

Nunn, Caitlin (forthcoming, February 2017). 'Translations-Generations: Representing and producing migration generations through arts-based research.' *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 38(1).

## **Translations-Generations: Representing and producing migration generations through arts-based research**

### **Abstract**

Migration generations play a central role in structuring and mediating relations in immigrant-background groups and are important conceptual categories for understanding how these groups change over time. Yet, in both research and practice, communicating the complexities of intergenerational relations and generational change can be challenging. Tacit, sensuous, affective and embodied aspects of generations frequently evade capture in conventional research approaches, while generational differences can impede understanding within immigrant-background families and communities. Arts-based research, through its engagement with alternative modes of knowing and understanding, and its capacity to reach beyond the academy and across generations, offers possibilities for addressing both of these challenges. Via an account of a collaborative arts-based research project exploring Vietnamese Australian generations, and focusing on two of the artworks produced, this article demonstrates the potential of arts-based research to contribute to producing and sharing knowledge about intergenerational relations and generational change in immigrant-background communities.

**Keywords:** migration, generations, arts-based research, Vietnamese Australian, refugee settlement

## Introduction

As the lights dim, Diana Nguyen walks through the audience to take her place before three photographic portraits of first generation Vietnamese Australian mothers. Dressed in *áo dài*, the traditional dress of Vietnamese women, she tugs at the restrictive collar. She slowly begins undoing the buttons as she delivers as a monologue an excerpt from an interview with a young second generation Vietnamese Australian woman:

Sometimes it feels as though [my mother's] entire life has just been laid out as a stepping-stone for me to move forward. And that's the entire generation, that's what they live for. They don't need nice clothes; they don't need to go on a holiday... They just work, go home, cook, drive their kids around to the next tutoring centre, then sleep. And they're ready to do that 'til they drop. And they're happy to do that, and they're content to do that, and they're just so grateful for the opportunity to have their children move forward.

Behind Diana, in Thuy Vy's photographs, inspired by the same interview excerpt, the three women sit alone and remote, their faces lost in shadows, expressions unreadable. As Diana concludes her monologue, she slips out of her *áo dài* to step forward in western attire. A transition between first generation and second, or perhaps between Vietnamese and Australian.

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The above monologue was performed as part of a multi-arts event entitled *Translations-Generations*: the outcome of a collaboration between a researcher and seven Vietnamese Australian artists. Each of the visual, audio-visual and performance works presented was

based on interviews conducted with the artists and members of their families, exploring generational continuity and change and intergenerational relations among Vietnamese Australians. The works engaged not only with the explicit content of the interviews, but also with the tacit, sensuous, embodied and affective meanings emerging out of, and evoked by, these accounts. As such, they both represented existing data and produced new knowledge and understandings. The artworks spoke in a range of registers to an audience that included academics and artists, Vietnamese Australians of different generations, and members of the wider community.

Based on *Translations-Generations* and the study from which it emerged, this article explores the capacity of arts-based research approaches to produce knowledge about migration generations that is difficult to capture via traditional research methods, and to disseminate it beyond the academy in forms that actively contribute to intergenerational understanding in immigrant-background communities. The article commences with a brief introduction to migration generations and Vietnamese Australians. It goes on to highlight the capacity for arts-based approaches to address limitations in existing research on this topic, and their potential, through collaboration with immigrant-background artists, to facilitate the communication of this knowledge across migration generations. Discussion of *Translations-Generations*, focusing on two of the artworks produced for the event, and on audience responses, provides a case study for how this manifests in practice.<sup>i</sup>

### **Migration Generations**

Migration generations<sup>ii</sup> are an important conceptual tool for describing and analysing change in immigrant-background groups. Patterns of cross-generational continuity and change chart the progression of these groups in the country of settlement, while intergenerational relations

draw attention to how these processes are negotiated (Kertzer 1983; Rumbaut 2004). Migration generations have conventionally been utilised to attend to differences between those born in the country of origin (first generation) and those born in the country of settlement (second generation), and thence following genealogical lineage, with the children of the second generation constituting the third generation and so forth. This conventional approach has been further refined by Rumbaut (2004) and others to differentiate between first generation subjects who migrate at different life stages, and consequently have different relations to both their countries and cultures of origin and settlement. The most widely recognised of these is the 1.5 generation – those who migrate aged between six and twelve years old – who are likely to retain memories and linguistic and cultural competencies from the country of origin, but are also likely to achieve native-level cultural and linguistic proficiencies in the settlement country (Rumbaut 2004).<sup>iii</sup>

Migration generations stand alongside and intersect with a range of other factors mediating intergenerational settlement, including race and ethnicity, gender, visa category, and era of arrival, (Mansouri, Leach and Traies 2006; Colic-Peisker 2005; Rumbaut 2004; Kibria 1993). One's migration generation is understood to influence many aspects of life, including linguistic preferences, practices and fluency (Parameshwaran 2014), level of engagement with local institutions and practices (Nguyen, 2008), and rates of inter-ethnic marriage (Khoo, Birrell et al. 2009). Migration generation can also mediate more subjective feelings and experiences of identity and belonging, and affective relations to countries and cultures of origin and settlement (Nunn 2015; Skrbiš et al. 2007).

Differences between migration generations often have a significant influence on intergenerational relations. 'Generation gaps' can emerge between people from different generations, with differing linguistic capacities and cultural preferences and practices at times impeding communication and understanding. Complex intergenerational relations manifest

particularly within families, with homes often becoming ‘contact zones’ in which encounters between different ideas, values and practices are staged (Chambers 1994). In addition, particularly in the early years of settlement, there can be an ‘inversion of kinship relations’ (Viviani 1996: 129) as members of the 1.5 and second generations more quickly adapt to the new context and assume knowledge and responsibilities traditionally held by their elders. At the same time, members of the 1.5 and second generations can be placed under significant pressure by members of the first generation to achieve success in the host society while also maintaining the values, language and practices of their ethnic community (Zhou and Bankston 1994).

Beyond this, generational continuity and change and intergenerational relations manifest in less practical and explicit ways, including through emotional orientations to, and embodied relations with places, practices and people, sensuously experienced and expressed (see O’Neill 2010 and Wise and Chapman 2005 re migration more generally). Additionally, in refugee-background families and communities, and for others with traumatic histories, there is often ‘a lived presence of the past’ (Kidron 2009:5) that evades explicit communication but which can profoundly shape intergenerational relations. Such intergenerational silence is not, however, necessarily an absence of communication, but can be a space of tacit understanding. This can include ‘empathetic’ knowledge of first generation experiences; embodied communication through the marked bodies of survivors of war or torture; and readings of first generation practices as ‘narratives in motion’ (Kidron 2009:15). It is in relation to these sensuous, affective, embodied and tacit aspects of migration generation that arts-based research has the potential to contribute to knowledge and understanding.

### ***Vietnamese Australian generations***

Vietnamese Australians are the sixth largest immigrant group in Australia, with 0.9% of the population born in Vietnam (ABS 2013), and at least 1.2% with Vietnamese ancestry (ABS 2012). The majority of first generation Vietnamese Australians arrived as refugees between the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 and the early 1990s, and through associated family reunion migration. Fleeing their homeland – often via a perilous boat journey and with little hope, at least initially, of ever returning – members of the Vietnamese ‘foundation generation’ (Nunn 2013) settled in a newly-multicultural Australia ill-prepared for their arrival (Viviani 1984). Yet despite this challenging beginning, there are strong indications of intergenerational upward mobility for many Vietnamese Australians (Hugo 2011).

In light of their pre- and migration experiences, including losing loved ones and leaving others behind, the desire to maintain strong intergenerational relations – particularly within families – is a defining characteristic of the Vietnamese diaspora in Australia. According to anthropologist Mandy Thomas, an ‘often-heard remark by adult Vietnamese is “We now consider our children to be our homeland”’ (Thomas 1999:186). Key aspects of generational continuity and change and intergenerational relations among Vietnamese Australians include the ongoing resonance of the past in the present, mediated by generational differences in knowledge and experience; a widespread desire for cultural and linguistic maintenance, though tempered by increasing cultural flexibility and hybridity and the decreasing everyday practice of Vietnamese language in second and later generations; and increasingly assertive, but flexible and contingent, modes of belonging in Australia across generations. Crucially, even in the face of profound changes, significant generational differences, and common misunderstandings of the challenges and complexities negotiated by other generational cohorts, the family appears largely to have retained its place at the centre of Vietnamese Australian lives (Nunn 2012).

In academic literature, however, the concept of generations is rarely used and ill-defined as a tool for understanding continuity, change and relations among Vietnamese Australians.

Research has focused overwhelmingly on the adult first generation, and their characteristics, experiences and practices are portrayed in book-length works in the fields of oral history (Nguyen 2005, 2009), political science (Viviani 1984, 1996), and anthropology (Thomas 1999). Subsequent generations – those who migrated as children or were born in Australia – have received comparatively little academic attention, and intergenerational relations have been similarly under-researched. This is in stark contrast to Vietnamese Australian-authored artistic production. Migration generations, both as a mode of positioning and/or recruiting artists, and as subject matter, are a frequent theme in this work, and different generations and generational differences have been the inspiration for several anthologies and exhibitions (e.g. Nguyen 2004; Hoang 2004; Le and Cranswick 2002). This suggests the potential for arts-research partnerships that draw on this history of engagement with the topic.

### **Arts-based research**

In recent decades, arts-based research has gained momentum in breadth and diversity, as well as in institutional recognition (Pink 2013). Arts practices as diverse as photography and film, creative writing, performance, visual arts, and digital media are employed across a range of disciplines including anthropology, sociology, and education to variously identify, collect, analyse and/or represent data (Leavy 2009). Arts-based approaches are especially popular modes of researching marginalised groups such as forced migrants, often pursuing emancipatory agendas in addition to broader objectives concerning ethical and innovative approaches to producing and disseminating academic knowledge (c.f. Harris 2012; Nunn 2010; O'Neill 2010).

Arts-based approaches present particular opportunities for addressing the gaps and challenges in research on generational change and intergenerational relations among migrants and their descendants. They can facilitate collaboration with artists with interest and experience in the topic, utilise art's capacity to access and communicate sensuous, affective, tacit and embodied aspects of generations and their interrelations, and encourage dialogue and understanding across generations and communities.

### ***Collaboration with artists***

Most arts-based research approaches involve participatory processes through which research participants become, to varying extents, co-researchers. These processes are understood to potentially benefit both the participants and the knowledge produced. They acknowledge the central role that participants play in producing research, value their expertise and experience in the field of study, and give priority to their concerns and modes of articulation (Harris 2012; Finley 2005; Lassiter 2005). Research/arts collaborations additionally facilitate dialogue between two regimes of knowledge production and representation, fostering alternative and innovative ways of knowing (O'Neill 2010; Conquergood 2002).

Given the existing engagement with the topic amongst Vietnamese Australian and other migrant-background artists, this drawing together of arts and research has particular merit for the exploration of generational change and intergenerational relations. These artists have the potential to contribute knowledge about, and experience engaging with, these issues.

Additionally, 1.5 and second generation artists are also often skilled translators, able to facilitate communication and understanding across multiple linguistic, cultural and artistic realms (Vu 2010). This is in addition to their lived experience as members of migrant-background communities, and their expertise as artists.

### *Arts as knowledge production*

Another key strength of an arts-based approach to exploring migration generations is the range of vocabularies it offers through which to express the sensuous, affective, embodied and tacit aspects of migration, settlement, and marginality (O'Neill and Harindranath 2006) and the ways in which they differ and intersect across generations. This is in contrast to normative modes of academic knowledge production and dissemination that privilege forms of knowledge that are language-based, or that can be translated into language (Finley 2005). As Conquergood observes (2002:146):

What gets squeezed out by this epistemic violence is the whole realm of complex, finely nuanced meaning that is embodied, tacit, intoned, gestured, improvised, coexperienced, covert – and all the more deeply meaningful because of its refusal to be spelled out.

This is critical in the context of migration generations and their interrelations, which are constituted and communicated in part through bodies that are the 'products of cultural and historical encounters' (Thomas 1998:75); communication shaped by differing levels of linguistic interpenetration; shifting affective connections to places, people and practices; and the often tacit communication of memory, longing and loss (Thomas 1999; Nguyen 2009; Kidron 2009; Ahmed 1999).

Arts-based approaches additionally facilitate the production of polyvocal representations that can – either within individual works or through the presentation of multiple works – draw on a range of vocabularies to 'honor and preserve' the divergent voices and experiences of different generations, and facilitate the representation of their 'multiple, at times conflicting, realities' (Kirsch 1997:193).

### *Communicating beyond the academy*

One of the most widely recognised benefits of producing artistic representations of social research is that they are accessible to diverse audiences ‘who might otherwise be disadvantaged or inhibited from accessing and interpreting the...discourses of research data presented in traditional academic forms’ (Mienczakowski 1999:150). Artistic outcomes can constitute an ethical mode of feeding back information to participants, their communities, and the wider public (Conquergood 2002; O'Neill 2010). Further, in utilising accessible, engaging, and sensuous representational forms, such work can encourage the audience to understand, empathise and identify with those whose ideas and experiences are represented (Finley 2005; Mienczakowski 1997; O'Neill 2010).

Given the many barriers to, silences within, and untranslatable and incommensurable elements of, intergenerational communication in Vietnamese Australian families and communities, sharing knowledge through artistic representations opens up new possibilities for intergenerational understanding and dialogue. Operating in the realm of fiction and symbolism, and distanced from the personal and the everyday, arts-based dissemination can also provide a less threatening space in which to represent challenging ideas and stage difficult conversations (Santos 2002; Scott-Danter 1999).

### **Participants and approach**

*Translations-Generations* was produced in partnership with seven Melbourne-based Vietnamese Australian artists. These artists – all members of the 1.5 and 2<sup>nd</sup> generations – were identified to participate based on their experience in community-engaged art making

and representing Vietnamese Australian experiences. They included artists in media arts, photography, writing, performance making, and visual arts.

The seven artists assisted in recruiting members of their families to participate in the project. Twenty-two people, including the artists, participated in in-depth, semi-structured interviews that sought to understand the ways in which ideas, experiences, identifications, and modes of belonging vary across generations. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded thematically and by generation. Interviewees ranged in age from seventeen to mid-seventies and were members of the first (n=7), 1.5 (n=4) and second (n=10) generations, as well as one multi-generation Australian: the adoptive sister of one of the artists.

Artists were provided with a demographic and thematic summary of the interview data, from which they requested material that they were interested in exploring. This material provided the basis for the artworks produced. While the broad parameters of the process were established by the researcher – that artists would work with interview transcripts to produce artworks for public presentation – the process developed heuristically and collaboratively. The artists and researcher met approximately monthly as the work developed in order to share ideas and issues, engage in reflexive discussion, give and receive feedback, and to plan the event.

The outcome of this collaboration, *Translations-Generations*, was devised as a curated multi-arts event. Its title captures the central concerns and nuances of the project. *Translations* reflects the many processes of transposition and re-interpretation involved in the experience of migration, as well as the everyday acts of intergenerational communication within migrant families. It also names the process through which interviewees' ideas and experiences were translated into interviews, transcripts, and finally, artworks. Alongside *Translations*, the central interest of this research – *Generations* – also signifies the potential product of, or perhaps even an alternative to, translation – the creation, or *generation*, of new practices,

identities, and meanings. Together *Translations-Generations* encapsulates those generations of migrants and their descendants who ‘live in translation’ (Ang 2003), and, in doing so, generate new meanings and new ways of being, while also capturing the processes through which their ideas and experiences come to be represented in this project.

### **Translations-Generations**

*Translations-Generations* was presented at Footscray Community Arts Centre as part of the Big West Festival; a biennial community-based, contemporary arts and cultural festival in the Western region of Melbourne. Across eight showings, approximately 200 people attended the event.

When the doors opened prior to each showing, the audience slowly drifted into the venue. The space was warmly lit and set out with lounge chairs and coffee tables and the small plastic tables and stools that are recognisable to those who’ve been to Vietnam as the restaurant furniture of street stalls. A pot of jasmine tea and small cups sat on each table, and contemporary Vietnamese French music played softly in the background. A number of visual and audio-visual works by participating artists were on display around the space. The performance-based works were curated into a thirty-minute presentation, after which audience members were encouraged to linger, to chat with the artists, researcher, and each other, and to drink tea. Following some performances the karaoke machine was turned on and audience members took turns singing their favourite Vietnamese and English songs.

### ***Like a Version (Hoang Tran Nguyen)***

*Mum always had the radio on in the garage so pop music was always in the air. In high school I hung out with a group of Vietnamese kids who had a karaoke system in*

*their lounge room. We would play basketball in the yard, eat, and sit around and sing karaoke... Karaoke was my introduction to the Vietnamese diaspora. It was a rite of passage.*

Hoang Tran Nguyen is a multimedia and visual artist. He arrived in Australia as a refugee in 1982, aged 7.

Hoang Tran Nguyen's karaoke videos draw on music, video and first generation interview transcripts to produce insights into the experience of Vietnamese Australian settlement in the 1980s. Each karaoke video is comprised of interspersed footage from two or more video texts. Embedded in the song lyrics (appearing karaoke-style at the bottom of the screen), edited excerpts from first generation interviews constitute additional or replacement 'lyrics' to be sung along to. While the interview excerpts employed by Nguyen loosely coalesce around the theme of first generation settlement experiences, they are evocative rather than explicative, edited like the videos that accompany them to provide decontextualised images and ideas rather than a coherent narrative.

The audio and visual materials come from Australia, Hong Kong, Vietnam, and the USA, and reflect the transnational mediascapes of 1980s Vietnamese Australia (Cunningham and Nguyen 2000, 2003). These diverse media individually communicate sociocultural information, and reflect the era of production, and together draw attention to the multiple cultural and communicative realms in which Vietnamese Australian families operated in the era of resettlement. They additionally reflect the central role of media and media technologies in mediating ideas and experiences of places and cultures, and in shaping cultural memory (Morley 2001; Sturken 1997), as the artists' identification of karaoke as foundational to his understanding of the Vietnamese diaspora testifies.

Karaoke – popular both in Vietnam and in the Vietnamese diaspora – is an innovative and highly appropriate form through which to facilitate embodied, affective engagement with the research data. As Mitsui and Hosokawa (1998 p3) write:

The karaoke machine is more than just a machine that allows one to be a star for three minutes. It combines at the same time musical technologies, personal experiences and collective memories that go far beyond microphones and pre-recorded accompaniment.

It thus has the capacity to directly, and differently, engage audience members on multiple levels. Furthermore, its presentation and its meanings are reliant in part on the audience and the singers, for ‘a karaoke video is...not a piece of finished “work” until someone sings to it’ (Fornäs 1998 p122). It is thus, in effect, a work always in progress, re-made and imbued with new meaning in each performance.

As popular entertainment, the songs and visual media function as triggers for the evocation of individual and collective memories and emotions among audience members, tapping into alternative modes of knowing that include the sensuous and affective (Thompson and Biddle 2013; Bryant 2005). In addition to recalling prior knowledge, the re-presentation of this media in the context of *Translations-Generations* – as well as its re-assemblage in unfamiliar configurations through the karaoke format and the interruption of song lyrics with first generation interview excerpts – encourage new readings of this media through the lens of Vietnamese Australian ideas and experiences. In utilising the karaoke video genre, in which video content bears little correlation to the song it accompanies, *Like a Version* eschews explicit meaning-making and divests interpretive responsibilities/opportunities to the audience.

For those audience members who participated in performing the karaoke there was also an additional affect, produced by the embodied, sensuous knowing of singing or speaking the words of interviewees embedded in the songs. This affect has been explored in an education and training context by Michael Crowhurst (2009), who has found that speaking the words of marginalised research participants generates an embodied connection to their stories. During some performances, this affect extended beyond those who took to the microphone to include those who, from their seats, sang along to each of the songs, joining in on remembered lyrics and experiencing the disruption of familiar songs with interviewees' narratives.

One of the three videos produced by Nguyen is for Jimmy Barnes' *Working Class Man* (Cain 1985): an Australian rock anthem that evokes the quintessential Australian character of the (white, male) Aussie battler (Scalmer 1999). The images in this video come from two contrasting sources. One, the Australian soap opera *Neighbours*, which was at the zenith of its popularity in the mid-to-late 1980s, encapsulates the Australian white suburban imaginary of that time. The other, footage of a wedding in Vietnam, is an example of the home videos that were an important mode of transnational communication and connectedness across and between the Vietnamese diaspora and the homeland in the pre-internet era. The combination of these three media texts, interspersed with the words of first generation interviewees and in the context of a Vietnamese Australian event, function through moments of resonance and dissonance to provide insights into the first generation settlement experience.

In the two sets of footage there is a striking contrast between the emptiness of the suburban landscapes of *Neighbours* (a common theme in interviewees' accounts of arrival in Australia) and the busy-ness and vitality of the large Vietnamese wedding, suggesting contrasting uses of space and underlining the presence and absence of family and community. A particularly poignant juxtaposition is created between the large houses of *Neighbours* and the re-presentation of one first generation interviewee's account of his early aspirations: 'We walk

out into the streets/Look at all the houses/We find the oldest, ugliest/And hope one day we live there'. At the same time, there are moments of resonance, through which new insights are revealed. Barnes' song, heard in the context of a Vietnamese Australian arts event, evokes an alternative image to the white working class man: the first generation of Vietnamese refugees who also formed part of the working class in the manufacturing and service sectors across Australia. This resonance is further reinforced by images of shirt-sleeved Vietnamese wedding guests raising a toast with mugs of beer, embodying the stereotype of the Australian working class man. Vietnam itself provides a point of intersection. Lyrics relating to serving in the Vietnam War and resenting the US in relation to that conflict highlight a connection between Vietnamese Australians and the wider Australian narrative, and takes on new meaning when considered in relation to first generation Vietnamese Australians and what was perceived by some as America's abandonment of the South Vietnamese.

*Like a Version* replicates for the audience the co-presence in the lives of first generation Vietnamese Australian settlers of multiple realms of representation, meaning, value and aesthetics. In doing so, it provides insights into the complex process of negotiating these multiple realms, and how they intersect, diverge and converge to produce unique ideas and experiences.<sup>iv</sup> Moreover, the inclusion of widely familiar media texts evokes personal and cultural memory and affective engagement, and then challenges them through the insertion of the unfamiliar: first generation interview transcripts. These diverse media – aural, textual and visual – grant audiences multiple modes of entering into the work, and into the experiences of first generation Vietnamese settlers, further augmented by the opportunity to embody their words through karaoke performance. *Like a Version* thus utilises both the form of karaoke and the content within it to provoke new insights into first generation Vietnamese settlement in Australia.

### ***Flat Daddy (David Cuong Nguyen)***

*Flat Daddy is a response to the varying absences and presences of fathers in first generation Vietnamese Australian families. Some fathers were never present. Others left. Some were bodily present, while their hearts and minds drifted elsewhere. Many wanted to be present but were instead in factories, in restaurants, in backyard sweatshops. Flat Daddy is a meditation on present absence and absent presence.*

David Cuong Nguyen is a writer and theatre maker. He was born in Vietnam and arrived in Australia as a refugee in 1977, aged 6 months.

*Flat Daddy* is a spoken word/projection piece created by David Cuong Nguyen that explores the various absences of first generation fathers narrated by 1.5 and second generation interviewees. *Flat Daddy* – a blank white foamcore cutout of a man – is the symbolic father upon which images are projected, accompanied by a spoken word piece delivered by Nguyen. *Flat Daddy* was inspired by the ‘Flat Daddies’ concept developed in the United States that involves placing life-sized photographs of parents serving in the armed forces into their family homes so that children can maintain a connection with their absent parent (Flat Daddies n.d.). Yet, in contrast to the ‘Flat Daddies’ of American military families, which bear the photographic image of the absent father, Nguyen’s *Flat Daddy* is devoid of visual cues: a literal absence onto which memories, emotions and experiences are projected.

Paternal absence – whether due to family breakdown, long work hours, or lack of engagement in family life – is a common theme in the interview data and is noted in academic literature on Vietnamese Australians and other refugee-background communities (c.f. Kibria 1993; Thomas 1999). Indeed, only one of the seven families interviewed for this study remained a complete nuclear family. Factors mediating this and other forms of actual or perceived absence are understood to include the stresses of migration and settlement, barriers

to fulfilling the traditional role of provider, changing generation and gender roles eroding household authority, and emotional and mental health issues relating to the past, to family still at risk or in need, and to challenges in the settlement country (Fisher 2013; Correa-Velez, Spaaij and Upham 2012)

Nguyen's poem begins: 'No one knows when he left or where he went / But there were always signs he wasn't there'. A composite of the many absent fathers narrated in interviews, *Flat Daddy* utilises data relating to first generation men – most often conveyed by their now-adult children – to explore this absence. It focuses in particular on the question: 'Where did he go when he wasn't present?', drawing on pre- and post-migration narratives to uncover the possible sites inhabited by the absent father. These include physical destinations, but also imagined ones: return journeys to Vietnamese pasts that echo Rumbaut's (2004) suggestion of a past-oriented outlook among those who migrate in mid- to late-adulthood. As *Flat Daddy* concludes: 'These refuges are gone now, but he returns whenever he can / For he is a time traveler, a virtual tourist, searching for home'.

Yet these are mere projections. In exploring absent fathers, *Flat Daddy* also draws attention to absent, or at least non-explicit, knowledge – in both the data and in second generation understandings. It asks questions that the children of refugees are tacitly taught not to ask but which help shape their identities (Kidron 2009; Lin, Suyemoto and Kiang 2009), and posits possibilities drawn from the limited information available. *Flat Daddy*, in its imagined account and projected images, is not about the first generation father as much as it is a visual and aural representation of 1.5 and second generation attempts to understand these absences. Sitting on the floor beside, and faintly illuminated by, an old-fashioned overhead projector, Nguyen slowly changes the transparencies as he presents these possible trajectories. The projections that accompany his words – 'morphing pictures filling out the spaces of his ghost' – resonate in multiple, abstract ways with the text. They include a machine in an Australian

factory, Vietnamese soldiers moving in single file across a field, spirals of incense in a Saigon temple, and the trunk of a tree in Hanoi, roots curving up and around it. The roots are particularly evocative, suggesting ideas of (un/up)rootedness, which not only reflect the second generation experience of absent fathers, but are important in Vietnamese phrases such as *mất gốc* (lost roots): an accusation sometimes leveled at members of the diaspora, and *người Úc gốc Việt* (Australians with Vietnamese roots): a mode of identification for some Vietnamese Australians.

*Flat Daddy* emerges out of second generation experiences of living with and through their fathers' literal and figurative absences. In form and content it communicates dual narratives: of the lives of first generation men, and of second generation attempts to understand the silences and absences experienced as the children of these first generation refugee settlers. In *Flat Daddy*, the use of artistic modes of representation facilitates a flexible and creative relationship with the data. The ideas explored, in focusing on facets of the past that are not known, can only be constituted through aural and visual projections, which build upon, but simultaneously transcend, the 'facts' of the data.

### **Reception and reflections**

*Translations-Generations* demonstrates the capacity of arts-based research approaches to contribute to the production and dissemination of knowledge on migration generations through collaboration with artists from migrant-background communities, utilising arts to access tacit, sensuous, embodied and affective forms of knowledge, and engaging with audiences beyond the academy and across generations. This is reflected in audience responses to *Translations-Generations*, garnered through voluntary audience feedback forms.

Thirty-nine attendees from across the first, 1.5 and second Vietnamese generations, as well as native-born and migrant members of the wider community, completed forms.

As hoped, *Translations-Generations* presented an opportunity for Vietnamese Australians to gain some understanding of other generations in their community. For second generation attendees it facilitated insights into first generation perspectives, such as ‘our parents’ work ethics and ways of thinking’. It also gave first generation audience attendees an opportunity to ‘experience the culture of new young Vietnamese’, and to access their experiences of intergenerational relations, including ‘the way young Vietnamese Australians feel pressured by their parents’. Further, the very nature of the event demonstrated to one first generation attendee how ‘young Vietnamese Australians are embracing their Vietnamese culture’. It is worth noting, however, that this conflation of ‘young’ with second generation, despite the fact that many members of this generation – and artists in this project – are aged in their thirties, reflects embedded hierarchical relations and ongoing misunderstandings across Vietnamese Australian generations.

An unanticipated aspect of the communication of generational experiences was the value for those who are rarely represented in media and cultural production of having their own experiences portrayed. This is comprehensible in the context of the persistent lack of diversity in mainstream Australian media and cultural production, in which Vietnamese Australians have historically been essentialised, marginalised and underrepresented (Teo 2000). It is also reflective of art’s capacity to share perspectives that may be difficult to address in everyday intergenerational communication. A number of second-generation Vietnamese Australian questionnaire respondents found the representation of their own generational experiences the most engaging aspect of *Translations-Generations*, showing ‘how we think as kids who are born and brought up in Australia’, and ‘what happened to Vietnamese people and what their children (us) experience everyday’.

An additional facet of intergenerational communication and understanding emerging through this project was the exposure of artists, often for the first time, to the narratives of members of other generations in their families via the interview transcripts upon which their works were based. Indeed, in several cases, the representations produced are the product in part of the access granted through the project. This included incorporating data provided by family members into works and exploring an aspect of personal or familial experience. A number of works present an affective connection to, and thirst for knowledge about, the past, while also displaying empathy for – and at times constituting a tribute to – the first generation and their struggles. Importantly, as the product of artists’ engagement with the interview data, the artworks in *Translations-Generations* not only represent, but also constitute complex sites of intergenerational negotiation.

While the nature of the tacit, affective, sensuous and embodied knowledge produced through art renders it necessarily difficult to translate into language-based responses, many attendees highlighted the non-literal modes of knowing produced through *Translations-Generations*.

These included the ‘varied sense appeal’ of the works and their ‘expressive, poetic’ and ‘atmospheric’, rather than ‘purely informative’ communication. Other respondents variously found the work ‘moving’ ‘evocative’, ‘intriguing’ ‘engaging’ and ‘open, honest’.

Highlighting the importance of embodied, sensuous understanding, one man expressed the ‘feeling of entering into another world of experience’.

The polyvocality of the event and of individual works as a means of producing more complex and dialogic understandings was also noted by respondents, including the ‘juxtaposition of ideas, concepts’ across the event, and the ‘mix of “Aust” classic/iconic culture with feelings of immigration’ in *Like a Version*. This polyvocality, in content, form and register, meant that even where limited linguistic, cultural, or arts literacy may have impeded some people’s understanding of some works, they were able to access others. Indeed, different works

appeared more relevant and engaging to different sections of the audience. Thus, the multi-artwork approach facilitated broad, and differentiated, access to the research data. And while none of the works directly challenged each other, nor did they all resolve into a coherent or fixed narrative, thus leaving open the multiplicity and dynamism of Vietnamese Australian ideas and experiences.

Nonetheless, while the accessibility of *Translations-Generations* was widely noted by respondents ('not too highbrow or inaccessible', 'better context than most media'), there were limits. Feedback from first generation family members of participating artists revealed some gaps in understanding. It is not surprising that non-literal representations challenge audiences and evade interpretation. In privileging the experiential and the sensuous over the explanatory, and the exploratory over the declarative, arts-based approaches shift the interpretive authority to the viewer, who is simultaneously *obliged* and *free* to make their own meanings from the work (MacDougall 1998). This is one of the benefits of artistic representations. It does, however, provoke consideration of the potential for arts-based representations to be as exclusionary as academic ones.

Also at play in matters of first generation access were linguistic, social and cultural barriers. While there was a clear rationale for collaborating with established 1.5 and second generation Vietnamese Australian artists in producing *Translations-Generations*, it was a rationale premised in part on the fact that these artists have forms of linguistic, social and cultural capital that are not necessarily shared by their family members – particularly the first generation. This comes in many cases with the concomitant ability to act as cultural and linguistic translators across generations and communities. Yet the challenges of addressing multiple audiences with varying cultural and linguistic frames are significant, and risk, as Chi Vu (2010) suggests, proving the aphorism of 'translator, traitor'. This is exacerbated by the western training of the artists, as well as their preference for English-language

communication, which privileges 1.5 and second generation audience members. Thus despite Vietnamese language translations of key project information, the presentation of non-text-based artworks, and the referencing of Vietnamese cultural frames and use of Vietnamese language in some works, which sought to make the event more accessible to non-English-speaking members of the first generation, *Translations-Generations* was not as successful as it might have been in facilitating an ethical and accessible mode of dissemination.

## **Conclusion**

Migration generations are an important mediating factor in the ideas and experiences of immigrant-background communities, and understanding generational change and intergenerational relations is important both for research and for families and communities. Yet the tacit, sensuous, affective and embodied aspects of generations frequently evade capture in conventional research approaches, while generational differences can impede understanding within immigrant-background families and communities. *Translations-Generations*, in drawing on the experience and expertise of Vietnamese Australian artists, utilising alternative modes of producing and sharing knowledge, and engaging with multi-generational audiences beyond the academy, makes a modest contribution to addressing these challenges in the context of Vietnamese Australian generations. In doing so, it demonstrates the potential of arts-based research for engaging with migration generations more broadly. *Translations-Generations* provided a space beyond everyday communicative constraints to share knowledge and foster understanding across Vietnamese Australian generations. The multiple registers in which knowledge was produced rendered the event accessible to a diverse audience, many of whom would not otherwise have – or necessarily seek – access to academic research, even where it directly relates to their experiences. Further, *Like a Version*

and *Flat Daddy* – two of the seven works created for the project – demonstrate how arts-based research can facilitate insights into the tacit, sensuous, affective and embodied aspects of generations. These works both *translate* research data into new forms that draw out latent meanings and communicate in alternative ways, and *generate* new knowledge and understandings through the encounter between the artist and the data with which they engaged.

While there is more work to be done in synthesising arts-based research and the alternative modes of knowledge it produces with conventional social research, and in making arts-based research outcomes accessible and meaningful as sites of cross-generational dialogue and understanding, *Translations-Generations* demonstrates the capacity of arts-based research to make a productive contribution to producing and sharing knowledge about intergenerational relations and generational change in immigrant-background communities.

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<sup>i</sup> While it is worth noting the irony of attempting to write these artworks as text – and in doing so, to lose in translation much of what is unique in their contribution – it is a pragmatic undertaking that facilitates placing these works, and these forms of knowledge, in dialogue with those that dominate academic knowledge production.

<sup>ii</sup> The terms ‘immigrant generation’ (Rumbaut 2004) and ‘migrant generation’ (Skrbiš et al. 2007) have also been used to encapsulate this generational framework, though there is no consistently applied terminology

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across the field of migration studies. I have chosen to use ‘migration generation’ (Nunn 2012) in order to position people in relation to their migration heritage, rather than to the individual migrant: a modest attempt to work against the ascription of ‘migrant’ as an intergenerational identity.

<sup>iii</sup> While migration generations are further complicated by increasing practices of transnationalism, including multiple and return migrations, long-term intergenerational settlement is still common and warrants continued academic attention.

<sup>iv</sup> See Hickey-Moody (2011) for a different example of how ethno/mediascapes have been utilised in arts-based research to explore and represent identity in refugee-background cohorts.