Intersecting homeliness: Vietnamese Australian Reflections on a Suburban Home, Strathfield, NSW

Boi Huyen Ngo, University of Technology Sydney

> Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home and,
> by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams;
> we are never real historians, but always near poets,
> and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost.
> (Bachelard 1969: 6)

In 2013 I lived in Vietnam. Once a year, the Vietnamese people have a particular tradition called *khom đất*, where the people set out a guest table filled with a delicious feast of food and paper clothing, shoes, accessories and money for the spirits of the house. *Khom* in *khom đất* means a set of rituals or a prayer to bow down and pay respect. *Đất* means land. This is a ritual that acknowledges the spirits within the home and the agency that those spirits have with respect to the home. There would be separate rituals for different types of spirits and incense would burn as an offering in various household places. For example, an incense and food offering would be on an altar directly above the fire stove in the kitchen, a sign for residents to be grateful to the fire spirit of the home. There is a belief that if the fire spirit gets angry, then the spirit may be a danger to the family. The spirit has the agency and a power over the home. This then is a ritual for recognising that a home has its ghosts, its history and its spirits that reside long before the current people residents and that those spirits have the power to protect or destroy. Mostly, the ritual tells us to recognise that land and place are not to be owned,

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and matters such as fire or water or wood are not mere commodities. Rather, these materialities are living and only would be at our disposal to help us when they are given respect and the recognition that they are living and are powerful agents.

Within the Vietnamese language, there is no specific word for differentiating between 'home' and 'house'; rather, Vietnamese people use the word 'house' to mean both the building and the home—*nhà*—(rather than state, 'I go home,' one states literally, 'I return to the house'—*Tôi về nhà*). To say house rather than home could mean that home is not to be possessed, but has its own agency, vitality and spirit.

With this in mind, I want to tell you about a particular uncanny phenomenon that happened in my family home in Strathfield, Sydney—a loved family home where my family still resides—that occurred ten years ago and that, to this day, has not escaped any of our memories. By recounting this phenomenon, I hope to capture, in a self-reflexive way, the merging of the past and the present within the Vietnamese migrant experience living in the Australian landscape, with its dark history of the forced displacement of Indigenous peoples. I wish to mourn and acknowledge that the land that has given my refugee family the opportunity to begin life safely and freely, and that is my birthplace, is a stolen land. And, therefore, we are always both grateful for, and in mourning with, our homeland.

The land of my family home in Strathfield has varying textures, varying levels. On the outer layer of the land, the soil is powdered, providing a beautiful façade of smoothness. It smells sweet and musky, like dried fruit. My father is the gardener. He made the garden in a formal European style, almost as a way for the family to integrate or to have the feeling of belonging in the Europeanised surroundings of Australia.

Just half a metre below this powdered and smooth soil, you meet rough, older soil, clumpy and annoying. Through the moisture of the land and its own decay, the many fragmented roots of trees, plants, and weeds that had formerly stood on this land are pulped within this soil. This soil's varying textures are hard to grasp; the small fragments of stone and roots and unknown bits stab the hands like fragments of the finest glass. Other parts of this soil have an unexpected touch of oiliness, an unknown thickness that is sticky. The smell of the soil is unpleasant, with a certain strange sourness lingering in the air.

The traditional owners and custodians of the land of my house are the Wangal people of the Darug tribe (Darug can also be spelt as Dharug). This land, the land of Strathfield, was an important place for the culture and livelihood of these people.

The European settlement of Strathfield began in 1793. The Wangal people were driven away from the land after this settlement, a land that was their home, their source of food, a part of themselves. Armed soldiers were sent out by Lieutenant-Governor Grose to drive the Wangal people out of the land of my house (Strathfield Heritage 2015). I cannot find information about what happened to them afterwards. Even now, the Strathfield Heritage website actually says that these people most likely never lived in Strathfield but just used the land for hunting and gathering food.[1] It was almost as if to

[1] The Strathfield Heritage website states: 'It is unlikely that the Strathfield district was a place of permanent camping for the Wangal people, as Strathfield does not contain rock shelters or overhangs suitable for camping. Rather the plentiful eucalypt trees, native grasses and access to the Cooks and Parramatta Rivers made Strathfield a likely place for gathering or hunting food by the Wangal people, a costal clan of the Darug tribe. As an important source of food, Strathfield may have been an integral part of the Wangal clan's territory' (Strathfield Heritage 2015).

wipe yourself clean and innocent off the horror of stealing a homeland by not recognising the area as their homeland in the first place.

Between 1789 and 1790 the introduction of smallpox to the Darug tribe by the European settlers killed thousands (Kohen 1985). Although there were no records, it is likely that within the first three years of the European settlement, over half the Darug tribe died of smallpox. A report from Governor Arthur Phillip (1789) stated the following:

> numbers of the natives were found dead with the smallpox … It is not possible to determine the number of natives who were carried off by this fatal disease. It must be great… and as natives always retired from where the disorder appeared, and which some must have carried with them, it must have been spread to a considerable distance, as well inland as along the coast. We have seen traces of it wherever we have been. (Campbell 2002: 88)

My family began to notice a curious, pimply group of orange mushrooms growing around the garden. They started to grow at the side of the house and within a week they had spread to all the garden beds. We all found them perplexing and extraordinarily disgusting to look at. My father in particular found them puzzling; he is a professional gardener and had never seen them before.

One night, as we sat in the garden, we smelt an awful stench. My parents recognised the smell as similar to rotting dead corpse. Such a thick and abject smell; it was musty, acidic, decayed. It confronted us like a veil. It came over the house.

The smell came from the mushrooms.

We began to kill off the mushrooms. With long sticks, we slashed them down whilst keeping our distance from them. But they continued to grow. They spread. It would be weeks later that they disappeared as quickly as they had come.

A few years later, from a rather incidental search on the internet, we realised that these things were not mushrooms. They were flowers with no stem or roots, from the Rafflesia genus. They are even known locally as ‘corpse flowers’ due to their stench. They grow in water-based landscapes such as marshes or in the tropical forests of South East Asia. For them to flourish and grow in abundance in Strathfield, Australia, a considerably drier environment, seemed ghostly—that abstract body of the past. For my family (who happen to come from South East Asia) and for my home, they were an

uncanny phenomenon, these mushrooms that grow upon invisible South East Asian waters.

The Aboriginal conception of body is that body is part of land, land is part of body; ‘speech and sweat are seen to penetrate people and places: speech goes in the human ear and travels through the air, sweat comes out of the body and sinks into waterhole (the earth pores or ear channels)’ (Rose 2002: 320).

Aboriginal bodies of the Darug were killed by massacres and sickness: ‘By 1840 there were fewer than 300 Dharug Aborigines left alive, only about 10% of the original population in 1788’ (Kohen 1985: 22). The land, being part of the killed bodies, expresses this silenced history, quietly and disquietly.

Within this expression of the land—the uncanny flowers smelling of corpses, the cries of a moving land.

The land will always be drenched with the ghosts of the pasts, the quiet of its hidden tragedy, the heaviness of its disquiet. The (dis) quiet of home.

When my family first moved into this home, we thought there were ghosts. Now we *know* there are ghosts. And the ghosts are crystallised in the land. A land loved, nurtured, tragic, homely and unhomely.

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