In the spirit of reconciliation: migrating spirits and Australian postcolonial multiculturalism in Hoa Pham’s *Vixen*

“Spirits come and go. But we’re still here. The land is still here.”

These words are said by a ningaui, an Aboriginal Australian spirit also sometimes known as a bunyip, to comfort a Vietnamese fox fairy – a mythical creature who is able to take the form of a woman - who mourns the death of her friend, a fox fairy from China. In light of the complex colonial past that still haunts Australia and the ongoing discussion about what relationship Australians should have to this past, especially when they are from relatively recently arrived groups, this is the most important moment in Hoa Pham’s novel, *Vixen*. The novel is what Pham calls an “historical fantasy”; she deliberately plays with mythologies from various cultures against an historical backdrop that makes no claims to accuracy. Nonetheless, Pham captures a truth in this moment and others like it in the novel: it is a moment of recognition between othered groups in Australian society and a motion toward reconciliation. It is also a moment in which complex histories of colonialism and migration converge and are tentatively negotiated within discourses of postcolonialism and multiculturalism. It is not a moment of complete resolution – before disappearing the ningaui invites the fox fairy to return another time, signalling a desire for an ongoing interaction – because reconciliation in Australia is an ongoing process and the relationship between the indigenous and the non-settler (non-white) migrant is particularly new. Sneja Gunew argues that the Australian state has failed its multicultural subjects – its migrants – as much as it has failed its Indigenous subjects. Pham’s novel, in a sense, attempts to respond to this suggestion as well as to propose a solution: the encounter between the fox fairy and the Aboriginal spirit is a moment of negotiation between Indigenous and multicultural subjects under the broader rubric of postcolonialism. The use of spirit forms allows Pham to draw upon the collective experiences and memories of these particular subject positions as well as to explore the multifarious ways in which postcolonial and multicultural nations are haunted by both their past and the pasts of the nations left by its migrant subjects.

Pham’s historical fantasy is ambitious and not limited to this imagined negotiation between Indigenous and multicultural subjects in Australia; *Vixen* offers an allegorical commentary on twentieth-century history, with its particular focus on the shared histories of Vietnam and Australia. Various historical, political and cultural subject positions are represented in *Vixen* by various mythical creatures who interact in

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2. Ibid., vii.
various symbolic ways. In the novel, after defeating a French vampire and losing her human lover to a conflict with emerging northern communists, the unnamed Vietnamese fox fairy flees Vietnam as it falls to these twin pressures of decolonisation and communism. Taking on the identity of a woman killed by the communists, she migrates to Australia where she befriends Chen, a Chinese fox fairy living in the country, who migrated from China during the gold rushes of the 1850s. Also in the country she encounters the ningaui, with whom Chen is also acquainted. Eventually the fox fairy returns to Vietnam, where she meets with a young dragon and finds an orphaned fox kitten. The novel ends with the fox fairy choosing to remain in Vietnam with her newly adopted kitten, who will now learn to be a fox fairy too.

There are three key encounters of concern in this chapter that can be roughly categorised as the colonial encounter, the multicultural encounter and the postcolonial encounter. The colonial encounter occurs between the Vietnamese fox fairy and the French vampire. As a critique on the effects of French colonisation on Vietnam, the colonial encounter suggests that colonial powers can be parasitic and so weaken the political and cultural climate of a nation. In the multicultural encounter between the Vietnamese and Chinese fox fairies, Pham explores the possibility of intercultural dialogue within the multicultural state, emphasising the importance of migrant pasts in creating and enriching understandings of Australia as multicultural. Finally, the postcolonial encounters that occur between the fox fairies and the ningaui are used to imagine the political and cultural possibilities of conversations between multicultural and indigenous subjects in postcolonial and multicultural Australia. The shared experience of colonialism by the Vietnamese fox fairy and the ningaui in particular opens up an even more interesting transnational dialogue that, I argue, gestures towards a form of what Anthony Appiah calls “rooted cosmopolitanism”.

Pham’s use of spiritual beings deviates somewhat from the norm in ethnic literatures, allowing her to provide a particular commentary on the intersections of Australian and Vietnamese histories. Ghosts are a common feature of much migrant or multicultural writing, as well as Indigenous writing, in Australia and other settler societies, such as the United States, Canada and New Zealand. In her study of ghosts in contemporary American ethnic literature, Kathleen Brogan argues that ghosts function “to re-create ethnic identity through imaginative recuperation of the past into the service of the present.” More importantly, she argues that these ghosts “lead us to the heart of [America’s] discourse about multiculturalism and ethnic identity…they reveal much about the dynamics of social and literary revisionism in response to cross-cultural encounters.” In Brogan’s sample texts, the ghosts are usually ancestral, related in some way to the protagonists they haunt who are coming to terms with their ethnic heritage. Pham’s spiritual beings, on the other hand, are creatures drawn from traditional

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5 Kathleen Brogan, Cultural haunting: ghosts and ethnicity in recent American literature (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia), 4.
6 Ibid., 4.
Vietnamese, European and Australian mythologies; they are not ordinary ‘ghosts’ as such and are not related to the other migrant characters found in the novel. These creatures are even more allegorical, representative of a group’s collective history as living and dynamic, subject to change and interpretation. The fox fairy in *Vixen* is therefore becomes an embodiment of Vietnamese ethnicity, understanding this as the collective histories, experiences and traditions of a group, but she does not haunt a protagonist: ethnicity, in a sense, is the protagonist.

More so than even the ancestral ghost, the various spirits that inhabit Pham’s novel serve to highlight the relationship between the past and present because they are witness to them both. They represent memory and history, and they are testimony. This highlights the importance of history and tradition to ethnicity and the process of ethnic identification. Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs observe that “the past is always ghostly” in Australia. The ephemeral quality that the ‘ghostliness’ of the past suggests belies its very real and constant politicised presence in Australian culture and society. Pham’s spirits are immortal (as long as they choose to be, as demonstrated by Chen’s voluntary death) but they are also corporeal (again, in the case of the ningaui at least, if they choose to be). But reading the corporeality of the fox fairies as an indication the very reality of the migrant presence in Australia problematises the changing form of the ningaui and her reclusiveness; there is a danger of inferring from this that the Indigenous presence in Australia is also changeable, reclusive and, as the fox fairy herself once wonders, indifferent: “The English took over everything. Like in America. I did not understand. Why did not the Australian people rebel, like the Vietcong?”

**The colonial encounter**

The Indigenous past is pale and ghostly even in this tale of spirits, referenced only in Chen’s account of her experiences in Australia and interactions with the ningaui. The nature and process of colonisation is instead depicted within the Vietnamese context, embodied by the French vampire, Chloe. As Ken Gelder states, “[v]ampirisation is colonisation,” and Chloe quite literally sucks the lifeblood out of Vietnam by preying on its emperor. Graham Huggan, drawing on Gelder, draws out the ambiguities of the vampire as a manifestation of colonialism: “On one level, the vampire represents a destructive meeting of extremes, in which civilisational excess (often framed as decadence) becomes interchangeable with barbarity; on another, it represents the blurring of all ontological categories, so that vampires not only constitute a threat to specific personal/cultural identities, but also demonstrate that identity, however produced or protected, will always be foreign to itself” Chloe is depicted in lush terms of excess: “She spills out of a beautiful green silk dress and teeters in spiky black heels. . . .

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7 In *Haunted Earth*, Peter Read suggests that Pham’s fox fairy is capable of travelling back and forth in time. There is, however, no evidence to suggest this in the narrative. The fox fairy’s relationship with time is linear; she simply witnesses and remembers the past, and can reflect upon it more easily in the present than a human. See Peter Read, *Haunted Earth* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2003), 112.


9 Pham, *Vixen*, 93.


Emperor] says that she is France – elegant, graceful and rich.” There is something seductive about colonisation, the novel daringly suggests, even for its object, but in essence it is parasitic. While the Emperor is enchanted by Chloe, he is also enchanted by the colonial presence of the French. Although the fox fairy does not immediately recognise Chloe’s true nature, she is suspicious of this encroachment on her territory and mentally attacks Chloe’s physical otherness, which is further accentuated when she dons an ao dai. The traditional Vietnamese dress, the fox fairy observes, “makes her breasts look like udders” and she is unimpressed that Chloe “thinks it’s amusing to look like one of us.” Chloe’s ill-fitting ao dai and her broken Vietnamese mark her failure to create a secure sense of belonging as the coloniser within the colonised state, largely due to the lack of respect she affords her hosts and their culture, and so signals the inevitable demise of the French occupation of Vietnam. Another attempt to adhere to local custom is similarly marked by disrespect. She presents the fox fairy with a ruby ring, believing that the small trinket will buy the protecting fox fairy’s permission to colonise, the process of which is represented by her feeding on the Emperor. Both the giver and the receiver misinterpret this gift exchange: Chloe thinks that the ring buys permission to stay unequivocally, whereas the fox fairy asserts that it granted her audience with the Emperor but not the right to feed. Angered by her disrespect and greed, the fox fairy poisons Chloe by lacing her white rice pudding with silver, a metal typically considered lethal to vampires and werewolves in European traditions, resulting in the fox fairy’s flight from the court to escape imprisonment for murder. Chloe’s greedy consumption of the poisoned rice pudding encapsulates Huggan’s further characterisation of vampires as “symbols of an overweening ‘West’ that, driven by a greed far beyond nourishment, is eventually condemned to turn in on, and consume, itself.”

While Chloe represents France and its colonial power, the meaning of the fox fairy is more elusive. As discussed above, she does not act to revive Vietnamese ethnicity in others in the same way as the visitations of ancestral ghosts of other ethnic fictions are often used. In such fictions, the ghosts usually bring about the ethnic catharsis of the protagonist by reminding them of the ethnic past. The fox fairy’s meaning is complicated because she does not haunt the protagonist, nor is she a traditional ethnic protagonist herself. As discussed by Brogan above, ghosts in ethnic literature usually serve to recreate or revive ethnic identity through recollection of the past. The fox fairy does not need to be reminded of her ethnicity nor does she remind others of theirs, although, as will be discussed later, her survival does depend on the ethnic identification of others. Rather, the fox fairy plays witness to historical events, displaying a certain territorial concern for Vietnam, and shaped by the historical forces that affect it. This reading sees the fox fairy’s role as an embodiment of Vietnamese ethnicity as a dynamic, living thing with an important relationship to history, memory and the past. This is further reinforced by the fox fairy’s duty to ghosts in Asian traditions. These other ghosts and spirits perform the traditional role of ghosts in ethnic literature, representing a

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12 Pham, Vixen, 30-31.
13 Ibid., 34.
14 Ibid., 35.
16 E.T.C. Werner, Myths and Legends of China (Singapore: Graham Brash (PTE) Ltd 1991), 370.
lost past. When the fox fairy summons the spirit of her dead lover, Han, for the last time, she notices details that indicate his immunity to historical change: “His accent is now archaic, untouched by European vowels.”17 Han is also unable to remember information she has given him in other visits and he admits, “I do not remember much. You summon me and I come. Otherwise I just drift from place to place. I mostly guard the tomb of the Emperor. But when I’m with you I’m alive.”18 Trapped as he is in the moment of his death and expecting to see her each time as when he last left her, the fox fairy comes to realise that Han cannot love her for what she is – as the embodiment of a broader, living Vietnamese ethnicity she is subject to change: “Han never understood the way Vietnam was, the way Vietnam is. He never went beyond the Inner Citadel.”19

The multicultural encounter

Viewing the fox fairy as this embodiment of Vietnamese history and tradition is not challenged by her departure from that land. As she states at the beginning of the novel, “There are many myths and stories about fox fairies. But the only ones I can tell are mine.”20 Even within the nation, histories can be multiple and these histories are arguable further fragmented by the processes of migration and diaspora. This fox fairy embodies the particular trajectory of history that led many Vietnamese to migrate to Australia, and is witness to these historical experiences of Vietnamese Australians. Her migration therefore challenges understandings of history as static and localised and to see the ways in which the histories of the places where migrants come from intersect with where they go. This recalls, somewhat obliquely, the creative tension between ‘where you’re from’ and ‘where you’re at’ that Ien Ang argues allows for a “productive, creative syncretism” in diasporic cultures and,21 I argue, is also necessary in multicultural sites.

In coming to Australia the fox fairy inevitably brings the Vietnamese past with her. Through her migration, she comes to represent the intersection of its histories and traditions with those of Australia and to form the Vietnamese Australian present. Her survival in Australia, however, is dependent upon the continued ethnic identification of other Vietnamese migrants. The fox fairy is also frustrated to find that the Vietnamese in Australia gradually abandon the practice of honouring their spirits, which weakens her: “With no one to worship me I lost my sense of self…Living as Hong’s sister, I was like a ghost. I affected no one and no one treated me as was my due.”22 The Chinese fox fairy chooses to die rather to continue to live unworshipped in Australia. Her death symbolises the gradual death of ethnic groups as they are absorbed into the Australian mainstream culture over time, indicated also by the ease in which she wore Australian clothes as a human. Pham does not suggest that assimilation, and the dissolution of ethnic identity through this process, is inevitable but rather a possibility. Again, this reaffirms the reading of the fox fairy as a dynamic and living embodiment of Vietnamese history and tradition; she must be honoured and remembered or else she will fade and

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17 Pham, Vixen, 240.
18 Ibid., 242.
19 Ibid., 244.
20 Ibid., 1.
22 Pham, Vixen, 190.
die. It also rests upon a particular understanding of the relationship between ethnicity, history and memory. As Brogan argues, “[m]emory is the mirror that reflects ethnicity: to be Cuban, Irish, or Jewish is, to a degree, to remember oneself as such, a memory of connectedness that carries with it certain privileges and responsibilities.”

Unlike traditional ethnic spirits, the fox fairy’s presence does not revive the ethnic identification of those with whom she interacts. Rather, her sense of self – her identity – is dependent upon the ethnic identification of others: there can be no ethnicity without those who identify with it. The relationship between ethnicity and history is presented as symbiotic, and memory is central to both.

As Amritjit Singh, Joseph T. Skerrett Jr. and Robert E. Hogan argue, memory “interrupts linear conventional narratives in order to make room for multiple voices and perspectives … This use of multiple voices [in ethnic literatures becomes] … a means of creating community as part of the dialectic between the past and the present in moving toward the future.”

Chen, the Chinese fox fairy, plays a similar role to that of the Vietnamese fox fairy; she migrates to Australia during the gold rush of the 1850s, and is witness to the racism and violence against the Chinese on the goldfields. The Vietnamese fox fairy appears either ignorant or indifferent to the history of exclusion and racism pertaining to Asian migration to Australia, and is relatively oblivious to the few instances she witnesses in the city. Chen’s recollection of the violence of the goldfields highlights the problematic history of Asians and Asian-ness in Australia, and the different historical experiences that can be encompassed by this category. Chen also warns the Vietnamese fox fairy about the dangers of forgetting such exclusions: “You cannot forget. If you forget it will happen again.”

It is important to remember, therefore, that Asians were historically excluded from Australia for much of the twentieth century by what has come to be known as the White Australia policy. The Vietnamese fox fairy, migrating to Australia in the mid-1960s, arrives at the point when Australian immigration policy was slowly being reformed to allow non-white immigration. This reform resulted largely from growing international pressure regarding the inherent racism of Australia’s immigration policy and escalating tensions in the Asia-Pacific region, such as the Vietnam war, that were producing large numbers of Indochinese refugees; pressure mounted for Australia to “take in its fair share”. The fox fairy’s apparent obliviousness to the particular race relations prevalent in Australia throughout her stay (she returns to Vietnam around the 1990s) is problematic, particularly given her sensitivity to the political tensions in Vietnam. It perhaps indicates her difficulty in creating a meaningful connection to Australia and Australians. In a sense her relationship with Chen, and the recollection of Chen’s story in the narrative, is necessary to awaken in her an historicised race consciousness.

23 Brogan, Cultural haunting, 130.
25 Pham, Vixen, 142.
26 Ang, On not speaking Chinese, 119.
The friendship that develops between Chen and the Vietnamese fox fairy also represents the tentative alliance that is formed between migrant groups – particularly those assigned the same race category, in this case ‘Asian’ – in response to the host society. ‘Fox fairy’ here comes to symbolise ‘Asian’ but, by emphasising the differences between the two fairies, Pham effectively critiques this problematic category, which is commonly imagined as homogenous despite the diverse cultural groups it encompasses; they might share a ‘race’ but are differentiated by the specific Chinese and Vietnamese ethnic histories they represent. The shared Asian mythology from which the fox fairies derive, together with the Vietnamese fox fairy’s Sino features in woman form, also refer to the old cultural ties between China and Vietnam and serves to strengthen the relationship between the two fairies. Their apparent sameness is, however, initially cause for suspicion given the territoriality of fox fairies. When she first encounters Chen on her initial journey into the Australian countryside, the Vietnamese fox fairy necessarily shows deference to the older Chinese spirit, and respect for her ownership of the land. As spirits that honour ghosts and embody histories and traditions, they have respect for the rules that necessarily govern their interactions and intersections. Pham does not set up a hierarchy of migration histories in doing so, but merely establishes a relationship between Chinese and Vietnamese histories that converges in the Australian context on the shared basis of race. The Vietnamese fox fairy must learn of the Chinese past in Australia in order to understand the tentative positioning of Asians in Australian society. This creates, to paraphrase Singh et al above, community within the dialectic between the migrant past/s and the multicultural present. Their friendship represents the possibilities of multicultural encounters and the necessary intersections of histories that must occur within a multicultural state.

**The postcolonial encounter**

The fox fairies’ interactions with the ningaui must therefore also be seen as a necessary encounter that brings together Australia’s migrant and Indigenous histories to create a new multicultural and postcolonial dialogue. Consequently the intersection between postcolonialism and multiculturalism is key to understanding Pham’s novel and the historical fantasy she is attempting to imagine for contemporary Australia. As Sneja Gunew observes at the beginning of *Haunted Nations: the colonial dimensions of multiculturalism*, “The relationship between multiculturalism and postcolonialism is an uneasy one.” Nonetheless, there is a relationship, which is drawn out effectively in Gunew’s comparison:

Multiculturalism deals with theories of difference but unlike postcolonialism, which to a great extent is perceived to be defined retroactively by specific historical legacies, multiculturalism deals with the often compromised management of contemporary geopolitical diversity in former imperial centres as well as in their ex-colonies.

Multiculturalism is, in an historical and often physical or geographical sense, quite literally postcolonial. It does not, however, always comfortably encompass the specific historical

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27 For a discussion of this with particular reference to the Australian context, see ibid., 112-125.
29 Ibid., 15.
legacy, as Gunew terms it, of colonialism, particularly within the Australian context. Indigenous thinkers and leaders have deliberately distanced themselves from Australian discourses of multiculturalism because of the importance of recognising that their special rights as dispossessed peoples are different and distinct from the needs of migrants and their children, which the policy of multiculturalism first sought to address. Nevertheless, various critical multiculturalists, such Gunew, Ghassan Hage, and Bob Hodge and John O’Carroll, seek to explore the necessary relationship between those managed by colonialism and those managed by multiculturalism. This notion of cultural “management” derives from the work of Ghassan Hage who argues that migration is a continuation of the colonisation process and so finds an even more causal relationship between colonialism and multiculturalism, which in turn affects multiculturalism’s relationship with postcolonialism. In his exploration of Australia’s often-racist immigration history, Hage discerns what he calls a “White colonial paranoia” – the “fear and loss of Europeanness or Whiteness and of the lifestyle and privileges that are seen to emanate directly from that.” The various policies of the twentieth-century that restricted non-White immigration, which have come to be known historically as the White Australia Policy, have been, Hage argues, manifestations of this colonial uneasiness that still plays out today through multiculturalism. White colonial paranoia highlights the tenuousness of colonial power and the need to establish institutions and structures that maintain this power, and the need to manage interaction with and between society’s Others. Multiculturalism, Hage argues, is the management of the diversity, resulting from largely post war waves of immigration to Australia, by the White Anglo core established at the centre of Australian society through colonisation.

What occurs in Australia is a situation wherein the indigenous and the multicultural negotiate only with this White core and rarely with each other. Peta Stephenson argues that the “continuing cleavage of ‘the immigrant’ and ‘the Indigenous’ in contemporary paradigms of reconciliation provides little space for discussion on the potential role and contribution of migrant Australians to the reconciliation process.” Stephenson challenges the artificiality of this cleavage by highlighting the various historical and cultural encounters between Indigenous and Asian Australians over time. She does not argue that all of these encounters result in positive resolutions but merely uses them to develop a “clearer understanding of the related histories of struggle of oppressed and explored minorities against the homogenising tendencies of nationalist imaginaries.” The possibility of dialogue between the Indigenous subject and the multicultural subject offers a potential challenge to the power of Hage’s White core; it does not exclude the core from the dialogue but rather challenges the intermediary role it has played historically.

30 See, for example, Bob Hodge and John O’Carroll’s discussion of Aboriginal poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal’s objections to multiculturalism in Borderwork in multicultural Australia (Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2006), 110-113.  
34 Ibid., 67.
Pham’s novel rather bravely imagines this dialogue through the fox fairies’ encounters with the ningaui. Interestingly, however, the Australian White core is given no ghostly or spiritual presence in Pham’s novel, unlike Chloe’s representation of French colonialism in Vietnam. In Australia, the spiritual encounters occur between multicultural subjects – the Vietnamese and the Chinese fox fairies – and between these subjects and the Indigenous subject – the ningaui. The concept of colonisation is not entirely absent but simply not given a direct spiritual presence in Australia, which raises interesting questions as to how the novel depicts the colonisation of Australia. The White core is thus effectively excluded from Vixen, which leads the novel away from the traditional binary structure of postcolonial and multicultural dialogues.

This is not to say that these dialogues occur easily and without miscommunication. What matters, however, is that they occur. When Chen first encounters the ningaui in her search for a safe place to look for gold, she is necessarily wary of the Aboriginal spirit because her only terms of reference are the behaviours of spirits in China: “I frowned. It was the spirit’s territory and spirits usually get angry when they are disturbed. No one survives who steals the treasure of a fox fairy.” To Chen’s surprise, the ninguai is courteous and permits Chen and her human husband to pan for gold in her river: “Since you ask.” That Chen asks for permission is important as it shows respect for the ninguai and in showing respect for her Chen is also paying respect to the land. It is important to note that the Indigenous Australian relationship to land is not one based on ownership of the land but on belonging to it. The ninguai does not feel it is necessary to be territorial because: “If they [the white men] harm the land it will harm them back.” When the white gold miners disrupt the ninguai and damage the riverbed where she resides, darkness falls and they are massacred by shadowy presences.

The ninguai’s river had been the site of a massacre of blacks by whites, and is overwritten again by the massacre of the miners by the Aboriginal ghosts. It is both what Maria Tumarkin terms a “traumascape”, a place “marked by traumatic legacies of violence, suffering and loss”, and what Ross Gibson terms a “badland”, a site where the often violent legacy of colonialism can be simultaneously acknowledged and ignored. Such massacre sites as the ninguai’s river are unfortunately plentiful throughout Australia and a violent massacre of Chinese miners did occur on the Australian goldfields. Pham conflates the site of such violent events for, as Tumarkin argues, traumascapes are places where “the past is never quite over” and Pham’s spirits are living witnesses to the ongoing histories of places and peoples. In a similar vein, Tony Birch argues that “the land itself is the repository of historical memory”, particularly in Indigenous culture. A particular relationship is thus created between the ninguai and the land, based upon the

35 Pham, Vixen, 148.
36 Ibid., 149.
37 Maria Tumarkin, Traumascape: the power and fate of places transformed by tragedy (Carlton: Melbourne University Publishing, 2005), 12.
39 Tumarkin, Traumascape, 12.
significance of the land in Indigenous Australian cultures and the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands. If the ningaui is, like the fox fairy, a spiritual embodiment of history and tradition and the land itself is likewise a repository of historical memory, then the distinction between the land and the ningaui becomes blurred.

To reiterate, Indigenous relationship to land is not one based upon ownership of the land but of belonging to it. As Richard Broome asserts, “Aboriginal people traditionally had a peculiarly intense and symbiotic relationship with particular country of which they were spiritually a part, to which they were bound by totems and by their responsibility as custodians. Land, people and the great ancestors were fused together”. The ningaui embodies that spiritual connection to land and is at once the land, its people and its memory. Upon meeting the ningaui, the fox fairy finally receives her answer to the question of why the Australians didn’t fight against British colonisation: “this is her land and she does not even need to threaten me. The ningaui is more friendly than Chen or myself.” This is not to suggest that Indigenous Australians passively acquiesced to British occupation but that the Indigenous relationship to land is not easily severed. As the ningaui says to reassure the fox fairy, “Spirits come and go. But we’re still here. The land is still here.”

Australian colonisation as an act of dispossession, to play on words, is not about exorcising the spirit from the land but disrupting, often violently and irrevocably, the people’s connection to it. The ningaui, however, is confident of the spiritual connection she holds to the land; she and the Indigenous people will still exist as long as the land does, and the memory of colonisation is seeped in the landscape. As Gelder and Jacob argue, “the postcolonial ghost story speaks not so much about possession as (dis)possession, coming as it does after the fact of settlement.” They utilise Freud’s concept of the ‘uncanny’ to read the unease with the landscape that results from Australia’s problematic past, the discomfort of having dispossessed an Other. When the Vietnamese fox fairy finally encounters the ningaui herself after the voluntary death of Chen, the Indigenous spirit is initially suspicious, fearing that the Vietnamese fox fairy is a possessed fox, until the fox fairy insists that she is not there to desecrate but to respect. The ningaui understands this: “You have to be respected to exist, mate. And they don’t respect us until they’re out bush and there ain’t no one else.” In postcolonial Australia, the uneasiness with the colonial act of dispossession – whether you call it uncanny or White colonial paranoia – is in itself a form of respect that keeps the ningaui and her memories of colonisation alive. In the act of dispossession, the colonisers enable and ensure Indigenous haunting.

This recalls an earlier quote from Gelder and Jacobs: “the past is always ghostly here [in Australia]”. The process of reconciliation in particular, they argue:

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42 Pham, *Vixen*, 188.
43 Gelder and Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia*, 32.
44 Pham, *Vixen*, 186.
bring[s] the nation into contact with the ghosts of its past, restructuring a nation’s sense of itself by returning the grim truth of colonisation to the story of Australia’s being-in-the-world. But it is not surprising that, rather than laying things to rest, these ghosts…in fact set a whole range of things into motion…

The Australian ghost story, they assert, “confronts these issues directly”. Indeed, the encounters between the spirits in *Vixen* involve a direct confrontation of issues emerging from postcolonialism and multiculturalism that are rarely imagined in other forums. As discussed above, Indigenous and migrant dialogues are rarely imagined and encouraged still less despite the potential contribution that could be made to the processes of reconciliation.

There is, however, debate about what relationships migrants should have to this past. The Australian Prime Minister between 1996 and 2007, John Howard, once controversially stated, “Australians of this generation should not be required to accept guilt and blame for past actions and policies over which they had no control.” This generation of Australians is culturally diverse; more than half Australia’s population is either a migrant themselves or has at least one parent born overseas. Their relationship to Australia’s colonial past and its policies is, some might argue, even more complex as they are personally more distant from these past policies and practices than those Australians descended from the generations who were present and responsible. As Tumarkin poignantly reflects, “new urban immigrants, like my family, arriving in Australia in the 1990s, could spend decades, sometimes lifetimes, not once coming to face with the reality of the continent-wide death which has served as a foundation of this country in its present form. *We are new here. It’s OK.*” Tumarkin highlights the ethical conflict faced by migrants in their search for belonging: that by belonging to a culture and society that has been built on such actions, if we seek to imagine themselves as part of that culture and society, we must also imagine themselves within its historical narrative, and accept responsibility for both the good and the bad.

Birch, in his essay “Returning to Country,” draws a vital connection between Indigenous Australians and refugees, as a large number of Vietnamese Australians were, as disposessed peoples. There is a need, he concludes, “to welcome…refugees to Aboriginal Australia” based upon a shared understanding of the loss of homeland. When the Vietnamese fox fairy finally encounters the ningaui herself after the voluntary death of Chen, it is, as I argued in the introduction, a moment of recognition, similar to the welcome and recognition Birch offers refugees. Initially suspicious, as Chen also once was, the ningaui thinks that the Vietnamese fox fairy is a possessed fox, until the

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46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
48 See, for example, ibid., 24; Ghassan Hage, “Polluting Memories: Migration and Colonial Responsibility in Australia.” In *Race* Panic and the Memory of Migration. Edited by Meaghan Morris and Brett de Bary (Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2001), 333-362.
50 Tumarkin, *Traumascapes*, 166.
fox fairy insists that she is not there to desecrate but to respect. The ningaui understands this: “You have to be respected to exist, mate. And they don’t respect us until they’re out bush and there ain’t no one else.” As the conversation continues, the ningaui expresses curiosity about the fox fairy’s homeland and whether she misses it, to which the fox fairy responds, “Yes. But it would be different now. There was a war there.”

This particular exchange between the Vietnamese and the Indigenous Australian spirits is more complex and interesting than even the encounters between Chen and the ningaui because both Australia and Vietnam are sites with colonial pasts and legacies of internal and external displacement.

The question then arises of why the fox fairy returns to Vietnam and the consequences this has for Vietnamese, or migrant, belonging in Australia. The fox fairy’s return to Vietnam does not disrupt Vietnamese Australians’ belonging to Australia; in a sense they have inscribed their own belonging to Australia through their complicity with the very type of multiculturalism that Hage critiques. In returning to Vietnam, I argue, the fox fairy effectively reclaims – or repossesses - her land and creates a transnational connection and sense of belonging between Australia and Vietnam. Gelder and Jacobs argue that “Australian ghost stories generally do not respect the ‘localness’ of their sites; they are by no means constrained in this sense.” While Pham’s spirits generally emphasise the importance of place, history and memory particularly within the postcolonial context, the fox fairy uncovers a form of “rooted cosmopolitanism”, wherein the intersection of multiculturalism and postcolonialism has created a “morally and emotionally significant community” amongst the ningaui and the fox fairy, and effectively amongst Indigenous and multicultural Australians. The possibilities of the exchange between the fox fairy and the ningaui therefore go beyond national boundaries, gesturing towards the possibility of transnational understandings based upon historical sympathy.

Conclusions
As Hsu-Ming Teo observes of the spiritual encounters in Vixen, “Australian stories, Australian histories, thus become entangled with those of other nations.” A novel like Vixen, Teo argues, “throw[s] open the window to new, previously disregarded historical vistas, suggesting that Australian history is rooted in more than just a British past.” It also throws open the window to new intercultural and transnational dialogues and the cultural, social and political possibilities that such conversations open up. Pham’s use of spirits to enact these conversations in her novel does not lessen the significance of their interactions. As historical fantasy, Vixen is also allegorical: it is a critical reflection upon the intersecting historical pasts of Australia and Vietnam, a critique of colonisation and

52 Pham, Vixen, 186.
53 Ibid., 188.
54 Gelder and Jacobs, Uncanny Australia, 31.
55 Appiah, ‘Cosmopolitan Patriots,’ 91.
57 Hsu-Ming Teo, “Future fusions and a taste for the past: literature, history and the imagination of Australianness”, Australian Historical Studies 33:118 (2002), 137.
58 Ibid.
assimilation and, more optimistically, a hopeful projection of the possibilities held for new cultural dialogues.

Conversations about reconciliation and immigration can be particularly difficult to have in Australia. Although Australia’s current Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, took an important step forward with his apology to those generations affected by the policy of forcible removal of children, known as the Stolen Generations, this immense symbolic act was but another step in the ongoing process of reconciliation. Significantly, this gesture was immensely popular amongst Australians, perhaps signifying that the relationship to the past held by Australians from their culturally diverse backgrounds is strong, haunted as they are by this in the very mechanics of their society and its national ideologies. Although Australia and other lands may be haunted by their pasts, it does not necessarily follow that these spirits are unfriendly to the people that have come to live there; all they ask for is to be remembered and respected.
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