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*Un Senso della Vita: Diasporic Identity Construction and the Search for Belonging*

Prior to embarking towards Canada on what would represent their second permanent departure from home in February of 1987, the Truong family gifted a hand-crafted foulard to Francesco Gala and the *Associazione Mandello* for providing them with a fundamental sense of stability following their flight from South Vietnam in 1979. The design has inspired my dedication object, which includes a map and the national flag of Italy accompanied by a map of Vietnam with the South Vietnamese flag, a noteworthy symbol which many refugees from the war have held onto in proud memory of a nation whose legacy continues solely through such acts of cultural self-expression. The original foulard also features messages from each member of the family, which emphasize thankfulness to their Italian sponsors and describe their unforgettable stay in a country that welcomed them with open arms. Writing her statement at the age of eighteen after spending seven years in Italy, Professor Hoang Truong denotes her family's newfound sense of serenity and the opportunity to reformulate a "meaning for their lives (*un senso della vita*) which they had lost leaving their home." Drawing upon Stuart Hall's conceptualization of cultural identity as "being far from eternally fixed in some essentialized past [but] subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power," Italy holds a special place in the hearts of the Truong family not just as a refuge but as an irrevocable part of themselves (225). Currently an Italian professor at UCLA, Prof. Truong thus continues to uphold this experientially acquired Italian heritage while also remembering Vietnam and the history which has played an essential role in the process of becoming the person she is today.

Many of the experiences Prof. Truong recounts from her family's secret flight from their home in Thành phố Rạch Giá come across through fragmentary memories, recalling Le Espiritu's definition of refugee studies as the search "for the things that are seemingly not there, or barely there" (Le Espiritu xx). Fleeing Vietnam at the age of eleven as the eldest of four, the orderly sequence of exact events may have blurred due to the normal process of remembering and forgetting but the thoughts and emotions felt by her family remain ingrained with full clarity. When recalling the lead-up to their departure by boat towards a refugee camp in Pulau Bidong and later Kuala Lumpur, Prof. Truong highlights the secrecy she felt the need to preserve and overall silence her parents Lac Minh and Quang Truong maintained about the situation due to possible consequences such as imprisonment by the government.

Embarking on a small boat which had been set up by her father, Prof. Truong and her family crossed the gulf of Thailand on a voyage lasting five days and four nights. Observing the ocean from the deck at night, she recounts seeing dolphins follow their boat and asking her mother what they were since she had never seen them before. In a fashion telling of her family's unceasing support for one another, she explained that dolphins were friends of people and would protect them from harm. This statement proved comforting, and it also fits into a larger culture of admiration for dolphins, whales and other sea creatures featured in Vietnamese lore and mythology which continues today with establishment of 'whale graveyards' throughout the country. Such a story also shows how in times of uncertain change, one attempts to re-establish themselves by placing one foot in something new while maintaining the other in the familiar.

Once there, Lac Minh Truong began to request asylum wherever possible and managed to set up interviews with representatives from Australia and the *Gruppo caritas* of Mandello, which worked in conjunction with the Italian government and under the direction of the Catholic

church. The interview with Italian representatives happened to be the first scheduled for the Truong family, and following approval they decided to immediately accept the offer in order to resettle their lives and escape the state of limbo they had undergone throughout their journey. The subsequent trip from the gulf of Thailand to Italy represented an unprecedented effort by the Italian government, which dedicated three warships to the cause and brought 907 Vietnamese refugees to Italian shores between June and early August of 1979. Before permanent resettlement, they once again stayed in a refugee camp near Rome, where Prof. Truong recalls the presence of refugees from Eastern Europe. This alarmed her family because of their association with communism, which as opposed to the imagination of their upcoming free lives reminded them of “a spectral future of nonexistence, under communism and terror” (Nguyen 2).

The final trip to Lecco, Italy finally meant an opportunity to settle in a new home, set up by the *Caritas* organization in a refurbished elementary school. When discussing their reception in a homogenously Italian town, Prof. Truong notes a sense of welcoming into the environment coupled with curiosity on behalf of locals for the only foreign family around. She did not describe the process of integration necessarily as assimilation, but remarks how her siblings Hoang Oanh, Y Niêm and Ngô decided to become catholic in order to “follow and fit in with their friends at school, all of whom had been baptized and followed the process from the first communion through confirmation.” The importance of this step for her younger siblings can be seen particularly in the message expressed on the foulard by then six-year old Y Niêm, who writes that it was the day of his baptism. The different approach the Truong siblings took towards religion seems to have depended partially on age but also demonstrates Hall’s definition of cultural identity as ever-changing and “[belonging] to the future as much as to the past” (225). To this point, the upcoming departure for Canada and expectations for life there may in fact have

increased the family and Y Niêm's desire to be baptized as a form of connection to their home in Italy. Born right after their resettlement, even his name recalls this experience as it translates to "memory of Italy."

The overwhelmingly positive reception and experience Prof. Truong recounts of Italy contrasts the current situation of refugees who have encountered an asylum-seeking system characterized by increasing barriers to entry. In comparison to current outflows such as the Syrian refugee crisis, Justin Huynh argues that "perhaps the most impressive aspect of the response to [the Indochina crisis] was the comparatively high emphasis by leaders on solving the crisis" (200). Of course, several features distinguish the two situations including its geographical scope, the number of asylum seekers and their religious background. Given that a large part of the Vietnamese population was catholic at the time particularly after the dictatorial presidency of Ngo Dinh Diem, this may in fact have played a role when compared to a largely Muslim population from Syria. Right-wing populists such as Matteo Salvini have exacerbated this issue, crafting a sense of imagined fundamental difference between the Christian West and Muslim 'Orient' based on the history of the crusades.

An important piece of legislation Prof. Truong discusses in closing as fundamental to her family's journey and experience is the Refugee Act of 1980, which raised the ceilings for asylum-seeker admittance and encouraged other countries to engage in humanitarian responses to the aftermath of US withdrawal from Vietnam in 1975. Without it, the Truong family could not have reached refugee camps in Malaysia and led the lives in Italy that had an inextricable impact upon their identities. In this way, Prof. Truong's experience and the unique construction of her multifaceted cultural background can inform current discourse about refugees and affect the way one approaches the plight of refugees today, who seek their own *senso della vita*.

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