

Enshrining Vietnamese-Irish lives

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In his absurdist masterpiece *An Béal Bocht*, the author Flann O'Brien included an Irish map of the world drawn by the artist Seán O'Sullivan. Only the significant spaces were marked, including Sligo Jail, travel routes to Scotland and deposits of illegal alcohol. The United States ('Overseas') contained little of note except for New York, Boston, Springfield Massachusetts, some long-horned cattle and a few money order offices.¹ England ('the Other Side') had even less of significance: it had fewer money order offices, but did reveal one outstanding feature – the Irishman George Bernard Shaw.

While this map was certainly included for comic effect, the humour was made possible because of the size and spread of the Irish diaspora and the decimation wrought by emigration. A few years after *An Béal Bocht*, John O'Brien's *The vanishing Irish: The enigma of the modern world suggested*, without any hint of humour, that if the attrition levels continued the Irish would disappear or become an 'enervated remnant in a land occupied by foreigners' (1953: 7).

Beyond the specifics of emigration, however, the absurd cartography of diaspora in *An Béal Bocht* is suggestive of something more universal. All cultures produce representations of space while conforming to representative spaces. Cultures, in short, must 'enshrine' themselves in order to be, and it is this process of enshrining that concerns us here. The ethnographic data that we draw upon to explore this process is the example of the Vietnamese-Irish. Our goal is to sketch an ethnographic outline of what a Vietnamese-Irish map of the world might look like and in so doing trace the cultural history of the Vietnamese in Ireland. This cultural history is important in its own right because it discusses an older minority's experiences of resettlement in the context of the dramatic increase in immigration to Ireland in the past few years – a reversal of the previous history of emigration.

Origins

Ireland's record of refugee resettlement is poor. The response to displaced populations during and immediately after World War II was overtly racist. In the 1950s Hungarian refugees, selected for compatibility with 'the basic Christian ideals' of Ireland, were quarantined in disused army barracks in County Clare. Three hundred and seventy-one of them later went on hunger strike and demanded to be assisted in emigrating.

In 1975 and again in 1976 the UNHCR requested that the Irish government resettle three Vietnamese families. They

were refused on economic grounds. By 1978, however, the plight of the Vietnamese 'boat people' was receiving sustained attention from the world's media, and in 1979 100 resettlement places were offered, coinciding with the Irish presidency of the EEC. In months following, the national newspapers carried frequent articles on the challenges of resettlement. In July 1979, for example, the poet and columnist Anthony Cronin informed *Irish Times* readers that '[m]any of the refugees [...] have something to hide'. Soon after, the historian David N. Doyle suggested that Ireland should take Sino-Vietnamese refugees as an apology for

helping exclude Chinese immigrants from 19th-century America, when Irish people acted like 'evil green barbarians' (*Irish Times* 1979).

In August 1979 212 Vietnamese refugees finally arrived and were housed by the Red Cross in a private wing of a Dublin hospital and in a Christian Brothers' school. According to the Irish Red Cross:

While the operation of the centres was successful it did have many internal problems [...] The emergence of 'leaders' in both centres caused problems [...] but because we had got to know them and their devious methods, control was maintained. (n.d.: 4)

The refugees were later 'dispersed' around Ireland to 'strong provincial areas' as opposed to anonymous urban housing estates. Such estates were thought to lack the strength of community necessary for integration that 'provincial' areas were perceived to have (see McGovern 1986). By the early 1980s they had remigrated to Dublin's poorest neighbourhoods and entered into the ethnic fast-food business. Today, the majority reside in the Greater Dublin area in either local authority or private properties. Family size tends towards large units. In terms of kinship, a male-orientated patrilineal *ho* exists alongside a bilateral system of *nha* or households. The family system moves beyond the walls of the house: it is often played out in fast-food businesses, and it is reified by religious belief – the grandparents of today will become the revered ancestors of tomorrow through the practice of ancestor worship. The system also extends beyond borders to connect up relatives across the world. Central to this process is the ancestral shrine, and we investigate how social processes and meaningful space might be broadly conceptualized in a way that suggests enshrining as a process and an excellent lens through which to understand culture and identity.

Across the generations

For the older generation, particularly those who have not acquired proficiency in the English language, Vietnam

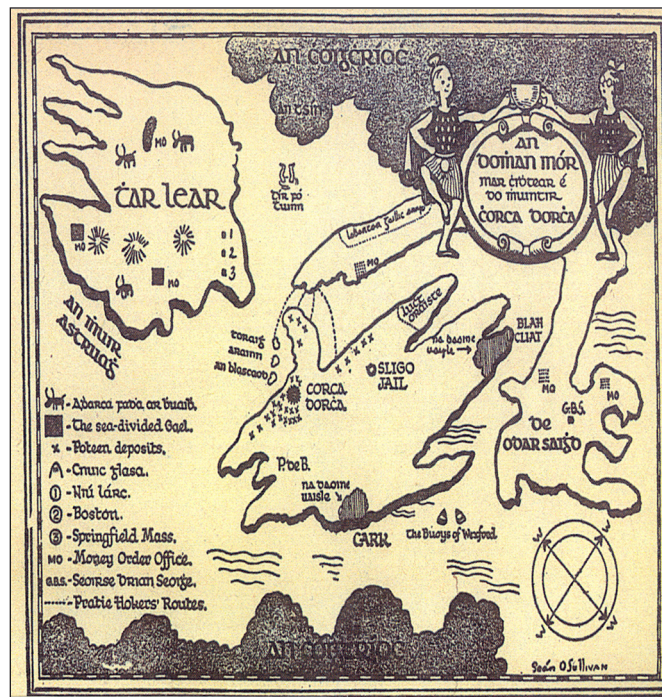


Fig. 1. The 'Irish map of the world', as seen by the artist Seán O'Sullivan, in Flann O'Brien's *An Béal Bocht*.



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Fig. 2. Altar, with a cigarette burned to the end from a recent ngày giỗ (anniversary of death).

looms large. During an interview one woman in her late 60s noted: 'My only friends are Vietnamese, and I don't have much to do with Irish people or understand them.' For many younger people who were born in Vietnam but have spent most of their adult life in Ireland, identity is understood in more hybrid terms; one young man spoke of having 'two different cultures'.

Ethnographic research involved collecting data on a sample of 527 individuals across 99 households (from a population of approximately 2000). One hundred and forty-three individuals within the sample were second-generation Vietnamese-Irish (born in Ireland to one or more Vietnamese parents). The majority had either second- or third-level education and worked in family-owned take-

away businesses. As one young Vietnamese-Irish woman explained:

I worked part-time in my family's restaurant [...] It's the same with others in my family [...] All my brothers and sisters work part-time. Not that anyone complains. Working on the counter was horrible at times [...] But you see that's where we work and make a living in our family, so no matter what [...] you just go back.

Education is taken seriously in Vietnamese-Irish families – seriously enough to generate humour. Apparently, several years ago a respected Vietnamese-Irish man attended a parent/teacher meeting. His son had been absenting himself from school and forging explanatory letters. The teacher doubted their authenticity, but was frustrated by not being able to speak Vietnamese. All communication passed through the student. 'Tell your father that we know you've been hanging around the amusement arcade,' shouted the teacher. The boy turned to his father and said, 'He wants you to know that I'm top of my class,' in Vietnamese. 'Why is he shouting?' asked the boy's father. 'He's hard of hearing and very excited,' replied the boy in Vietnamese, before turning to the teacher and saying, in English, 'He says you can't prove that!'

Education and other interactions with wider Irish society expose the second generation to careers and lifestyles different from those of their parents. One may ask: how does a cultural form acquire its stability and, indeed, its convincingness amid conditions of novelty and change? Below we discuss the spatial practices of 'home' – the structures for feelings of belonging – and argue that the concept of enshrining may help to suggest a core feature of how cultures work. Here we are contributing to a well-established literature by ethnographically extending a proposition of Henri Lefebvre's: 'social relations [...] have no real existence save in and through space. *Their underpinning is spatial*' (1991: 404; emphasis in original). Space, in this sense, must be understood as thoroughly cultural.

Enshrining

Crossing the threshold of a Vietnamese-Irish home is, in the words of the people themselves, to move from 'outside



Fig. 3. Ancestors' altar.

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Fig. 4 (left). Scenes such as this are common in the home videos, with their narrative of return to Vietnam.

Fig. 5 (right). Inner-city Dublin.



culture' to 'a piece of my country', a place brimming with consumer objects, invariably set off next to an ancestor's altar. The altars, with their demons, deities and photographs of dead relatives, with perhaps a bottle of whiskey and a cigarette burned to the end from a recent *ngày giỗ* (anniversary of death) represent religion, family, identity, the future and the past – they enshrine.

Four levels of this typical altar may be observed in the photograph in Fig. 3. On the bottom level there is a series of statues to 'minor' deities, associated with children and life lessons. Young girls wear effigies of these deities as amulets on necklaces. Further up there are photographs of ancestors, followed by important supernatural beings, including the Buddha. As family members grow older they interact with the altar differently – indeed, they age with it. The altar itself is not a fixed set of objects: as old photographs are removed new ancestors are added. Like a Stalinist political photograph, the ancestors' altar only appears to be frozen in time.

The ancestor shrines must be understood in the context of the wider spaces of home life, such as consumer technology and photographs depicting educational achievements. Indeed, it is precisely the presence of these seemingly conflicting objects that is interesting: simply put, the objects are held together in a meaningful space. Ancestor shrines have also managed to fold themselves into a transnational world in which multinational families maintain strong connections. Indeed, the space they produce is both 'traditional' and 'portable', adaptable to both different contexts and new forms of representation. To illustrate, one young informant, Phuong, reached a typical crossroads in her life, which she discussed during this project. Having finished her education but unable to secure steady employment, she began to work in her father's takeaway business. To escape this she explored the possibility of emigrating to Texas and operating a restaurant with extended family there. Her imagination and planning were facilitated through the medium of home videos. While satellite TV, the internet, DVDs and karaoke videos, etc. all circulate among families in the Vietnamese diaspora, home videos are a particularly striking communicative platform. A prominent category of home video, for example, is the 'narrative of return'. These videos are usually kept to record the first trip an individual or family makes back to Vietnam. Often the ancestors' graves are the focus of much of the footage, together with home towns and communal activities – the camera drifts over activities rather than focusing on individuals, and the footage is usually without narration. Occasionally, the camera moves past others making videotapes. As viewer, one sees oneself watching someone else filming someone else.

Another prominent category of home video is the one that Phuong brooded over, the 'video audit'. Videos of people's lives circulate transnationally. Phuong was making an important life choice while watching a home video in which the camera moved and focused like a stereotypical father of the bride before a marriage – lingering on material objects in the house, cars, the restaurant's kitchen and the numbers of customers. Historically in rural Ireland there was a practice known as walking the land, during which potential in-laws surveyed the holdings of the marriage partner's family; this seemed the visual equivalent of such an audit.

There are many other aspects to this technologically mediated spectatorship. For those who cannot travel, home videos bring them in touch with the wider family. Again the style is interesting. Before a celebration such as a birthday begins, food is laid out on a table. Video cameras consume the image of the food before the guests sit down, giving those who watch the tape a sense of being there as invited guests. Just as letters home once allowed members of the Irish diaspora to share lives separated by thousands of miles, so today Vietnamese-Irish home videos enable everyday life and the imagination to transcend borders. And, again, ancestor worship features heavily. The family and the dead interact on the death date or *ngày giỗ* of an ancestor. Before the anniversary the ancestors' altar is cleaned and decorated. A ceremonial 'foretaste' is held during which incense is lit and food is set out. During the actual ceremony the ancestor is finally invited home for an elaborate meal. Interestingly, the ancestor is not the only absent presence. Through the lenses of home video cameras distance collapses and the faraway members of the family become virtual consumers of the meal with their kindred. Thus, seemingly antique rituals that cross the threshold between the living and the dead are shot through with practices that extend out into a transnational world. The following account suggests some key themes:

The day after tomorrow is the anniversary of my grandfather [...] On the *giỗ* we will all make a personal prayer. You have the picture and you have food, you eat the food but you have to give the people that are dead the food as well. With my father, if he smoked before, if he drinks before, then we have to leave that there for him. You saw that when I left a bottle of whiskey for him. It's as if he were still alive. We invite him to join us. Young people now, they forget [...] If we try to educate them and get them to do this then my children will do this in the future.

This might be read as a statement about cultural practices in danger of slipping away. Yet at the point at which Vietnamese-Irish people are speaking about the possibility of 'values' disappearing, one may see older values

1. Springfield, Massachusetts was the New World home of most of the population of the Blasket Islands.

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Fig. 6 (above). Still from home video: market in Vietnam.



Fig. 7 (below). Another common home video scene: a restaurant kitchen.

being reinvigorated as new ones emerge. Another, younger Vietnamese-Irish man observed:

I would not think that in my children's homes there will be an ancestors' altar [...] I lived here for 25 years, yet I still keep my country to live in. In my home it *is* Vietnam; in my home it *is* Vietnamese food, my own food. But [my children] they think they're Irish...

Another man remarked:

Probably our children will change to Irish culture or something like that. But some children will still keep the tradition [...] Because our family has the thing for to pray in that room [...] Because the culture is the family together.

One must look to what may be indexed by the conclusion that 'the culture is the family together', and widen the frame. In most Vietnamese-Irish homes family photographs adorn the walls. These often depict the educational successes of children: graduation days in schools or universities, prizes being received, etc. They resemble shrines to the present, which are competing with the ancestors' altar. It is more likely, of course, that the two 'shrines' have sympathetic relationship – they bear a family resemblance in more ways than one.

Clearly, the emerging picture is not a perfectly congruent one, as the resources of family may provide not only support and information but also, for some, a source of unwanted difference and a sense of claustrophobia. In a conversation about his childhood one informant noted that many Vietnamese-Irish families used older siblings to discipline the younger ones and their cousins. 'They'd eyes all over the place,' he noted. 'It was like Big bleedin' Brother.'

A key question raised in any discussion of the second generation is that of the extent of the cultural change that will occur in families. One may track change through ancestor worship, itself a dynamic expression of family.

This is what Kim, a young Vietnamese-Irish woman, had to say on the topic of religion:

I don't practise anything. The ancestors' thing is more social for me, but there's a bit of religion, we get everyone together that way [...] It's difficult to see people otherwise. I don't think there is any chance of having, like, an altar in my own home later [...] I have an Irish boyfriend and it'd freak him out.

I don't believe in anything really – but I do believe in this. [She shows an amulet carved in the image of a female deity from the ancestors' shrine, which she wears around her neck.] My sisters wear these also – all the girls wear them – they are what we believe in. I think that she protects me, that she guides me when I need her.

As Gaston Bachelard noted in *The poetics of space*, '[t]he old saying: "We bring our ancestors with us" has many variations' (1997: 84). Were one to extend the frame by thinking more broadly about enshrining then one might consider how the obviously cultural difference of the ancestors' altar passes the threshold of Vietnamese-Irish homes around the necks of young women as amulets. Such cultural practices make aspects of home life amenable to the 'outside' world in which these young women live much of their everyday lives. In a similar way, inside the home, photographs of educational achievements on living room walls are both contemporary and traditional, extending a reverence for ancestors displayed on shrines to a celebration in photographs of the achievements of youth and hopes for the future. This extension of enshrining balances time and space in a way that maps the contours of Vietnamese-Irish life.

Reflections

The spatial turn in critical theory has influenced the social sciences for several decades now. Much of the focus has been on disrupting the assumed 'isomorphism of space, place and culture' (Gupta and Ferguson 2001: 66). This article builds on the ethnographic literature that takes space as a central focus of analysis (Saris 1996, Maguire 1998, 2004) and seeks to suggest a broader project for anthropology under what we would consider to be the useful heading of enshrining. Our focus here has been to explore ethnographically the spatial dimensions of identity as mutable, flexible and dynamic, while at the same time recognizing that identity may congeal to give coherence and stability – and not always in benign ways. In an Ireland once again reconfiguring national identity in the light of migration – this time immigration – the theoretical and ethnographic exploration of identity has taken on a new urgency. ●

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Fig. 8 Vietnamese-Irish takeaway.

