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Emigrate out of National Borders, Immigrate into Diasporic Spaces

Vietnamese International Doctoral Students' Diasporic Subjectivity in the Making

Anh Ngoc Quynh Phan | ORCID: 0000-0001-9979-1321

Faculty of Education and Social Work, The University of Auckland,
Auckland, New Zealand
anh.phan@auckland.ac.nz

Abstract

The article explores the ways in which Vietnamese international doctoral students participated in and influenced social spaces to produce diasporic subjectivity among Vietnamese diasporic communities in the study countries, and how this diasporic subjectivity was produced in what I term 'diasporised moments'. Guided by theory of space, I look at how Vietnamese doctoral students negotiated their 'membership' of those communities, how their national identity was challenged and contested, and how their nostalgia was triggered against the backdrop of their transnational life, leading to their diasporic subjectivity in the making. I argue that the theoretical bearings of space allow us to expand our understanding of the integration of international students into life on foreign soil beyond the common assumption of integration into the local culture only. I further argue that international students do not purely experience homesickness but actually produce diasporic subjectivity in their temporary migration for academic pursuits.

Keywords

diaspora – space – international doctoral students – diasporised moments – diasporic subjectivity – Vietnam

1 Introduction

International students, including international doctoral students, are the fastest-growing stream of new migrants, often classed as temporary migrants in the study destinations. They are an interesting group of people with 'complex overlappings of socioeconomic and mobility types ... which defy neat migratory and motivational categorisations' (King, 2002: 99). Their mobility is not simply separated into different stages of a process, such as emigration from and immigration to a particular country and possible re-migration to the country of origin. Rather, we should understand the transnational mobility of international doctoral students as processes that link their places of origin, destination and onward migration (Bilecen and Faist, 2015). As current migration legislation in many countries, like Australia, Canada, New Zealand or the US, offers international students (particularly international graduate students) opportunities to stay on and seek employment after their graduation, 'they have de facto become potential long-term migrants' (Baas, 2019: 223). The movement of international students and international doctoral students, therefore, should be seen as a part of transnational migration systems (Vertovec, 2002). In that sense, international doctoral students can be assumed to be (prospective) members of the diaspora, and their interactions with diasporic communities merit the attention of scholars.

International students are often considered migrants in ways that domestic students are not (Collins, 2008). Previous studies have focused on the acculturation process of international students who have available to them ethno-national resources and co-national cliques that can play a significant role in their migration and settlement (Poyrazli et al, 2003; Lee and Rice, 2007; Yan and Berliner, 2013; Leong, 2015; Yan, 2020). Thus, it is important to interrogate the settlement experiences of students, which involve actors such as their co-national diasporic communities, and the manner in which international students are viewed by their own co-nationals. This topic is still underexplored because diaspora is rarely mentioned in the literature on international students in general. This paper attempts to address this lacuna by examining the interactions between international students and the diasporic communities in their countries of study, as well as the diasporic subjectivity that international students produce as they move across and participate in various social spaces in these countries.

Based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with four Vietnamese PhD students who sojourned in different parts of the world for education purposes, the paper aims to unravel not only the way the Vietnamese international students participated in the diasporic space and subsequently reconfigured

the dynamics within their co-national diasporic communities, but also how they themselves produced diasporic subjectivity as people who were deterritorialised. Despite the small number of participants, the paper will provide a more nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of international students in general in host countries and the interactions between themselves and their well-established diasporic communities, which can be illustrative of the experiences of a wider group that could include temporary migrant workers, sojourners or even tourist travellers. This study's investigation of the participants being diasporised could initiate a new area of research on international students, which has long focused more on their acculturation in study destinations. Rather than making a generalisation for the whole population of international students from the stories of a few, this study can be viewed as contributing to the current debates on the student-migrant nexus as well as international education and diaspora. It opens the discussion on the often taken-for-granted easy access of international students to their co-national communities in host countries and sheds light on how new members in these communities reconfigure the existing diasporic spaces.

To begin, I situate the study within the trend of international education among Vietnamese students after 1986 when Vietnam experienced a comprehensive transformation in its economic and foreign relations policies. I then move into discussing diaspora as a fluid, multi-faceted concept before presenting extant literature on the Vietnamese diaspora. In the theoretical framework and methodology section, I delineate how I carried out the study and use Lefebvre's work on spatial production (1991) and the concept of diasporic subjectivity to illuminate how Vietnamese doctoral students negotiated their 'membership' of those communities, how their national identity was challenged and contested, and how their nostalgia was triggered against the backdrop of their transnational life, in what I term 'diasporised moments', all leading to their diasporic subjectivity in the making. The paper concludes with a summary of the findings and some reflections on the study's contributions.

2 Literature Review

2.1 *Vietnam as an Emerging Source Country of International Doctoral Students*

The number of Vietnamese students studying overseas has risen significantly during the past decades, notably after Đổi Mới in 1986. Vietnam opened its doors to the world following a period of wars and rebuilt the country under a socialist regime with government-centred planning policy. The increase in per-

sonal wealth in Vietnam, with the growth of middle-class families there, means more people can afford the investment of overseas study, from secondary to doctoral education. According to UNESCO, the number of Vietnamese students studying abroad in 2012 doubled that in 2006, and rose to 190,000 at the end of 2019 (Vietnam country commercial guide, 2021).

Recent years have also witnessed a remarkable increase in the number of Vietnamese students undertaking a PhD overseas. Besides those who are self-funded, Vietnamese students rely on two main financial resources for their academic pursuit abroad: Vietnamese government funding schemes (notably Project 322, Project 911 and the recent Project 89) and foreign-aided scholarship programmes. With Project 322 (2000–2014) (which funded study at Master's and doctoral levels) and its successor, Project 911 (2010–2020) (for study at doctoral level only), the Vietnamese government's main initiative has been to promote overseas study using the state budget. Funding for Project 911 was allocated for 10,000 PhD candidates who would pursue their studies at overseas universities (Government of Vietnam, 911/QĐ-TTg, 2010), and aimed at producing 23,000 doctoral degree holders by the time the programme ended. However, less than half of the scholarships had been offered when the project completed its last selection cohort in 2017 for PhD completion in 2020 (Department of Education Australian Government, 2018). Regardless of Project 911 not fulfilling its initial aims, it is evident that the number of Vietnamese students pursuing a doctoral degree overseas has been and will be increasing.

2.2 *The Nexus of Diaspora and the Internationalisation of Higher Education*

Diaspora is a post-colonial concept which is multi-faceted in meaning. One view posits that diaspora presupposes a shared geographical place of origin with 'similar physical attributes and derivative cultural traditions' (Harris, 1996: 7). Shain and Barth (2003) state that diaspora refers to people who reside outside the borders of their common origin, or homeland, regardless of it being real or symbolic, independent or not. These views point to the importance of the place of origin, without which diaspora would be a meaningless concept.

Diaspora involves certain 'boundary-maintenance' (Brubaker, 2005: 6, cited in Bruce and Wheaton, 2009: 594) in that it creates a boundary between 'us' and 'them' when diasporic communities have a strong group identity that prevents their assimilation into the host country (Cohen, 2008), keeps them a minority in their host country (Danforth, 1997) and sustains the belief that they will never be accepted by the host society (Safran, 1991). In Safran's (1991) explanation, this is a process of being 'dispersed from a specific original "center" to two or more "peripheral"' (1991: 83). Diasporic members are stretched between

two (or more) countries and two (or more) loyalties (Cohen, 2008) but are bound by 'a collective vision, memory and myth' of their homeland (Safran, 1991: 83). They have complex interpersonal and intercultural relationships with both their native country and the country of settlement (Tambiah, 2000: 163) or 'places of memory and places of presence' (Offner and Bumain, 1996: 163, cited in Bruneau, 2010: 36). Ma (2003) seems to agree with this approach, proposing that diaspora can be 'best viewed geographically as complex and interrelated sets of places and spatial processes' (2003: 5). He argues that diaspora does not necessarily indicate a group of people, it can also be 'a process, a geographic area, and a spatial network' (2003: 7). Brah (2005) coined the term 'diaspora space', describing it as a space 'inhabited not only by those who have migrated and their descendants but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous' (2005: 178). That said, diaspora is 'less about boundary and more about imagination ...' and the concept allows us to 'consider the possible emergence of contradictory yet viable forms of transnational imagined communities' (Georgiou, 2010: 21).

Prior literature has explored the relationship between academics and diaspora. In their study on US-based academics with biographical ties to German-speaking central Europe, Jöns et al (2015) proposed the term 'elective diaspora', which emphasises 'the power, right and liberty of individuals to choose whether they wish to be part of a diaspora and engage in the creation of diasporic networks' (2015: 144). Their research highlights the 'knowledge diaspora' and the elective nature of diasporic identities and belonging by stressing individuals' wish to support diasporic networks of the communities and cultures to which they feel connected. Larner (2015) identifies the increasing internationalisation of the academic labour market, proposing that diasporic academics have become central to the creation of global knowledge networks. Recently, Brooks and Waters (2021) and Han and Tong (2021) have argued that international students are part of the diaspora formation that participates in global knowledge circulation and reinvents the notion of brain drain. International students, simultaneously migrants and students, interact with various groups of people and communities across a myriad of social spaces. The dynamics between students and their earlier migrant cohorts has been sparsely discussed in Sondhi (2019), who looks into the encounters between international students and the South Asian diaspora in Canada through the lens of gender, and in Oldac and Fancourt (2021), who explore the existing diaspora's support for and challenges in accepting newcomers such as graduate students. In that sense, extant literature has treated international students as already part of the diaspora or as an established 'knowledge diaspora', and as a factor in the political mechanism that helps to advance the home country's knowledge economy.

However, how international students first participate in the existing diasporic space in host countries, how they negotiate their membership of established diasporic communities, and whether they become diasporised during their sojourn is absent from the current scholarship.

The reason for this gap is that ‘rooted and established diasporas very often have nothing in common with newly arrived migrants’ (Weinar, 2010: 84) and international students are often marginalised by such communities. The connection between international students and their existing diasporic networks, though lacking visibility in the existing literature, is visible in reality. As Hubbard (2008) remarked, the settlement process of international students involves much more than themselves—it includes ‘networks of heterogeneous association’ (2008: 324), including institutional actors and non-student populations. While scholars have identified actors involved in making student geographies, including universities, landlords, local residents and local authorities (Fincher and Costello, 2003; Hiebert and Kwak, 2004; Fincher and Shaw, 2009), only a few researchers pay attention to diasporic communities in the receiving countries as one of the actors. Little has been written on the interactions between the existing cohort of migrants and incoming students, specifically on how such interactions shape international students’ lived experience, and reciprocally, how new migrants from the homeland, real or imagined, (re)configure the dynamics in the existing diasporic community.

2.3 *The Vietnamese Diaspora in Previous Literature*

The number of overseas Vietnamese, also known as *Việt Kiều* in Vietnamese, is approximately 4.5 million, with the largest Vietnamese diasporic community found in the United States. Most overseas Vietnamese live in the West and have attained foreign nationality. However, it would be a mistake to view overseas Vietnamese as a homogeneous entity (Chan and Tran, 2011). Many of them are refugee families who fled Vietnam after the collapse of Sài Gòn in 1975. They are those who ‘lost their country’ or abandoned it when they escaped from the war aftermath (Nguyen, 2011). They still bear a strong resentment towards the current political regime in Vietnam and often reject it as part of their homeland. Apart from these ‘war victims’, who were adopted by countries in Europe, Australia or North America, there were those who went to study in East European countries, commonly known as the Soviet bloc, from the mid-1980s, many of whom were sent by the post-war Vietnamese government for education.

The role of Vietnamese diasporas has been increasingly brought into focus as a potentially powerful and important social, economic and cultural phenomenon. Small (2019), for instance, has examined the remittance and gift-giving culture of overseas Vietnamese. Chan and Tran (2011) have investi-

gated the reconstruction of Vietnamese nationhood among Vietnamese return migrants. Carruthers (2002) has explored the way returned migrants strategise their position to accumulate cultural capital in order to legitimate their membership in the home nation. Nguyen-Akbar (2014) studies the tensions of diasporic return migrants in their transnational family. Barber (2017) looks at the paradoxes of class and gender among British-born Vietnamese and how they attempt to achieve ethnic authenticity through their 'return' visits to Vietnam. Ben-Moshe et al (2016) take an interest in Australian-Vietnamese diaspora identity and transnational behaviours, and Carruthers (2001) writes about diasporic music video culture in Vietnam. Overall, the extant literature focuses more on the way Vietnamese diasporic communities influence Vietnam, while little attention, if any, has been given to the new wave of Vietnamese temporary migrants coming to receiving countries for education purposes, how this group of population participate in the diasporic spaces, and the interactions between first-generation Vietnamese immigrants and the new post-war Vietnamese international students. This paper attends to this research gap; further, it illustrates not only the way Vietnamese international students reconfigure the dynamics within these diasporic communities but also how they themselves produce diasporic subjectivity as people who are deterritorialised.

3 Theoretical Bearings: Space and Diasporic Subjectivity

The study approach is informed by interdisciplinary debates about spatial transnational mobility in the context of international education, and the cultural dynamics of diasporic communities, two research areas that have previously been analysed with limited reference to each other (Jöns et al, 2015). Modern theories propose that space is social space and is socially produced by human beings. Lefebvre (1991), Soja (1996) and Massey (1994, 2005) perceive space as dynamic, relational and agentive, shaping humans' ideas, beliefs and identity. Space embodies values, culture and beliefs and accommodates social relations. It is created by human beings through their bodily movements, actions and interactions with other human beings in the society.

To help illuminate the complexity in the international students' diasporic experiences and interactions with diasporic communities in the study countries, this paper draws on the work of Lefebvre (1991) to develop a heuristic lens that guides an analysis of different social spaces. Lefebvre's spatioLOGY (1991) reconceptualises space not as singular and static but active, dynamic and reproduced over time. According to Lefebvre's spatial triads (1991), the firstspace is the perceived space or spatial practice, which 'embraces produc-

tion and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets of characteristic of each social formation', which ultimately 'ensures continuity and some degree of cohesion' (1991: 33). In this study, it refers to the perception of life abroad involving movements and flows of everyday routines when interacting with diasporic communities. The secondspace is the representations of space, meaning the abstract conceptions. Through this, the discourses, histories, and institutionalised and social practices in Vietnam influence the being and becoming of the participants. The thirdspace, spaces of representation or the 'spatial imaginary', is 'space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of inhabitants and users' (1991: 39). This is the lived space, what is actually felt and what is really experienced by the body as it moves through the material enactments of space. It is important to note that the spaces are interlinked or interlaced, and one space informs the others.

Subjectivity is defined as 'a socially mediated process of relations and negotiations with multiple others and with multilayered social structures' (Braidotti, 2011: 4). Brah (2005) defines diasporic subjectivity as the composition of multiple 'situated identities' that are marked by 'diasporic inscription' (2005: 1). Diasporic subjectivity commonly emerges out of the Third Space (Bhabha, 1994), which indicates the space between cultures as well as the non-coincidence of a single culture with itself. Hence, Anand (2009) remarks that one need not be 'socially diasporic to possess diasporic subjectivity' (2009: 103). Bhabha (1994) explains in more detail the concept of Third Space in the following extract.

The intervention of the Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code. Such an intervention quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenising, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People.

1994: 37

Based on the theoretical tenets of space and diasporic subjectivity, this study investigates the diasporic subjectivity in the making by Vietnamese doctoral students as they traverse across social spaces, including diasporic spaces.

4 Methodology

This paper is derived from a larger qualitative research project conducted in 2019 and 2020. The project aimed at examining the identity reconstruction, sense of belonging and lived experiences of Vietnamese PhD students in their host countries, as well as their post-doctoral mobility choices. After the ethics application was approved by the author's institution, participants were recruited by purposive and snowball sampling through my personal contacts and then via contacts of the interviewees. These sampling methods allowed me to identify and select information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources (Patton, 2002). While diasporic subjectivity was not initially a key question guiding the research, it emerged as a highly significant theme in the students' narratives of their lived experiences in mobility. This article provides the first analysis to focus on the lived experiences of four Vietnamese doctoral students who had the most interactions with the Vietnamese communities in their study countries and felt particularly nostalgic while sojourning for their PhD undertakings. I have chosen to focus primarily on these four students in this paper so that their experiences can be understood within the rich context of their participation in diasporic spaces.

The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, as chosen by the participants themselves, either face to face or via online audio call. Online interviewing was necessary for those who were unable to attend face-to-face interviews due to the physical distance between me (based in New Zealand) and the participants, who resided in various parts of the globe, and due to the social distancing protocol resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020 when the study was conducted. Most interviews lasted about ninety minutes to two hours, and were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim afterwards for analysis. Table 1 provides a brief description of the four Vietnamese doctoral students in this paper, with the participants' names anonymised.

The interviews were semi-structured and the interview guide for the larger qualitative project was divided into three main parts, including questions on the participants' pre-PhD preparation, while-PhD experiences and post-PhD mobility. For this paper, the data came from questions about the participants' experiences during their academic sojourn in the host countries, including their home-making process, their interactions with Vietnamese communities and international friends, and the challenges and advantages they had as an international student in a foreign land. My initial analysis was informed by the concepts of diasporic subjectivity and the spatial triads by Lefebvre (1991). I analysed how the participants' spatial practices cohered to the symbols, values and discourses described in the literature and history (abstract space) to

TABLE 1 Participants' information

Participants (pseudonyms)	Gender	Country of PhD study	Field of study	Study duration	Post-PhD mobility
Tony	Male	New Zealand	Finance	3.5 years	New Zealand
Chloe	Female	US	Education	6 years	US
Han	Female	Australia	Education	4 years	Vietnam
Phung	Female	Australia	Education	4 years	Australia

embody an alternative or 'lived' form of interaction. (lived space). I tried to be open in identifying emerging themes, categories and patterns, or generating new concepts from the interviews. I took the 'interpretive-descriptive' approach, which means that the researcher has a primary interest in accurately describing what he/she has understood from the data and 'weaving descriptions, speaker's words, field note quotations and their own interpretations into a rich and believable descriptive narrative' (Strauss and Corbin, 1990: 22). Here, some level of interpretation and abstraction for theory-building may be present. For instance, as I analysed the critical incident of a participant reciting a poem, I coined the theoretical concept of 'diasporised moments'. A small number of excerpts which were typical of the data set are included in the paper.

Since I am a Vietnamese international doctoral student myself, I was aware of my insider/outsider positionality. Sharing social, educational and professional backgrounds with most participants allowed me to be aware of the complexity in their narratives of their own experiences while living outside the home country. This insider positionality also granted me easier access to the participants and, hence, built up researcher-participant trust. However, I was conscious of my outsider positionality as the researcher. I did not use my own experience as a source of data but, instead, created a balanced approach to minimise issues of 'outsider-insider' bias when interacting with the participants, interpreting their narratives and reporting the findings. As I agree with Dowling (2016: 33) that the researcher is 'never simply an insider or an outsider' when working with a population of similar racial, socio-economic, ethnic and other characteristics, I attempted to hold these two roles in critical tension throughout the data collection and analysis process. When interviewing the participants, I frequently restated the participants' words to make sure I did not misunderstand what they said or imposed my assumption on their statements. While I was analysing the data, I constantly took notes on the margin of the transcription pages or the research journals to differentiate my personal

emotional reactions from the participants' stories, with critical analysis underpinned by the theoretical framework and academic literature.

5 Findings

5.1 *When the 'Settling' Met the 'Settled': National Identity Contested*

This section details the accounts of the doctoral students, Chloe and Tony, who had complex, intricate relationships with existing diasporic communities in the countries where they did their PhD. For Chloe, a recent PhD graduate in the US, it was not easy to acquire membership in the existing American-Vietnamese community where she lived. There was a clear divide between Chloe and her fellow Vietnamese, because in her comments, 'Vietnamese and Vietnam mean different things to different people'. She recalled her experience when asked about her life as a Vietnamese living abroad:

Vietnamese, there should be a definition for it. The more I know about it, the more complex I realise it is. If I introduce myself 'I'm Vietnamese' to people of other races or ethnicities, they know 'ah, Vietnamese', just a word and they know I'm from Vietnam. But the longer I live with the local Vietnamese people here, the more I read, the more I realize that the national identity is very fluid, flexible and vague. It's difficult to pinpoint how Vietnamese means to this person is different from how it does to other people.

Chloe was born and raised in the north of Vietnam, known as the 'socialist homeland' (Carruthers, 2001). She studied in the US, where the Vietnamese diaspora is the largest Vietnamese diasporic community in the world, and most of whom are from the south of Vietnam, formerly the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Many of them arrived in the US with their family, after the war ended in 1975, as boat people or war victims who were put in rehabilitation camps for over six months. Chloe continued her narrative:

As a Vietnamese here [in a Southern state in the US], I'm the minority of the minority. I am from northern Vietnam while most Vietnamese people here came from the south [...] Some came as students and stayed on till now, but there are only a few of them. The majority are southern Vietnamese. They looked at me as if I was different from them. They almost didn't think I shared the same identity with them. That's why I said I am the minority of the minority.

While literature has noted that an existing diaspora in a country can offer tremendous help to newly arrived immigrants, who then quickly integrate into the established groups of immigrants who share similar national, ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Pedersen, Pytlikova and Smith, 2008; Oldac and Fan-court, 2021), Chloe's story showed that it took more than being Vietnamese for her to integrate with American Vietnamese. When she left Vietnam for the US for further education, she was not displaced. But when she arrived in the US and attempted to join a Vietnamese community there, she was totally displaced and deterritorialised. Chloe had a particularly negative experience of being Vietnamese among Vietnamese in America. What she experienced was a feeling of alienation from other Vietnamese people who gave her an 'othering gaze'. She articulated the experience of being 'othered' evocatively.

When I first arrived, I encountered numerous challenges. I thought 'Wow, it's so different here', something I had never expected. For instance, when they heard my accent, they came straight to me and asked 'Are you a daughter of a communist, coming here for money laundering?', 'You come from northern Vietnam, huh, coming from Hanoi [the capital city in northern Vietnam]?'. HO [Humanity Organisations] people asked me those questions a lot. I was, at first, obviously shocked because it was a far cry from my expectations. Of course I was surprised, shocked. It happened throughout the first year I stayed here. I avoided them. I didn't want to meet any Vietnamese people. I didn't speak to them, nor did I give any clue to anybody that I was Vietnamese. Whenever I went out, I only spoke English.

There are physical borders that people like Chloe can cross to set foot on new land, only to be stalled by the invisible borders of a territory of supposed familiarity. Chloe was negotiating her identity as Vietnamese with other Vietnamese people whose Vietnamese identity obviously did not mean the same as hers. The sense of in-betweenness in the Third Space occurred to Chloe not only because she was negotiating her Vietnamese identity to adapt to the culture on American soil, but also because she was negotiating her own Vietnamese identity in a Vietnamese community.

The diasporic space that Chloe participated in was a political site where her identity and her conceptualisation of national identity was contested. Lefebvre's (1991) abstract space, which refers 'to knowledge, to signs, to codes, and to frontal relations' (1991: 33) was evident in Chloe's account. The abstract space of knowledge, signs and codes of the Vietnamese migrants in the US where

Chloe lived made them rule her out of their community. This world of abstraction is 'what's in the head rather than in the body' (Merrifield, 2006: 109), the 'logic and forms of knowledge, and the ideological content of codes, theories, and the conceptual depictions or space' (Shields, 1999: 163). Chloe's background and her accent were not merely something of her 'body'. In the minds and forms of knowledge of the Vietnamese migrants, her accent from northern Vietnam revealed her background, which they associated with political conflict and reminded them of the historical scar of the Vietnam war. According to Watkins (2005), symbol systems provide manifestations of our mental constructs, which codify dominant epistemological approaches by which truth and validity are measured. In this case, the discourse of the Vietnam war and political regimes were the basis on which the truth and validity of Chloe's 'being Vietnamese' were assessed and measured.

It was interesting to see the strategies Chloe employed to defend herself from the 'shocking experience' (her own words) and from the bafflement of her national identity being contested. Besides avoidance, she used language, in this case the English language, to conceal her identity, to include herself in the broad category of immigrants/international students, rather than be marginalised by her co-nationals. In the US context where the Vietnamese language can signal ethno-national membership, Chloe used the English language as a discursive strategy so as not to make any ethnic affiliation to a specific group of community. Speaking English in an English-speaking country in this case was not just to communicate but also to terminate ethno-national engagement. This language strategy further exemplifies how Chloe, as a Vietnamese living in the US, flexibly switched between languages and created a space in which she could activate or deactivate her national identity. The strategies, according to Lefebvre's (1991) firstspace of spatial practices and secondspace of abstract space, also highlighted Chloe's performance and competence required for the everyday functions of society and social cohesion.

Similar to Chloe's experience, in New Zealand Tony met overseas Vietnamese who had once arrived there under the refugee category or to be reunited with family members who had been dislocated following the post-Vietnam war in 1975. But unlike Chloe, Tony did not face a challenging situation. The diasporic Vietnamese people did not deny his entry into the community because of the 'bygone political conflicts', as Tony stated. However, he noticed differences in the political insights of first-generation overseas Vietnamese in New Zealand. He chose to lend them his sympathetic ear during communal events and gatherings, when they talked about their fundamental similarity: the past national division that uprooted them. Tony described his interactions with the diasporic community.

There were many people arriving in around 1978, after the war. They were boat people. They had to live in refugee camps in Hongkong or Indonesia for years before being allowed to immigrate to New Zealand [...] They were having a normal peaceful life and suddenly they lost everything. I don't agree with some of their viewpoints. But when living in a community, you hear others' stories [...] They are all good people, actually. They just have this lifelong hatred that they pass down to generations and generations. You may feel astonished at their hatred [...] But when they talked about it [hatred], all I did was keep silent.

Tony's experience showed how he performed the spatial practices that include 'patterns and interactions that connect places and people, images with reality, worth with leisure' (Merrifield, 2006: 110). As Tony was well aware of the 'abstract space', meaning the Vietnam war discourse, the historical pains and the loss of Vietnamese boat people, he chose to adjust accordingly so that his participation in this diasporic space was welcomed.

Rejecting the current Vietnamese communist state as a legitimate regime is a common feature of overseas Vietnamese portrayed in previous studies (for instance Chan and Tran, 2011). The critical stance towards the current socialist Vietnamese government and the North Vietnam of previous generations of Vietnamese exiles is a painful reminder of the past. Tony took Tet celebrations in the Vietnamese community, in which he was both a key member of the organising committee and a master of ceremony, as an example of the national identity debate. The Tet event was the time and space in which Tony took action to, in his words, 'neutralise' the differences and encouraged everybody 'to put their political egos aside'.

In a Tet festival, it was suggested we shouldn't use the current Socialist Vietnamese flag because a number of people wouldn't feel comfortable and thus wouldn't come. We should use the flag of the Republic of Vietnam. I said no. No flag at all. That was the best for everyone [...] Neither of the flags so that everybody could come together, as a nation.

The flags and the debate around the flags just reminded Vietnamese people that the Republic of Vietnam had collapsed, yet never vanished. It was a ghost country that was haunting generations of Vietnamese transmigrants. Chloe, as demonstrated above, was the victim of being negatively marked by her own Vietnamese community as an outsider due to this haunted past. However, Chloe overcame the obstacles to become a part of the community that

once saw her as an outlander. She now lives and works in the thick of the local Vietnamese-American community.

I didn't see it [being minority of the minority] as a disadvantage or anything like that. It was just a reality [...] At first I didn't intend to interact with other Vietnamese or befriend them. But gradually I was more confident of my own identity. First, I didn't come here to look for troubles. I didn't discuss political issues. I didn't mean to trigger their pain because I wasn't in their situation and I didn't know what they lost. After some time enduring the hatred, that's what I figured out. I knew they didn't hate me because of me, it was because of the historical past. I started to sympathise with them. I told them that it was ok. What happened happened. I wasn't even born when the Vietnam war occurred. I told them we should talk to younger generations about the modern time. I had no comment about the past. I learned to know more about them, gradually. And they realised I was willing to help their children with their study. I even offered them advice on kids-raising issues or their kids' schooling. They knew I just meant well. The relationship became more lukewarm and I started to gain their trust. Now I interact with them almost on a daily basis.

Instead of letting a sense of identity disruption linger, the participants worked it out to integrate into their diasporic communities. They turned these diasporic communities into their 'lived space' (Lefebvre, 1991). As better-resourced migrants (meaning financially sponsored students, with a well-educated, middle-class background), the Vietnamese PhD students were able to use their self-perceived identities to create social and cultural spaces that connected them to the local co-nationals in the receiving countries. It is evident in this paper how they participated in different social spaces and changed them. Their lived spaces might have deviated from the abstract space, but this led to new forms of action, as in Tony's and Chloe's experiences of changing the dynamics and configuration of the diasporic spaces in the US and New Zealand. As Merrifield (2006: 110) posits, lived spaces 'don't obey rules of consistency or cohesiveness [...] they don't involve too much head: they're felt more than thought'. Hence, Lefebvre's (1991) concept of lived space does not refer merely to 'having an experience' but also to feelings of disruption, difference and change to allow for novel forms of engagement to emerge. The way in which Chloe and Tony participated in the Vietnamese diasporic communities in the US and New Zealand was exemplary in this aspect. Although it is true that the students' sense of belonging to a co-national community can be disrupted, as in Chloe's case, or shaken, in Tony's case, 'new forms of connectivity' were still created

and new kinds of spatial configuration could arise (Nadarajah et al, 2015: 17). The students' sense of belonging to Vietnamese communities was 'wilfully constructed' (Gomes, 2019: 240). In this regard, I concur with Nadarajah et al (2015: 17) that the global movement of people has 'actually increased the desire for community precisely because people are obliged to make a more conscious effort to find community in the midst of such complexity'.

5.2 *'Diasporised' Moments: Diasporic Subjectivity In-the-Making*

While the previous section laid out how an understanding of national identity could be contested in diasporic spaces, this section focuses on how the Vietnamese doctoral students, Phung and Han, encountered moments that triggered their realisation of their diasporic becoming, or diasporic subjectivity in the making.

Moments, in the words of Dolby and Cornbleth (2001) blur spatial temporal boundaries and recognise the 'varying, sometimes fleeting, conjunctions of time and space' (2001: 294). They argue that a moment, however momentary and imperfect, is able to capture flows that enable us to analyse 'its contours and rhythms and how it both creates and enables processes of social identification' (ibid.). Here I examine moments that provoked a sense of nostalgia and resulted in diasporic subjectivity in the making among the Vietnamese doctoral students. I now present the narratives of two PhD students in Australia, Phung and Han.

Phung flew back to Vietnam alone, without her husband and son, to collect data for her doctoral project after a year living in Australia. When asked if she felt sad leaving Australia to stay in Vietnam for the next six months without her husband and son, her answer revealed a moment of unexpected nostalgia. Although the interview was an audio call and I could not see Phung, I could sense her shaking and could imagine tears welling up her eyes when her tone, volume and speed of speech changed. Phung said with a trembling voice:

I was on the plane, flying back from Australia to Vietnam. The welcoming onboard music was the song *Vietnam—my home country*. And I started to cry. I cried for about half an hour, I didn't know why. I thought perhaps it was because I was coming home. When I was living in Australia, I had my husband and son with me. But in that moment, I was coming home, to my parents, I was coming home, to my home country where part of my family was residing. It was the journey home.

For Phung, the physical act of moving on a flight home, coupled with the song whose lyrics were familiar to her and full of traditional Vietnamese images,

made her reconceptualise the flight to Vietnam that day, from *a flight to the flight home*.

Han, another PhD student in Australia, attended a particular event that triggered her nostalgia and reinforced her diasporic consciousness. It was a one-time event hosted by a group of students in her faculty who loved creating poems. They had organised an international poem recital night in different languages. Han briefly introduced her poem and its meaning and then read the poem, 'I recited it in Vietnamese so that the audience could feel the musical sound of the Vietnamese language'. Han further said.

I wasn't sure why I chose the poem *Spring Haze (Mùa xuân)* by Nguyễn Bình. Maybe because what is described in the poem resembles to my childhood. I was born in a small countryside town. I guess my comfort zone is the countryside. I read that poem not only for the event that night and for the audience. I read it for myself.

Han's reading of the Vietnamese poem in the Vietnamese language to her fellow international doctoral students is an exemplary moment of nostalgia that pulled her back to a childhood memory. In that very moment, she interacted with the poem to give meaning to the images of the place and space of her home country that she had always carried. The moment she created the space when reciting the poem in her native language, she was having a dialogue with herself. The poem became a reminder of the place she came from and the space that shaped her. Simultaneously, Han became the mediator between her culture and her international friends. Her reading of the poem in the particular context of an intercultural exchange event, on foreign soil, created a world within herself and a world she invited others to enter.

Rosenblatt (1978) states that what readers bring to the act of reading is unique since they bring their 'personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, particular mood of the moment and particular physical condition' (1978: 30). I argue that this moment of poem reading was when Han felt her diasporic consciousness most clearly and her diasporic subjectivity was evidently formed, or in the making. Akkerman and Bakker (2011) notice that during critical moments of discontinuity that are created by crossing borders, people search for connections in dialogues with and about the new society and culture. I add to this observation that the connections with the culture of origin are also sought by transmigrants in critical moments to sustain continuity and groundedness. To Han's audience that night, the sounds and the language might have made little sense to them because none of them were of Vietnamese ethnicity. But to Han, the act of choosing the poem and

reciting it demonstrated her deliberate space production that gave meaning to her identity, the 'lived space'. That was the reason she said: 'I read for myself, not only for the audience that night. I read for myself. I wanted to have a moment that was not Australian. Back to the countryside. Reciting that poem led me back to my countryside.'

6 Discussion

The narratives of Chloe and Tony shed light on how their existing identity and conception of national identity were contested in the spaces in which they participated. While they were wrestling with embarrassment, doubt, astonishment and ambivalence and hence had to resort to silence or even avoidance by all means, they did not let themselves be reduced by these feelings. Before their departure from Vietnam, Chloe and Tony might not have been aware that they were carrying the national historical scar with them in their luggage to the host countries. However, they came to accept it as 'a reality', to borrow Chloe's words, a component of their life overseas. The legacy of the state that, to those born after the war (like the participants in this study), had existed only as an apparition, now appeared in the flesh. But Chloe and Tony were not debating history, nor avoiding or silencing contradictory historical voices. Rather, they learned to live with multiple understandings of their history. While their identity was challenged and confronted throughout that process, they learned to work on an understanding of their own and their co-nationals' identity and reform it in a way that empowered them to be more confident of their national identity and succeed in becoming a legitimate member of the diasporic community.

As Gomes (2019) asserts, while Anderson's 'imagined community' (1983) specifically looks at how communities maintain their national and cultural identities outside their homeland, his theory of imagined community allows us to 'unpack the complex identities which are evolving and in the case of international students, being created, as part of globalisation processes' (1983: 240). For those like Chloe or Tony, they had a chance to see a different shade of their national identity and expand their conceptualisation of the term while embedding this expansion into their life and their interactions with others. While national identity is to be 'co-ordinated, often largely defined' (Daniels, 1993: 5) through *changing understandings of landscape*, which means that our understandings of the landscape are changed, I argue that national identity is also defined by *understanding the changing landscapes*, which indicates our sensitivity towards and sensibilities about the new landscapes. The diasporic subjec-

tivity in the making born out of the participation of Chloe and Tony in diasporic communities can be seen as an opportunity to 're-read and re-imagine one's own culture' (Anand, 2009: 105). The wide difference *within* the overseas Vietnamese communities highlighted in the findings suggests that diasporic subjectivity 'can inculcate an awareness of multiplicity and difference and serve as a caution against narrow self-focused understandings of culture' (Anand, 2009: 108). Following Anand (2009: 103), my argument of the Vietnamese international PhD students' diasporic subjectivity in the making 'celebrates culture as a site of contestation'.

National identity, for the participants in this study, may not be the most vital marker in their desire and necessity to make a home in a foreign land but its importance and presence in their everyday lives is undeniable. What we could see here is that the students did not try to debate the history to reinstate their identity. They negotiated the understanding of history with themselves in order to interact with and live among diasporic communities. Their engagement with the diasporic communities in fact ushered in a new social space to (re)construct nationhood and expand their knowledge about and experience of the nation. As Chloe exclaimed 'Tet celebrations here are quite interesting to me, because most people came from southern Vietnam and they celebrate Tet in their way, which I didn't know before'. I here argue that the transnational experiences that border-crossers gain include not only an *international* frame of reference but also an expansion of their own *national* frame of reference. The diasporic spaces that the Vietnamese doctoral students participated in and the social spaces they were creating opened up spaces for the negotiation of the border-crossing identity of transnational subjects. From Oldac and Fancourt's (2021) observation, previous literature seems to fall short in studies on the relationships between highly educated migrants (such as migrant students) and an already existing diaspora. The findings of this study partly throw light on this relationship, agreeing with Carruthers (2008: 69) that in these diasporic spaces we discover both diasporic and transnational forms of consciousness, 'the former privileging memory and disjuncture, and the latter privileging contemporaneity and simultaneity, jostling side by side'. The diasporic subjectivity in the making of the doctoral students emerges from and within the Third Space (Bhabha, 1994), which in this case is the non-coincidence of a single Vietnamese culture itself.

In the cases of Phung and Han, the song Phung heard on the aircraft and the poem Han recited were boundary objects (Akkerman and Bakker, 2011) which had the bridging function of enabling connections across boundaries. Boundary objects can be both physical and abstract objects. The lyrics of *Vietnam—my homeland* or the words in *Spring Haze* are not only imbued with nostalgic

longing due to the actual physical distance between transmigrants and their country of origin, but they are also full of iconic markers of the nation, such as coconut palms, rice paddies, bead trees, a Vietnamese *Áo dài* or a young woman weaving on a loom. Boundary objects, such as songs or poems in these cases, are cultural products that added meaning to the participants' diasporic subjectivity in the making. The objects evoked and invoked nostalgic sentiments. They could only become boundary objects when these moments (reciting the poem or hearing the song) became *diasporised* and the transmigrants became aware of their diasporic consciousness. In other words, boundary objects facilitated the understanding of their transnational identity while reinforcing their national identity. The findings suggest that the term 'diaspora' should be understood less as who and what is diasporic, but more as how and when an individual becomes diasporic. The making of diasporic subjectivity is highlighted in this study to be a mode of connection in the service of the regrounding process.

7 Conclusion and Implications

As can be seen from the previous sections, on entering the diasporic spaces, the participants were shaped by these spaces and, in return, they shaped the spaces. Rather than feeling lost or displaced, the making of diasporic subjectivity reminded the participants of their cultural roots, or their imagined community. Cho (2007) differentiates between the transnational and the diasporic, claiming that transnationals are those whose subjectivities emerge out of the security of moving through the world with the knowledge of a return, whereas diasporic people are people whose subjectivities are conditioned by the knowledge of loss. In this study, I suggest otherwise—that diasporic subjectivity can be formed even when transnationals like Han, Phung, Tony or Chloe are aware of a possible future return. I argue that *diasporised* moments, when Han recited a Vietnamese poem to her international audience or when Phung's nostalgia welled up when listening to a Vietnamese song, are critical in the making of the diasporic subjectivity of transmigrants. Instead of using the word *diasporic*, I used *diasporised* with the emphasis on the state of being dispersed but connected, as were the doctoral students with their homeland. While *diasporic* refers to the nature that characterises the group of displaced, deterritorialised people, *diasporised* shifts the nature to the process 'in the making' that produces the diasporic subjectivity. As such, moments as presented in this paper became *diasporised* only because of the context in which these moments occurred and the effects they left on the participants. The moments

themselves (flying to Vietnam or poem reciting) were arguably not *diasporic* in nature but made *diasporised*.

It is suggested from the study that the negative connotations of the term 'diaspora', which are 'the loss of homeland, a collective memory of oppression and the gnawing desire for return' (Ma, 2003: 6) should not always be the focus of analysis. Instead, diaspora is always in formation, 'with their origins and sources always already elsewhere, and their futures still emergent' (Hall, 2012: 29). As diaspora includes people who do not necessarily share the same past of agony, it shows that identity does not just revolve around the discussion of what is inside a group. Instead, it is the reinvention of the limits of representation in the social space (Georgiou, 2010: 31) where people find themselves that deserves more attention.

This paper, based on concepts of diasporic subjectivity and the theoretical framework of spatial triads, allows us to understand the ways in which diasporic subjectivities are produced and constructed in spatial production processes and diasporised moments. At the same time, the study highlights how national identity can be manufactured through different voices and silences, inclusion and exclusion. There is a need to deepen and broaden this area of research in ways that further feature the everyday lives of international students and their incorporation into the fabric of different communities in host countries, including the diasporic communities, as well as the manner in which they are implicated in the ongoing transformation of such communities.

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