

## **The Honeymoon Suite: A Report on Independent Investigation**

James Baldwin defined Jazz as a music which creates a response to “that absolutely universal question” which History is forever eluding: *Who am I? And what am I doing here?* This existential question which has plagued humanity since antiquity, as evidenced by the proliferation of epic poetry across cultures from ancient Greece to Mesopotamia, is one I examine on a level at once global and personal through my poetry suite, *The Honeymoon Suite*. Epics are mythologised histories significant to a nation and take place in an ideal and distant past. This concept of temporal distance allows readers to consider the reverberations of significant historical events in the memories of individuals. This nostalgia for a place and time that no longer exists and the struggle to remedy that absence with an imaginative act of regeneration speaks to those living in diasporas.

My reading of *The January Children* by Safia Elhillo, a contemporary Sudanese poet, enriched this link between nostalgia and the act of inventing history in order to preserve it, as a means of understanding our origins, was the impetus for my own creative process. Elhillo views the geopolitics of diaspora as “not merely the loss of a place that remains static, retrievable,” in memory, but the “loss of a place that has changed” in physicality. It is this ambiguous longing for one’s homeland and, on a personal note, the bewilderment of being raised in both Vietnamese and Australian cultures, and belonging to neither, that I find compelling. The elusive nature of collective memories and the skewed perception of historically significant events have profound implications on the individual’s sense of self. Through *The Honeymoon Suite*, I marry the epic form with the subject matter of the diasporic experience as the role of epic poetry is not only significant in literature but in relation to a nation or culture’s identity. It is thus my intention to subvert the traditional nationalistic interpretation of the epic in order to create a dialogue between the national and the personal,

to explore how history manifests in the present and to investigate how much we allow geographical landmasses and the fallacious concept of racial purity to inform our identity. This is also the crux of Plath's exploration of Cold War angst. Plath's personal expression against global forces is achieved by the carving of a place for the individual female voice in a society ruled by fear and masculine suppression. I believe these notions are crucial to consider in our increasingly globalised world as they prompt a personal interrogation of the political tribalism and identity politics at the root of contemporary societies. It is my hope that a questioning of how much we allow our identities to be dictated by national borders, images and roles will prompt a greater appreciation for each reader's complex, irreconcilable and many-layered existence in the world.

My investigation into epic poetry drove the sequence of my suite. In accordance with the epic tradition, the first poem of my suite, *arrival and departures*, begins in media res, with the persona's father escaping Vietnam on "a tiny fishing boat ... powered by wind and half-answered prayers". I subverted the trope of a hero's fate being dependent on the will of the gods by having the persona imagine her father's epic journey and, through the invocation of her ancestors, ordain divinity unto a hero who not only precedes her, but creates her. Epics also originate from the oral tradition which I emulate in my suite to mimic the intimacy of folktales and memories parents pass down to children born into the diaspora; that is, the handing over of cultural legacy in the familial context. This concept is at the heart of the diasporic experience as, for many forced to flee their native countries, things as abstract as cultural beliefs, norms, values and superstitions are often the only 'valuables' which can be taken to a foreign country, and therefore that sustain one's connections with one's homeland.

Trauma is inherited by children born in the aftermath of war, genocide and conflict. Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory articulates a connection to the past not through witnessing trauma itself but by "imaginative investment, projection, and creation". I did not realise this at the beginning of my independent investigation but the act of imagining one's ties to history has significant similarities to the epic narrative's preoccupation with the past. M. Berry and C. Cole's *History and Postmemory in Contemporary Vietnamese Literature* (2011) was especially influential in my creative and analytical processes as it prompted my consideration of crucial literary theories that endow art with deeper meaning. Such theories like postmemory give language to and thereby dignify the experiences of the children of survivors of trauma. The paper examines the postmemory of children of the Vietnamese diaspora, whose everyday lives "are read against the epic past" of the collective cultural traumas inherited from their parents and goes on to cite historian, Inga Clendinnen (2006), who argues that "a writer's creative imagination changes or usurps the veracity of history, but the imaginative process ... adds a new layer of historical memory to a text." Thus, it is my intention for my suite of poetry, like history, to be read with the audience's understanding that memories are "informed by what is forgotten as much as what is remembered." Essentially, through my creative rendering of postmemory in the Vietnamese diaspora, I probe the implications of widespread nostalgia for memories we were not present to recall. I believe there is an urgent need for our understanding of the way cultural trauma and collective memory operate, as Hirsch wrote, "to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors", promulgating the trauma as the only or largest source of identity. Thus, the concept of postmemory is a glaring reminder that we must seek to understand our past before we can even conceive of our future.

In terms of content and form, the work of E.E Cummings pointed me towards poetry that operated independently of grammatical or syntactical rules. I appreciate the use of decapitalisation in Cumming's works as a sign of humility and a way to avoid rupturing the cadence of the poetry as the reader's subconscious mind often strays to find meaning in the capitalisation of a word, and applied this feature to *The Honeymoon Suite*. Derek Walcott, a postcolonial poet, Langston Hughes, a Harlem Renaissance poet, and Anne Carson, a Classicist poet, have all had profound bearings on the style and diction of my poetry. The imagist, Robert Gray, observed that imagery "makes us aware of life" as, through writing, "all the things that pass us by in life ... can be rescued out of time ... saved out of that torrent and preserved". Thus, through the very act of writing, and inviting singular moments to be appreciated by readers, I mimic humanity's construction of the past and to be an emotional historian, rescuing and preserving moments from oblivion by committing them to paper.

At the beginning of my Extension 2 project, I was so sensitive to and protective of issues regarding trauma within the Vietnamese diaspora that I wanted to make an enclave of that experience and give a voice to the long muted. However, as I researched the conflicting perspectives on the history of imperialism, colonialism and war, and on our contemporary epidemic of identity politics, I realised that no one can lay claim to any historical event. Although my subject matter is the diaspora and postmemory as it pertains to Vietnamese people, this is only a means of using writing and reading as vehicles to radical empathy for those who are too often over-simplified, or altogether erased, by our construction of history. Fay Weldon reaches the heart of the matter in her analogy of the City of Invention as "our eternal, our immortal home". The art of writing has the power to transcend boundaries of race, nationality, time and space. In universalising the human condition, writing removes the

parameters of separation and the disenfranchised once again claim their identity. Indeed, the writer/reader relationship fosters a merging of worlds that becomes lived and shared experience.

Through writing my suite of poetry, *The Honeymoon Suite*, it is not my intention to make a muse of the victimised who fled their war-torn homelands to plead for pity, but to dignify refugee experiences through the different perspectives each individual reader will offer. In their unique experiences in following, and, in part, directing the journey of the persona, they may reconcile with historical traumas which are personal to themselves. Just as Jazz emerged as an avenue of African-American self-expression, I too want to carve a place for the Vietnamese diasporic experience in literature, deliberately in the English language to explore how one's identity can be fraught between national boundaries, between history and fiction, between past and present.