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## *Black April*

During April 2015 you could be forgiven for thinking that the 1915 Battle of Gallipoli was the only important war-related commemoration since little else was discussed. Our national broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), covered the Anzacs from many different angles – though by no means all angles possible. Its multimedia extravaganza was outlined in a 28-page document entitled *Australia Remembers*, with the coverage officially beginning in 2014, peaking in April 2015 and continuing until 2018. It was the culmination of years of diligent planning from across the corporation – and I know it took that long because I was working at the ABC around the start of the internal planning and Anzac Day would regularly come up on meeting agendas.

Working at the ABC is what first brought my attention to how easily we privileged the telling of this particular war over others with Australian military involvement. What the Anzac centenary commemorations highlighted is that our official remembrance of war is largely concentrated on wars of national involvement from a military perspective, rather than wars that the Australian population were involved with – such as the war which had the most direct impact on my life, the Vietnam War. It's an important distinction because it indicates that the remembrance of war in Australia is perhaps more exclusive than it is inclusive, and the wars that many Australians have survived are not part of the national conversation.

While there have been successive waves of migration to Australia from those fleeing war and post-war regimes, many of these do not figure strongly in the national narrative. But does it have to be this way? Joy Damousi wrote in her recent essay for the *Griffith Review* that “there is a need for broader understanding of both the history of those who have fled wars and their aftershocks, and how their experiences of conflict have been remembered”. For a country with a highly complex narrative around migration, we seem to have a particularly reductive narrative about wars both at home and overseas, and selective grief about what wars are commemorated may ultimately undermine Australia's multiculturalism rather than fortify it.

We only need to look at the recent Paris attacks on 13 November 2015 and consider the widespread and almost immediate discussion that flared up online. The attacks that occurred shortly before Paris in Beirut, it was argued, were largely ignored by the Western world even though the perpetrators were essentially the same. Questions were asked about why we were lighting up our national symbols like the Sydney Opera House with the French tricolore and not the Lebanese cedar tree as well. Many noted that we have far more Lebanese-Australians than French-Australians and the lack of official grieving was a slight on some of our very own. Regardless of the merits of this argument, it was indeed an argument, and solidarity for the

French was partly overshadowed by intense discussion about this display of selective grief. What also became evident is that this problem has deeper roots than these recent attacks.

I wondered if the many critics who demanded the flag of Lebanon be flown were also aware that April 2015 was the fortieth anniversary of the start of the Lebanese Civil War, which lasted from 1975 to 1990. Commemorations of war are generally about ends rather than beginnings, but since that the Lebanese are one of our largest migrant groups, acknowledgement of the war would surely not have been unwelcome given it was ultimately acknowledgement that was being demanded regarding the attack in Beirut in November 2015. Elsewhere the start of the Lebanese Civil War was remarked upon, so it wasn't exactly a forgotten war.

The other significant anniversary that occurred during April was the fortieth anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War. As a direct result of how the war played out, tens of thousands of Vietnamese would eventually find safe harbour in Australia; before 1975, there were only around 700 people of Vietnamese descent living here. And though the anniversary was barely a blip on the radar of the ABC compared to other wars, there was certainly mention of it because Australia did have military involvement. It is clearly a war with an enduring legacy, not least of which is the post-war migration that resulted. Right at the end of March 2015, our other national broadcaster, the Special Broadcasting Service, aired a new American documentary called *Last Days in Vietnam* as a kind of acknowledgement.

The battle of the Anzacs at Gallipoli directly affected tens of thousands of Australians and subsequent generations, but couldn't we have better noted the concurrent centenary of the beginning of the Armenian genocide on 24 April? After all, both events occurred in the context of the same war and the latter is a significant event in the history of tens of thousands of Australians with Armenian heritage. Of course, genocide possesses different dimensions to our general concept of war but it could be argued that the Armenian Genocide was certainly state-organised warfare.

By the way, this is not a problem that's unique to Australia. The Affirmation of the United States Record on the Armenian Genocide Resolution is still under consideration in the US House of Representatives after being introduced in 2007 by Adam Schiff, a Democratic Party Representative for California. On the face of it, it may seem puzzling that such a resolution exists at all, but California wouldn't be what it is today without the huge population of Americans of Armenian descent. I mean, how else would the Kardashians have come to be? On the hundredth anniversary of the genocide, United States Congressman John Sarbanese wrote in *The Huffington Post*:

On April 24, the arc of the moral universe will intersect with the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Armenian Genocide. Many will bear witness to that intersection, but official recognition of the genocide by the United States government will be sadly and conspicuously absent.

People may well ask why official recognition is so important when what's past is past and surely we have all moved on by now. But have we? The wounds of war – and indeed, any conflict or destruction of a people – have a greater chance of healing if the cause of the pain is acknowledged beyond the relative few that carry the burden. The Jewish community certainly grasps this truth better than most. Otherwise it's exactly in these conditions that intergenerational trauma will flourish. We don't need to look so far from the history of our own shores either if we consider the Australian frontier wars and everything else that has followed

with our First Peoples – and why a “sorry” was sought for so long by the Stolen Generations, among others.

Lebanon and Vietnam exist on different ends of a sprawling continent but in Australia, these two expatriate groups co-exist alongside each other. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the city of Bankstown in Sydney’s south-west. According to the latest available census data, equal proportions of the Bankstown population were born in Lebanon and Vietnam, with the size of the subsequent generations with Lebanese and Vietnamese heritage being 2:1. On the surface, the two populations continue to be worlds apart and for many years the commercial heart of Bankstown was roughly divided along ethnic lines. However, these lines have become increasingly blurred.

Leaving Bankstown train station and walking through the centre of town, visitors will likely walk past the Vietnamese Boat People Memorial, a bronze sculpture with four three-quarter-life-size figures in a boat. It was created by artist Terrance Plowright and was officially unveiled on 4 November 2011. Its plaque reads as follows:

In memory of the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese boat people who lost their lives on the high seas during their journey in search of freedom.

The memorial is located in what was once called Old Town Plaza, renamed at the start of 2011 as “Saigon Place”. The name change was clear acknowledgement of the area’s history of Vietnamese migration and honoured what is now an established community group. Another reading of this memorial is that stories relating to the Vietnam War sit more comfortably within Australia’s remembrances. It also continues to inspire new stories regarding our involvement; most recently *The Sapphires*, which put an Indigenous story of civilian entertainers to the forefront.

Tania Mihailuk MP, the Legislative Assembly Member of Bankstown, was present at the unveiling of the memorial and her recognition was gratifying for Vietnamese community leaders. Exactly a week after 30 April 2015, she addressed the NSW Legislative Assembly with the following words:

I bring to the attention of the House the fortieth anniversary of the Fall of Saigon. This occasion is known by many Vietnamese-Australians in my electorate as “ngày mất nước” – the day we lost the country. As members are well aware, when Saigon was overrun by Communist guerrillas from the north on 30 April 1975, hundreds of thousands of innocent Vietnamese people faced the unbearable hardship of losing their homes, their livelihoods and, in some cases, being permanently separated from their loved ones. Many Vietnamese refugees showed their bravery and tenacity by finding a new home in a new country for a second chance at life.

Her words underscore the dominance of certain narratives around the Vietnam War and she references the one my parents also share, alongside most of the expatriate Vietnamese community who “lost” their country as opposed to the one who “gained” it. The building blocks of any narrative are the language used, and the words used are crucial for remembrance. For the Vietnamese in Australia, the whole month is called “Tháng Tư Đen” (“Black April”). The Fall of

Saigon is called “Ngày Mất Nước” (“day we lost the country”), “Ngày Quốc Nhục” (National Day of Shame) and “Ngày Quốc Hận” (National Day of Resentment). Meanwhile, on that day back in Vietnam, it’s called Ngày Thống nhất (Reunification Day).

Meanwhile back in Vietnam on 30 April 2015, there were large public displays with military units marching down the street and civilians dressed in colourful costumes – though to fairly sparse crowds and tight security according to accounts of the day. It’s hard to imagine how such a day could be a joyous one, even for the so-called victors, given the extensive casualties on both sides and the unresolved trauma in Vietnam and overseas. The monolithic nature of war narratives and the continuing sensitivities are clearly not unique to the telling of the Anzac legend, and perhaps ensue with all painful happenings which require the construction of meaning after the fact.

In a discussion on the BBC World Service about her book *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan said, “I didn’t even know there had been a war in China.” My ears perked up when I heard her say this because it illustrates a state common among the children of migrants. The distant war that brings one’s family to a new country is often dimly understood at best. Children in general know little of their parents’ lives – and the parental impulse is to generally prioritise protection over knowledge. This is one contributing factor to both the silence and ongoing conflict between the different generations. Where it is talked about, which is certainly the case in my family, the telling of it is far from exhaustive. My husband, an Anglo-Australian man, often hears new perspectives about the war from my father, which he then shares with me as we drive back home through Bankstown.

Driving by Chapel Road South we pass Lebanese restaurants full of customers eating later in the evening than we do. I often think, what of the Lebanese? What is Australia’s understanding of the civil war that led to the mass exodus of Lebanese from the late 1970s through to the 1990s? How do we – or more to the point, how could we – acknowledge the migratory origins of one of our most significant populations and honour their losses from the brutal civil war the way we’re doing with the Vietnamese? When it comes to the way we discuss refugees, for example, the Vietnamese are clearly a bigger part of that narrative than the Lebanese – though that might well be a difference driven by these communities and the way they think of themselves.

One of my earliest memories from going to school in Lakemba, not far from Bankstown, was a multicultural food day where everyone was encouraged to bring in a dish from home. I don’t recall what I brought, likely spring rolls or some variation thereof, but the only thing I clearly remember was trying homemade kibbeh – a combination of ground lamb, spices and fried bulgur wheat. It would be many years later before I knew what I had eaten because I had no name for it then, only the memory of how foreign it tasted, the antithesis to anything I’d ever tasted before. Thinking back to this early episode in my life illustrates how I lived right beside others but was also estranged from them without much context. Lebanese food, though pleasurable, was clearly a superficial encounter with another culture. These differences matter little as a child in multicultural Australia where other cultures exist as fuzzy concepts rather than sharply defined realities, but those early years can form the basis of adult understanding.

In recent years I do often ask myself critically, what do I know of what the Lebanese have been through? I went to school with many Lebanese and all I knew was that they were generally funnier and louder than someone like me knew how to be. Others I got to know through work

and personal encounters, like a beautician I went to for many years who gave me the nickname of “Won Ton”, which she eventually shortened to “Won”, and the way she did it wasn’t at all offensive. Some years ago I became close to a work colleague the same age as me whose family were Shia Muslims from the south of Lebanon. I don’t recall her telling me much about her parents’ recollections of the war, except that it was a scary time, but I distinctly recall what she relayed about peace. “My dad said it used to be so peaceful in Lebanon, a beautiful place where everyone lived together in harmony and our differences didn’t matter because we were *all* Lebanese.” Her father had been a Communist supporter and there was a real nostalgia for a certain bygone era, which I would later recall when I read *Black Swan* by Nassim Nicholas Taleb:

The Lebanese “paradise” suddenly evaporated, after a few bullets and mortar shells... A fierce civil war began between Christians and Moslems, including the Palestinian refugees who took the Moslem side. It was brutal, since the combat zones were in the centre of town and most of the fighting took place in residential areas (my high school was only a few hundred feet from the war zone) ... Aside from the physical destruction, the war removed much of the crust of sophistication that made the Levantine cities a continuous centre of great intellectual refinement for three thousand years.

Until two years ago, however, I never knew anyone who was born and raised in Lebanon – and it was this new friendship that led me to visit my friend in Beirut in August 2014. Being there it was easy to see first-hand why it’s still one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the region. We went to dance parties and concerts and gay clubs, ate and drank better than I dreamed possible, and swam in the Mediterranean at a private beach. Thousands of years of history were laid out before my eyes, a history which included the Byzantium and Roman Empires, as well as more recent French colonisation. The survival of human artefacts over millennia also reinforced a sense of the incredible resilience of both the place and its people. In some ways these impressions were not so different to what I came away from Vietnam with when I visited for the first time in 2010. Lebanon, like Vietnam, is a country that looks forward despite the unresolved trauma, though there was a certain underlying nervousness in Lebanon which had not been the case in Vietnam. Even to a casual observer like me, the many Syrian refugees in Lebanon were obvious because of their darker features and the way they dressed. My friend’s father told me he had hired Syrian labourers to help complete the building of their new home up in the mountains above the city, paying them half the wages of their Lebanese counterparts.

The mountains where the cedars grow were a recurring motif. When asked about the bombings of 2006, my friend and her family described going up to someone’s home in the mountains with supplies. They played cards with family and friends, and ate, drank and chatted to pass the time. “We just waited until it was all over,” my friend said, describing it as though that whole incident was nothing. Her telling of it was also in character because she often shows a brave front in the face of uncertainty.

The Vietnamese who arrived in the post-war era during the ’70s and ’80s are starting to lose the air of being a community-in-exile, yet most are still émigrés and relatively few have repatriated. The situation is less clear-cut in the case of Lebanese-Australians, because it seems that not too long after the end of the civil war people were more easily able to move between countries, perhaps in part due to their dual citizenship. People have also been leaving Lebanon for a much

longer time and not just as a result of the civil war, so the Lebanese have existed as a diaspora for multiple generations; it has become a part of their identity as a people. Indeed, when I was in Lebanon, I met several who had come back after growing up in countries like Ghana and Nigeria and were drawn back to Lebanon as adults. This included some who had been abroad for multiple generations.

Bankstown calls itself the “City of Progress”. The word “progress” in this context has always seemed to me like a government platitude. But perhaps it’s more than apt, thinking about how the Vietnamese and Lebanese communities are shaping themselves, regardless of external perceptions. What better definition of progress could we have, in light of how these two Australian communities – along with many other groups in the area – continue to flourish in their new home country after surviving some of the bloodiest wars of the late twentieth century?