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Occupying the Third Space

Vietnamese American Hybridity and the Struggle for Identity

Julie Linh Nguyen



INTRODUCTION

After the Vietnam War ended in 1975, over 800,000 people emigrated from Vietnam between 1975 and 1995, with more than half resettling their uprooted lives in the United States. People move to America in hopes that it will live up to its reputation of being a melting pot, but the multitude of immigrants struggling to establish an identity and assimilate into Western culture prove that America's melting pot still has unresolved issues. Because of this struggle, many Vietnamese immigrants lack a sense of belonging, even after moving away from Vietnam and attempting to establish a life in America for many years. Post-colonial scholar Homi K. Bhabha explains in his theory of hybridity that it is a place where neither the one nor the Other exist, but where a new, third space is created for the displaced to figure out their identity.

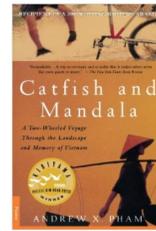
Although Vietnamese people immigrated to the United States over forty years ago, literary work by Vietnamese American writers, Andrew Xuan Pham, le thi diem thuy, and Hieu Minh Nguyen, convey through poignant language and evocative experiences that many Vietnamese Americans are still struggling in this third space with their hybrid identities.



THEORY

Homi K. Bhabha, one of the most recognized scholars in post-colonial studies, developed the theory of hybridity, which is the notion that there exists a "third space" where cultures are not defined, but rather continually being developed. In an interview with Jonathan Rutherford, Bhabha explains that "the importance of hybridity is that it bears the traces of those feelings and practices which inform it, just like a translation, so that hybridity puts together the traces of certain other meanings or discourses" (Rutherford 207). While hybridity is typically thought of as a mixture of two separate entities, Bhabha's idea of hybridity does not trace the two origins from which the third emerges, but rather is a third space that enables something new and different to arise. Studying the hybridity of a culture erases the fixed ideas about that culture since the emergence of identity is a direct response to a culmination of different things such as displacement and oppression. In his essay, "The Commitment to Theory," Bhabha urges that the willingness to explore unknown territory "may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism or multi-culturalism of the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's *hybridity*" (22). Studying the unknown allows one to perceive other cultures based on their unique identities that have been constructed through hybridity rather than based on their diversity through stereotypes or tokenism. These authors' experiences articulate hybridity through writing, and exploring their material can reveal ways in which their identity developed rather than assuming there is a stereotypical or exclusive way in which it is supposed to form.

Catfish and Mandala



In *Catfish and Mandala*, Andrew Pham shares that he was born in Vietnam, fled to America during the war when he was ten, and is now documenting his return to Vietnam in his thirties. His memoir delves into the issues that are coupled with immigrating to a foreign land that can't accept his differences and returning to a homeland that no longer recognizes his changes. Andrew's career encompasses the

difficulty of hybridity and shows that he is struggling to establish a place in Vietnamese and American culture. For example, Andrew's American boss Paul says, "I like you people. Orientals are good workers. Good students, too. Great in math, the engineering stuff" (Pham 25). By associating Andrew's work ethic and intelligence with his ethnicity, Paul stereotypes Asian people and reduces their worth to workers that are at the disposal of their American employers. After Andrew left his job, his father disapproves and says, "You don't do that. You do best job you can. You get promotion. You get new job. You say, 'Thank you very much, sir' and you go. Think about future. You are Asian man in America. All your bosses will be white. Learn to work" (Pham 25). In contrast to Andrew's boss, his father demonstrates the expectations of immigrant parents who want their children to work hard and have the best job available to make the most of the sacrifices they've made. The juxtaposition of the American boss and the traditional Asian father highlights the way hybridity is pulling Andrew in opposite directions. Andrew wants to respect his father, but in truth, "[he] can't be his Vietnamese American" (Pham 25). By saying this, Andrew expresses his desire to form an identity separate from what his father wants and from what other Americans assume. He does not derive his career choice from the stereotypes placed on him by Americans or from the narrow-minded requests from his father. Instead, Andrew retreats into the third space, makes his own choices, and begins constructing his own hybrid identity by traveling to Vietnam and writing.

shrapnel shards on blue water



Le Thi Diem Thuy writes about how her family has been affected by the Vietnam War in a poem addressed to her sister titled, "shrapnel shards on blue water." In this poem, Thuy speaks to her sister and juxtaposes

two stories of her parents working to put food on the table -- their mother taking a train every morning to sell food in markets in Vietnam and their father catching fish after midnight in a restricted part of the ocean. These anecdotes in the poem show how hardworking her parents are as well as the arduous measures they had to take in order to provide for their family. Both parents worked near water -- her mom's train took her home toward the South China Sea, while her dad caught fish in the dark. Thuy ties these moments together by telling her sister, "our lives have been marked by the tide" (34), possibly referring to a multitude of people and places, one being *Phan Thiet*, the coastal port city where Thuy was born. She channels her anger toward the war and where it has led her family:

we are
fragmented shards
blown here by a war no one wants to remember
in a foreign land
with an aching familiar wound (51-54).

Her metaphor comparing her family to "fragmented shards" is a nod to the war and how it has left people broken and damaged. The Americans do not want to remember the war because they lost, and the Vietnamese do not want to remember the war because it tore apart their lives and families. The "aching familiar wound" Thuy mentions refers to the fact that since America lost against North Vietnam, that loss is also felt when coming here from Vietnam. Yet, Thuy does not want people to think of Vietnam and associate it with a war that was lost and a nation that must be buried.

Tater Tot Hot-Dish

In his written poem, "Tater Tot Hot-Dish," Hieu Minh Nguyen writes about the different ways in which his family attempts to assimilate into American culture. Regarding food, his poem reads,

The year my family discovered finger-food
recipes, they replaced the roast duck with a turkey,
the rice became a platter of cheese and crackers
none of us complained. We all hated the way the fish
sauce made our breath smell (Nguyen 3-5).

His family replaces Vietnamese food with American food and everyone seems to be accepting of it. The roast duck is a common Vietnamese dish and rice is a staple in the Vietnamese diet, so to replace it with Western food represents assimilation to American culture, but distance from their ethnic culture. Fish sauce, known as *nuoc mam*, is commonly used with many Vietnamese dishes, regardless of which region the food is from. To hate the way it makes his breath smell is resonant of American school children who tease Asian kids for bringing foreign, smelly lunches. The hybridity is evident through the food representing a significant loss in their identity as Vietnamese people.



Buffet Etiquette

Aside from his written poems, Hieu also performs his poems as spoken word poetry. In his poem, "Buffet Etiquette," Hieu begins,
My mother and I don't have table conversations
Out of courtesy. We don't want to remind ourselves
of our accents. Her voice is Vietnamese lullaby
sung to an empty bed (Nguyen 1-4).

It is not uncommon for Asian families to eat together in silence, yet there is a painful silence between Hieu and his mother, who do not speak because of the differences in their accents and most likely the differences in their interests. He describes his mother's voice as a "Vietnamese lullaby" while his voice is "bleach" with "no history" (Nguyen 3-6). The fact that his mother sings to an "empty bed" is indication that Hieu is no longer there and no longer able to carry on the language. Hieu's description of his voice as bleach alludes to the overall whitewashing of his identity, and the fact that his voice has no history means that the language is truly lost from him. One of the most important defining aspects of a culture is its language, so when immigrants or children of immigrants begin adopting their new host language and forgetting their native one, a hybridity arises.



CONCLUSION

These three writers were effective in demonstrating Bhabha's theory by using both Vietnam and America to each create an identity that is unique. Andrew writes about the racial and stereotypical jeers he has received from Americans for being Asian as well as snide remarks from Vietnamese people for becoming too American. For those born in Andrew's generation, this memoir echoes their own escapes from Vietnam and their own struggles to rebuild the life they abandoned. However, for readers like myself, a first generation American who only had the briefest knowledge on Vietnamese history, reading *Catfish and Mandala* provided insight into my parents' and grandparents' lives and what they had to endure as a result of the war. le thi diem thuy gives insight into the war and how that has affected the perception of Vietnam and its people. She is adamant about creating an identity that includes the war, but can also be separate from it. Hieu Minh Nguyen's poetry is delivered in a way that is more accessible for young readers and viewers. He is successful in utilizing contemporary mediums that will attract attention from an audience that is not necessarily Vietnamese nor looking for a memoir to relate to. In this way, Hieu informs his audience of the issue with Vietnamese American hybridity and the struggles of trying to define the ideal life in America. Studying these works and their hybridity allows us to understand people and their culture without essentializing either one.

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