated. Therefore, the "spirit" that the 1.5 Generation wish to convey in their literary output is often that of being "in-between" culturally and linguistically. From this cultural positioning, the 1.5 Generation has two broad approaches available to it: realism and impressionism. While the former seeks to re-create "objective reality", the latter seeks to evoke subjective and sensorial impressions.

Under the first approach, realism, 1.5-Generation writers establish their cultural distinctiveness through the content of their work, and do so using standard English. These works rail against the invisibility caused by the cultural and linguistic gap by providing a diasporic Vietnamese perspective on historical events. Their use of standard language confers legitimacy in an arena where history is contested, and encourages a mainstream readership to identify with an otherwise minority viewpoint, as though it were as "neutral as the news itself" (Cao 88).

While the strategy of realism may assist 1.5-Generation authors to overcome invisibility, it brings with it the burden of linguistic colonization – whether felt to be great or small, or felt not at all, by the authors themselves. The question of which language to write in has previously been explored by post-colonial African writers. Frantz Fanon reasons in *Black Skin White Masks* that s/he who has taken up the language of the colonizer has accepted the world of the colonizer and therefore the standards of the colonizer. Following on, Ngugi wa Thiong'o put forward the argument for decolonizing the mind, which

> culminated in his decision to write in Gikuyu or Ki-Swahili rather than english [as opposed to Standard English] in order to address an audience other than foreigners and the foreign-educated new elite [...] The strength of Ngugi's position is that it is as concerned with the sociological implications of the use of english [as opposed to English] in terms of the control of production, distribution, and readership.
>
> (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 130)

Under the second approach, impressionism, 1.5-Generation authors can use an in-between language to convey their in-between-ness, one that makes the (cultural) translator visible. While this is a riskier strategy, as it may alienate mainstream readers, I propose that it is in the poetics of translation that authors of the 1.5 Generation most convincingly explore the

ontological dilemma of double-identity. By applying the strategy of impressionism these texts can communicate an "in-between" view of the world from within. Such an approach brings with it wider implications:

> [I]n translation studies a distinction is always made between whether to take an audience to a text, or to take a text to an audience [...] By defamiliarizing the language, post-colonial writers can bring readers face to face with the reality of difference, and call into question the supremacy of the standard language.
>
> (Bassnett and Trivedi 14)

Dinh's story, "Elvis Phong is Dead", is set on the day US troops withdrew from what was then Saigon. It coincides with the suicide of a fictional Vietnamese pop singer (modelled on the actual Elvis Phuong, an "overseas-Vietnamese" singer who is himself modelled on Elvis Presley). Readers follow the zeitgeist of a rock 'n' roll era, which coincides with the passing of South Vietnam, a state that was backed by the USA during the war:

> I remember April 30, 1975, very well. I was sitting in my office at *Viet Rock!*, overlooking Nguyen hue Boulevard [...] I felt fatalistic that day, and wanted to be *implicated* in history, a vain and pompous notion. In any case, I had my radio turned on to the American station, in an early bid for nostalgia perhaps. Someone was singing "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas". Sick, absolutely sick!, the American sense of humour.
>
> (Dinh, "Elvis Phong is Dead" 51)

In this story, the "in-joke" is between the author and reader, but not necessarily the narrator, who does not even know the name of the singer, Bing Crosby. In addition, the phrase "in an early bid for nostalgia perhaps" might be a "wink" at a knowing readership positioned in an American future. Dinh peppers the story with well-known signifiers of the Fall of Saigon: the radio announcer's reference to the temperature followed by the Bing Crosby song was a signal for Americans to evacuate immediately. Where Cao's depiction in *The Monkey Bridge* of the same historical event is limited to that particular moment (99), Dinh's "Elvis Phong is Dead" self-consciously locates the author and readers thirty years after the event, while its hapless narrator is stuck in 1975.

Elvis Phong is a well-known Vietnamese pop star, who was not an Elvis impersonator, but a duplicate, a copy of Elvis Presley. In post-colonial terms, the Vietnamese pop world was appropriating American pop culture without the need to reference its context. The narrator goes on to "explain" Elvis Phong to the reader:

> For the sake of foreigners and the ignorant, I will have to state the obvious: Elvis Phong is the greatest figure in the history of Vietnamese rock and roll. He created a revolution in Vietnam. Even his clothes were original. He often wore open shirts to show off his smooth, hairless chest, and rhinestone studded, fringed jackets even in 100-degree heat. An entire generation imitated Elvis Phong. He defined his generation. Elvis was Vietnam. (52)

Again the "in-joke" is between the author and the reader (at the expense of the narrator). There is nothing original or culturally "essential" about Elvis Phong and the rock 'n' roll music described in this short story. Even within Vietnam, before the many boat escapes that created the Vietnamese global diaspora, Vietnamese culture was well and truly shifting. "In 1965, as U.S. Marines were landing on the beach in Da Nang, Elvis wrote 'vua Xa Lo' ['King of the Road'] and 'Bat Duoc cung Roi!' ['I got You Babe!']" (52). The reader can almost hear these pop tunes as soon their titles are mentioned. The conceit of these "translations" is that they suggest that the Vietnamese song came first, and that it is merely a coincidence that there are famous US

pop songs which match the translations. By suggesting such cultural porosity Dinh undercuts nationalist fervour(s) existing on all sides in relation to the politically charged date of 30 April 1975.

For the bilingual reader, the "translations" are even more hilarious because they are preposterously literal. For example, "Bat Duoc cung Roi!" could be (back)translated into English as: "I've *caught* you my darling", rather than Sonny and Cher's "I Got You Babe". Dinh plays with "surface" story in order to make transparent the process of being culturally "translated". In fact, the process of exact translation can be the very obstacle to actual communication. While meaning may have been (partially and literally) translated, the contextualizing mood, music and social mores that would have accompanied these songs are shown to have been... lost in translation.

There is often an assumption that the text will be diminished and rendered inferior by translation. As Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi point out "it is important also to remember that the language of 'loss' has featured so strongly in many comments on translation. Robert Frost, for example, claimed that 'poetry is what gets lost in translation'" (Bassnett and Trivedi 4). In Dinh's work, however, translation is a tool for enhancement and enlargement, and what is gained is often hilarious. It seems that all sorts of meanings can be attributed where none was intended, and thus translation clears a space for creative play for the 1.5-Generation writer:

> From the beginning, Elvis was in sync with his time. His career coincided with and mirrored the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War made the man, made him write music, made him sing. In an interview published in *Viet Rock!*, June 22, 1967, Elvis Phong famously declared: "The din of hate provides the backbeat to my love songs". During live concerts, Elvis would shout to his screaming audience, "I write broken songs for all you broken people!". (2)

Dinh does not attempt to create a realist version of the fateful day. His deployment of impressionism is, I propose, a way to counter the simplification of historical events that is promoted by linguistic colonization. This impressionist strategy suggests that the past is not a world that can be translated into this time and place in a completely neutral way, and that perhaps the use of Standard English in the realism project obscures this from us. "Elvis Phong is Dead" ends with a climax of cultural (mis)translation:

> In 1968, the year of the infernal Tet Offensive, in which 64,000 people were killed, 120,000 injured, 630,000 left homeless, Elvis released what must be considered his magnum opus, a monster compilation of delirious songs called *Dia Trang* [*The White Album*]. White, one must remember, is the Vietnamese colour of mourning. (53)

Dinh's peppering of Vietnamese throughout the text is a strategy to reinforce an in-between cultural and linguistic identity – not just in the content of the writing, but in its very poetics. In contrast, the choice to use homogenized English in these short stories would serve to reinforce the construct of a stable and delineated cultural identity. Dinh writes across languages, rather than being completely in one language or another, and his poetics of translation enhances the content of his work.

In an interview for a Vietnamese diasporic website, Linh Dinh is questioned by renowned first-generation author Phạm Thị Hoài about his bilingualism:

> **Phạm Thị Hoài:** [P]hải ở một ngôn ngữ quen thuộc mớI vướng vào những quy định và ràng buộc của nó. Anh chắc là chưa vướng, nhýng đã nhìn ra một số ràng buộc nhất định của tiếng Việt, có lẽ nhìn ra rõ hõn người trong cuộc?
> [It's only when one is caught within a language that one feels entangled by its stipulations and limitations. You seem to not yet be caught in the Vietnamese language, but have

> recognized some of its bindings, perhaps seeing them more clearly than those who are within the language?]
>
> **Dinh Linh**: Thật sự thì tôi không rõ những ràng buộc nhất định của tiếng Việt là gì. *Đối với tiếng Việt, và cả tiếng Anh, tôi chỉ là một thằng Tây ba lô, một du khách trong ngôn ngữ.* Người du khách có thể nhận thấy rất nhiều điều ngộ nghĩnh mà người bản xứ, vì đã ở lâu một nõi, sẽ khó thấy đượ̣c. Người du khách quả là một trẻ thõ, và nhà thõ nên có sự hồn nhiên và vô tư của một đứa con nít. Không nên ngu như con nít, chỉ nên hồn nhiên như con nít thôi.
> [In truth, I do not know exactly what the entanglements and stipulations of the Vietnamese language are. *With regards to both English and Vietnamese, I feel like a "backpacker" to both languages, a tourist in [the country of] language.* As a visitor, I am able to recognize things that a native can no longer perceive because he has remained in one place for so long. The tourist is like a child, and a poet should be child-like and free of worries. Not stupid like a child, just child-like.]
>
> (Phạm, my emphasis, my translation)

Dinh's response suggests that, as tourists in [the country of] language, the 1.5 Generation may be ambivalent about language, and that this is in fact an ontological condition of this generation of writers. As Sherry Simon argues, this bilingual awareness "can only accentuate the false security of the mother tongue. All language becomes denaturalized, distanced" (69-70). Authors of the 1.5 Generation can be deeply ambivalent about language itself because as cultural translators they invariably come up against the limitations of Standard English in fully conveying their post-colonial identity – one which is constantly shifting.

As proposed earlier, 1.5-Generation writers can make use of two main strategies to remain culturally distinct while writing in the dominant language. Each has variable degrees of efficacy in different situations. 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".

Conclusion

Creative writers of the 1.5 Generation are positioned between the first and the second generation, which casts them in the role of cultural and linguistic translators due to their bilingual capacity and biculturality. The 1.5 Generation's identification shifts along a continuum of otherness. The aphorism "translator, traitor" applies more so to this generation than the first or second generation, because in order to participate in literary production, these authors must constantly return to the question "who is translating whom and for what purpose"? Their answers to this do not remain constant, as the cultural and linguistic gap shifts over time and in different circumstances of cultural production and political contexts. This suggests that the 1.5 Generation's identification is redefined with each new creative work.

These authors must enact creative strategies to resist invisibility, stereotyping and linguistic colonization. The choice of strategies to employ, therefore, changes according to the particularities of the cultural and linguistic gap at play during literary production. The most distinctive works by 1.5-Generation authors are the ones which seek to "decolonize themselves from two oppressors at once" (Mehrez, quoted in Prasad 55) by writing across languages to play with "overheard" messages, to (re)position and (re)translate themselves and their readers.

Finally, as these authors (re)define their cultural "identification" with each new work, they remind us all of our own shifting positioning, and conversely, our role in determining the positioning of others.

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