EMBODYING EXILE

Trauma and Collective Identities among East Timorese Refugees in Australia

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Abstract: Some of the more interesting and useful work on diasporic and transnational identities has emanated from scholars working in cultural studies and contemporary anthropology. However, with a few notable exceptions, little attention has been paid to the specific experiences of refugee diasporas, and in particular, to the role of trauma and embodiment in the creation of these 'moral communities.' Based on research with the East Timorese diaspora in Australia, this article looks at the performative dimensions (protests, church rituals, singing, and dancing) of the diaspora’s political campaign for East Timor’s independence. I consider how the bodily dimensions of this protest movement contributed to certain formations of identity, belonging, and exile, within the Timorese community. In particular, I explore how these performative strategies have created a context for 'retraumatizing' bodies and memories, channeling them into a political 'community of suffering,' in turn contributing to a heightened sense of the morality of an exilic identity among many Timorese.

Key words: affect, diaspora, East Timor, East Timorese, exile, long-distance nationalism, refugees, transnationalism, trauma

Introduction

Stateless groups are strongly represented among contemporary refugee populations in the West, most famously, the Palestinian, Sri Lankan Tamil, and Kurdish refugee diasporas. Far from passive victims, many such groups are active
cultural producers, despite having experienced the sorts of trauma common among the persecuted and displaced. Yet research into contemporary cultural identities among refugees in the West is still relatively rare, particularly work connecting questions of diasporic identity to refugee experiences of trauma and displacement, especially in relation to long-distance nationalisms. This article explores these questions through a case study of one such politically active refugee group, the East Timorese in Australia, whose tiny nation recently won its independence, in part, due to the continued efforts of its diaspora. I explore the role of the East Timorese independence struggle in the formation of an East Timorese diasporic moral community, investigate how the specific forms of protest employed in their struggle connected with their experiences of trauma, and argue that questions of embodiment and affect are central to the formation of their collective identities in exile.

There are an estimated twenty thousand East Timorese people living in Australia. They came to Australia as refugees mainly between 1975 and 1995, fleeing first a civil war, then the violent Indonesian regime that invaded upon Portugal’s withdrawal from the tiny territory after four hundred years of colonization. Over the years, many members of the Timorese refugee diaspora in Australia were active in advancing East Timor’s independence struggle, participating in various protests and campaigns. After twenty-four years of campaigning, a referendum was held in 1999 that precipitated East Timor’s independence—which was formally granted on 20 May 2002.

The focus of this article stems from three defining characteristics of the East Timorese refugee diaspora in Australia. First, in addition to the tragedy of displacement, large numbers of the community have suffered severe trauma in East Timor. Second, large numbers in the community have seen themselves as temporary exiles in Australia. And third, the majority of collective activities, and the circulation of news material within the community, was focused on the struggle for an independent East Timor. Moreover, the modes of protest employed in the struggle by those in the diaspora had one important connecting thread. They all invoked affective bodies, and it is the implications of this that I am interested in here. How have the bodily and sensory experiences brought about by displacement and trauma been re-experienced and channeled into affective diasporic identities connected to the homeland struggle? I argue that the combination of collective trauma within this refugee community, coupled with the strength, length, and methods of their independence campaign created a very specific collective identity oriented toward exile. I argue that the liberal use of dramatic performances, ritualized protest, and commemoration of traumatic events, created a powerful affective moral pull toward the homeland. The struggle provided a bodily means through which East Timorese refugees were able to ease their “migration guilt” (Hage 2002: 203), providing a kind of therapeutic balm for the traumatized among them, who were able to render the private pain of trauma meaningful through collective national discourses of suffering, exile, and martyrdom.
Strategies of Intensification

At this juncture I want to explore in a more comprehensive way how and why such political events produced spaces of social belonging for East Timorese refugees, and consider what benefits participation in such activities might have had for those Timorese involved.

Hage's (2002) recent work on Lebanese migrants, nostalgia, homesickness, and affect, provides some important insights. Hage theorizes the ways in which Lebanese migrants in Australia were differentially implicated by reading news from Lebanon, and experienced it with varying intensities. He argues that migrants (and people in general), actively engage in strategies of affective intensification. While focusing on Lebanese migrants and their news reading practices, Hage argues that an analysis of differential implication in, and intensity of, the experience of a particular reality may be applied to many aspects of social life. He deploys these two notions as analytical tools for measuring a person's affective and symbolic 'distance' from the Lebanese news. Intensity, as Hage conceptualizes it, has to do with the extent to which a reality is involving and affecting, but is also an intense relation where the person’s engagement in a reality contributes to its intensity (ibid.: 193–194). This important point frames his analysis of Lebanese migrants, where he pays particular attention to the bodily movements and responses of the migrant reader to the news from Lebanon, such as slapping the newspaper or spitting on the floor in anger in response to various news items. These utterances, interactions, and bodily movements, are termed strategies of intensification. The employment of such strategies is aimed at "narrowing the physical and symbolic gap between news and reader and in the process, augmenting the intensity of this reality for that reader" (ibid.: 2002). In other words, we can see this in terms of the body doing work to increase affective engagement with the topic at hand.

The desire on the part of migrants to be implicated emanates from what Hage terms "migration guilt." Such guilt derives from the disruption of a moral economy of social belonging, whereby members of a community are indebted to that community in a reciprocal gift exchange relationship. This debt is incurred by the individual in receipt of the gift of community belonging and social life. In this reciprocal relationship, one repays the gift of communality through life long participation in the communal group. Hage argues that for this reason, migration is a particularly guilt inducing process. This guilt inducing state of indebtedness is most acute when the community (this may be a family, a religious group, a village or nation, for example) is going through a hard time, and the person is not there to help. In this way, "when you do not share the fate of the collectivity which gave you social life, you are guilty of letting others pay alone for a debt you are collectively responsible for" (ibid.: 203). The use of affective modes of intensification and affective language is important in these strategies of intensification. The more intense the mode of being implicated, Hage argues, the more "debt" is repaid in this symbolic moral economy, which is also a physical moral economy, based on bodily performance.
Hage (ibid.: 204) also points out that the desire for migrants to be more implicated in the homeland cannot be taken for granted, and is not felt equally among all migrants. He argues that, to some extent, such excessive attachment to the homeland can be seen as a strategy of compensation for one's life not turning out as hoped for in the new country. In the case of the Lebanese migrants, this hope is primarily centered on the level of social and economic achievement experienced in the host country. In the case of the East Timorese refugee diaspora, although these are also important determining factors, I argue that there are also others at work. These have to do with the rupture of forced displacement; the levels of trauma in the community; the fact that the homeland has actively 'called up' the repayment of the moral debt to the nation; and perhaps most importantly, the protest strategies have all, in different ways, been modes that tap into East Timorese bodies and emotions, creating an incredible affective pull into a sympathetic community of suffering. I discuss this in more detail in the following sections.

Hage's approach offers a potentially fruitful path for understanding many of the processes I have seen at work within the East Timorese community. This excerpt from one of my interviews with Fatima is representative of views I have heard many times over during the course of my research: "I was involved in Timorese cultural dancing. I would go to protests—I would go to different like events—Just to make everyone aware of the Timorese people. I wanted to go there—and sort of be part of that for myself. Because I think I saw for my parents, and I saw for my uncle—and the suffering and ... [drifts away for a few moments] ... and I wanted to be part of that. And I think, in a way, like, I became more Timorese when I got involved with this stuff."

Fatima's words demonstrate very clearly the relevance of the notion of migration guilt experienced in the face of the suffering of those remaining in East Timor. Fatima describes how in her case, this translated into a desire to participate in the political struggle. Beyond the obvious political benefits, her participation in cultural dancing and protests also gives her a sense of belonging as an East Timorese person, and eases her guilt about the suffering of her family and those in East Timor. When she dances, she says, "I become more Timorese." Cultural dancing is an embodied activity that generates affective identification with Timoreseness. As she says: "And the suffering—I wanted to be part of that." To share their suffering means also to share in being East Timorese, to share in the moral community of East Timor, and to appease feelings of guilt arising from the sense that they had fled their war-ravaged homeland to save themselves and their own families, while leaving the majority of (particularly poor and uneducated) Timorese back in East Timor to suffer alone.
Protest Forms

In Australia, the Timorese protest movement began in the late 1970s and continued until 1999. It was characterized by four key strategies: (1) a strong international solidarity movement in partnership with Timorese activists; (2) a close alliance with the Catholic church; (3) the use of witnessing strategies, including the circulation of torture images, publication of ‘witness’ stories and speeches from survivors; and (4) the protests, spanning twenty-four years, involving the use of Catholic ritual (the carrying of crosses, protest church services, and so on), singing, street theater, cultural displays, and ritual objects (traditional weavings, crucifixes, models of traditional spirit houses), all suitably adapted for the political cause.

Rather than static texts, such as the newspaper to which Hage refers, I argue that the bodily character of these specific modes of protest set in train a particularly dialogic process with the participants. The story of the annual Catholic mass and protest held in Sydney each year to commemorate the four hundred or so Timorese who died in the 12 November 1991 Dili massacre is a classic example of the mixture of protest forms used in the struggle. The 1996 mass was one of the more spectacular and probably the biggest, as this was the year in which José Ramos-Horta and Bishop Carlos Belo jointly won the Nobel Peace Prize. Somewhere in the vicinity of five hundred people attended a large peaceful protest march to the St. Mary’s cathedral which immediately preceded the mass. At the head were around two hundred East Timorese marchers, and at the very front, were three pairs of young East Timorese men, each carrying a giant crucifix approximately ten feet long, and five feet in width. Roughly fashioned from unfinished logs, the crucifixes were carried on their shoulders in a Christ-like walk toward the place of crucifixion, emulating Christ’s journey to Golgotha. Behind them were a group of around one hundred East Timorese, mainly women, each carrying a smaller, white colored crucifix, approximately 50 cm long by 25 cm wide. Running along the crossbar, on the front of each of their crucifixes, was written the name of a person who died in the Dili massacre. All the East Timorese in the protest, both marchers and crucifix carriers, wore a tais scarf around their neck.

The march continued slowly through the city toward St. Mary’s Cathedral. Upon arrival, a rally formed outside with banners and speeches, after which the audience/congregation filed in. At the front of the church was the East Timorese youth choir, singing a mixture of protest and religious songs in Tetum, the language of East Timor. The mass, also, was a mixture of protest and religion, robed clergy sharing the stage with East Timorese in various forms of traditional dress. In a curious juxtaposition, traditional East Timorese drummers led the procession toward the pulpit, while the Catholic nuns had given rousing speeches to the protest crowd before the service.

Catholic ritual, as has been well documented (see Mellor and Shilling 1997), is a deeply embodied practice. For this traumatized community, the use of Catholic ritual in their protests offered a sensorial experience that created an
affective collective identification with one another, through the cause, especially through the invocation of the powerful imagery of Christ’s tortured body. The once isolating rupture of unruly pain and emotion associated with individual trauma is made meaningful through sympathetic identification with the suffering of Christ. It in turn becomes channeled into the warmth of a moral community of suffering (Werbner 1997: 238), arousing a sense of martyrdom in the name of the struggle.

Along with religious ritual and devotion incorporated into street and church protests, other activities such as singing, dance, and theater—especially street theater—played an enormously significant part in the Timorese struggle, and provided another powerful bodily space for Timorese to become engaged with the homeland cause. Theater performances typically portrayed scenes of torture and massacres by the Indonesian military. These performances were often accompanied by young East Timorese performing traditional dances in full tais costume. As Ram (2000: 267) has argued in another context, dance and singing have the capacity to create an embodied sharing among the audience, tapping into the ‘aliveness’ of the performance to give presence to an entire set of emotions that are somehow inherent in the patterns of performance. Similarly, the context and materiality of ‘ritual objects’ used in protests function as important mnemonic devices that elicit sensory, and affective responses from participants. As Seremetakis (1996: 7) argues: “The sensory landscape and its meaning-endowed objects bear within them emotional and historical sedimentation that can provoke and ignite gestures, discourses and acts.”

Seen in this light, the role of the ritual objects in Timorese protests function to cross ignite affective identification between bodies, objects, religious discourses of suffering, and the East Timor cause. Although individual objects will carry the sediment of their own history, the combination of objects, made use of in the highly dialogical space of protests, cross reference one another. In this way, the history of the objects (religious, cultural, connected to family or homeland) arouse an affective connection in individuals, in turn meshing them, through these objects in political context, with the discourse of the struggle.

The case of the Dili massacre tais, is a poignant example. Timorese refugee bodies and emotions were pulled into the performance through witnessing the very physical, sensuous act of the public display of an elderly woman painstakingly weaving into the cloth, each of the four hundred or so names of those who died in the Dili massacre. The final cloth was around fifteen meters long, and was carried in many protests over the following years. In every East Timorese home I have visited in Sydney, the tais cloth is the first thing to meet the eye upon entering. Tais are important in Timorese cultural and family life. As Parkin describes: “[U]nder conditions of rapid and sometimes violent flight and dispersal, private mementoes such as the tais cloth may take the place of interpersonal relations as a depository of sentiment and cultural knowledge ... They are like ancestral memorials encoding continuity between and across the generations” (Parkin 1999: 318).
Moreover, the evocative power of cloth in Southeast Asia is a well-documented form of identity construction (see Niessen 1993), and in East Timor, it has an especially powerful role in evoking East Timoreseness. Particularly evocative are those cloths woven on the traditional back-loom. Produced through the women’s bodily suffering during the weaving process, their very materiality evokes this suffering.

In the East Timorese case, the use of such material objects in political protests has a dual function, at once encoding and igniting continuity with family and cultural traditions in East Timor, and translating this generational continuity into the East Timorese national imaginary. Following Seremetakis (1996), the cultural meanings of objects such as the tais cloth, ignite the senses and emotions, provoking a sense of connection to the cloth and its meanings, and crosses over to the context of the Dili massacre and the homeland struggle. In turn, this connects bodies, memories, and senses, into an affective relationship via the objects, to the cause.

In addition, the use of distressing images of torture and trauma has been a central and deeply moving aspect of the independence struggle. There is no doubt that it has had a profound impact on the success of the movement. Since 1975, there was a constant stream of images smuggled out of East Timor showing graphic scenes of Timorese victims of torture and violence perpetrated by the Indonesian military. These images were displayed at a series of exhibitions, set up on signboards, displayed on city streets, carried during protests, and circulated within the community. Similarly, several collections were published of eyewitness stories of trauma suffered under the Indonesians, and Timorese refugees were regularly called upon to publicly relate their experiences at rallies.

For the ‘listener,’ the appeal of such acts of public remembering lies in the way they permit a personal bodily and emotional connection with events of which they were not directly part. In this way, an event is made “to feel more like a memory” to the listener, by borrowing the memories of others (Engels, in Humphrey 2000: 10). This characteristic makes such practices highly successful spaces for achieving a sense of intensification (Hage 2002) in participants to enhance a sense of belonging to the homeland and the struggle, and therefore repaying the moral debt owed by those who fled. In this way, events such as hearing traumatic testimony, viewing the horrendous images of torture, commemorating massacres, not only work to emotionally ‘move’ the wider community into action for the East Timor cause. Importantly, it is the convergence between the bodily nature of trauma with the bodily dimensions of torture images, drama, performance, ritual, and images of the tortured Christ, that generate the most powerful sense of affective belonging and identification with that which is being witnessed, commemorated, or testified to. However, as I now argue, they also function to ‘retraumatize’ the East Timorese community in a way that taps into the bodily nature of trauma, and work to ‘rescript’ their narratives of self into affective identification with the cause.

Therefore, partaking in strategies of intensification such as the protest activities have had an enormously important role to play in creating a space for
social belonging in the moral economy of East Timor and the pacification of migration guilt. Yet, it has one further function. For Timorese individuals who have suffered, and continue to suffer the effects of trauma, affective investment in the protest movement provided a mode through which the renarration of traumatic memory translated *meaningless* terror and pain into something *meaningful*. It offered a sense that an individual's trauma was no longer a private pain, becoming instead, part of the greater struggle of East Timor, and the universal Catholic imaginary of martyrdom.

**Trauma, Affect, Narrative**

Trauma is an important factor in the formation of East Timorese individual and collective identities as exiles. All members of the East Timorese refugee diaspora have experienced trauma in one form or another. They may be categorized, therefore, as a 'traumatized community.' Every person I interviewed had either experienced traumatic events, lost loved ones during the course of the occupation, or were close to those who had. What I want to emphasize here is the extent to which such stories permeate the very fabric of the refugee diaspora in Australia. They float around, whispered in explanation for 'strange behavior'; they live beneath the surface among friends and family, rarely spoken about, especially in the first person, but all in the community know about such stories or have stories of their own.

Exacerbating the primary trauma, the effects of trauma and loss are often experienced more intensely under the kinds of conditions of isolation, loss, and displacement that forced migration entails. Many younger Timorese born in Australia, even if they have never been to East Timor, experience what we might term 'trauma by proxy,' growing up in the difficult context of living with parents who had suffered, and living in the shadow of constant reminders of the situation in East Timor. Large numbers of those in the diaspora also had close friends and family left in East Timor, and there was always the constant worry about their safety. People in Sydney were fearful of criticizing the Indonesian regime for fear of brutal reprisals against family back in East Timor. What is more, constant new arrivals fleeing East Timor served as an ongoing reminder of what was happening there. As one young person pointed out: "You can see it in their eyes—the fear. Whenever I meet someone who had just arrived from Timor I feel very sad, it reminds me of what is happening to my people, and my country" (Rawsthorne 1994).

Trauma, then, comes in many forms. Through direct experiences in East Timor, through stories of the suffering of family and friends, through the experiences of loss and displacement, through the guilt of fleeing, leaving loved ones behind, through ongoing worry about the fate of those who remained, through seeing constant new arrivals in the community freshly escaped from the horrors of what was happening, and more broadly, the trauma of living day to day where such stories permeate the very basis of family and community life.
The effects of such trauma are many. According to the trauma counselors and social workers who engage with the East Timorese community, trauma frequently turns to anger, or is turned inwards. Anecdotal evidence from counselors and community representatives suggests that there are high levels of domestic violence within the East Timorese community. It seems that in many cases basic trust structures break down. Correspondingly, there are also high levels of anger, suspicion, and distrust within the community. There are several groups with long held hostility toward one another (Rawsthorne 1994; Tang 1999). For many, any sense of future or hope is lost, resulting in high levels of poverty, unemployment, depression, and a general sense of atrophy. And, according to trauma counselors and social workers who work extensively with the East Timorese community in Sydney, there are many cases of Post Traumatic Stress. The sad irony of the East Timorese diaspora is that one of the characteristics within the community is the extent to which it is permeated by mistrust, disunity, and anger. So while there are many fractures and simmering disputes at the grounded day-to-day community level, community belonging and a sense of shared purpose are to be found only in the homeland cause. Here, the angers of everyday life are set aside for the more abstract and comforting moral community of exile.

At the center of ‘homeland’ projects is a sense of imagined community on the one hand, and individuals, whose sense of self, their self-narratives, and affective identification have some kind of ‘fit’ with this identity. At the simplest level, identities are the stories we tell to, and of, ourselves. Work on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Caruth 1995b) has shown, however, that one of the principal characteristics of trauma is the way that the traumatic event somehow ruptures the narrative self. In the following section, I explore how the psycho-social aspects of trauma might mesh with issues of refugee identity, and the forms of protest outlined earlier.

Although there is currently much debate about the over diagnosis of PTSD (see Bracken 1998; Summerfield 2001), there are nevertheless some generally recognized symptoms that often present in survivors of trauma. These are usually delayed responses to the traumatic event, and include symptoms such as hallucinations, intrusive thoughts, recurring dreams, thought or behaviors, which stem from the event, and a feeling of numbness that may have begun at the time of the trauma events. It can also include an increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event (Caruth 1995a: 4). Caruth argues that the most salient feature centers on the reception of the actual event. The original event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, only belatedly, when it possesses the trauma survivor in the form of traumatic memories. In this way, she argues, the traumatized become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess (ibid.: 1995a: 5). In some ways, the inability to assimilate the experience at the time of the event is a kind of protective response. However, because it is a protective mechanism, the weight of the trauma is such that the individual is often unable to take control of the memory and make meaning of it at the level of self-narrative, even long after
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the event. Traumatic memories also shrink time because they are so embodied. Such memories have a ‘presence’ that gives them a feeling of being closer than other memories. In this way, the shrinking of time brings the memories into the immediate present, at least until the memories are narratively integrated. For East Timorese, this in a way can function to bring the homeland ever closer.

Mastering these traumatic memories requires the integration of the event into some kind of meaningful narrative. The ‘telling’ of the event is one step in this process of renarrating the self. Their particularly bodily and sensory character, however, exacerbates the difficulty of integrating these trauma memories. It is not easy for a trauma survivor to ‘tell’ in a way that communicates all the complex bodily and sensory dimensions to the experience. The conventions of spoken narrative exclude the possibility of expressing ‘all there is to say, all that I have felt, all that I saw, felt, smelt, heard,’ and so on. Charlotte Delbo, a Holocaust survivor (in Culbertson 1995: 2), distinguishes between “sense memory,” a kind of “deep memory,” and “thinking memory,” the “rational, ordered and clear memory of narrative.” It is possible to have a sense of the latter when you hear a trauma survivor speaking about the traumatic events in unemotional tones. This presents what Delbo calls “external memory” which is socially constructed. It skates along the surface of words, engaging only the intellect, not the body’s re-experience, which cannot be known in words, only in the body (in Culbertson 1995: 3). The implication, then, is that the unrepresentability does not stem from the extremity of the trauma event, rather, from the “split between the living of an event and the available forms of representation with/in which the event can be experienced” (Van Alphen 1999: 27).

For many Timorese, there seems to be something isolating—and I mean in a very physical, sensory way—about young East Timorese who have not experienced the war, and who ‘know’ abstractly, but do not ‘know’ in the way that those with first hand experience do. During the struggle a kind of somatic community was enacted through protest performances and religious vigils which many people have actually missed. I argue that these people felt a need to reintegrate their trauma into the wider meaning of the homeland struggle. Firstly, this is an outcome of the isolating nature of traumatic memory, the need for some kind of meaningful reintegration of that experience, and the drive of the sense of ‘migration guilt’ introduced earlier. Secondly, they want their memories to be shared, to create a sense of belonging to a community that somatically shares their isolating experience. Performance, singing, and ritual in particular, tap into and ignite a sense of collective somatic belonging amongst participants.

In this way, and this is the core of my argument, the hyper-performative and bodily nature of many of the core independence activities—drama, singing, dance, the use of religious icons, using religious spaces for the cause, and the use of commemorative strategies, torture images, and stories of trauma—provided a compelling milieu into which experiences of trauma were rendered meaningful in a very embodied way. One of the important outcomes of trauma is the way that it ruptures the self, and ruptures the narrative of memory. For many, bodily protest strategies such as street theater provided an effective (and
affective) means through which trauma could be bodily invoked, re-experienced, and rescripted, in a way that de-isolates them, allowing them to share, renarrate, or reintegrate, their individual pain with the larger homeland project.

For this reason, the sensorial character of traumatic, and indeed bodily memories generally, might be characterized as raw emotional nerve endings that lie in the body, vulnerable to ignition in contexts that tap into this extra linguistic realm of sense memory. The corporeal and sensorial nature of the performance repertoires of the East Timorese struggle have functioned as mnemonic devices which induce the bodily sensations of traumatic memory in members of the refugee diaspora, and funnel them into the discursive framework of the homeland cause, thus rescripting traumatic memories into a broader collective project. For example, the physicality of young people acting out scenes of military abuses, or the physical and emotional effects of viewing images of torture, and then walking in a protest carrying a crucifix and singing songs of longing for the homeland, all tap into powerful, yet undefined bodily memories of trauma, creating a powerful affective catharsis which meshes with other bodies in the crowd, and which is actively invested in, at the same time as being pulled into the fight for the homeland. Coming back to Hage’s notion of ‘intensification’; for refugees suffering intensely from ‘migration guilt,’ the affective pull of processes that tap into the full force of bodily memory can also offer a sense of satisfying redemption. That is, these protest strategies create both an affective and moral pull toward the homeland, which is satisfying in many ways for the participant because these processes also function as spaces in which the refugee can be implicated in the homeland through engaging actively in modes of affective intensification.

The Community of Listeners

While protest strategies may be described as a kind of ‘healing’ practice, they do not operate on neutral territory. I now briefly consider the question of what I term the ‘community of listeners.’ The protest strategies outlined in this article can generally be defined as testimonial, witnessing, and commemorating techniques. The important point is that these are always ‘heard’ by a community of listeners, and this ‘listening’ always takes place within a cultural frame. Antze and Lambek (1996) make the significant point that the right to establish authoritative versions of testimony never rests with the individual alone. In order for a survivor to reintegrate the memories through meaningful narrative, there needs to be a process of ‘witnessing’ by a community of ‘listeners.’ Meaning is social. Therefore, narratives, or testimony, are meaningful within the social and cultural context of those who ‘hear.’ Remembering, telling, commemorating, and witnessing are therefore always constrained by conventions. Who is hearing and who is validating what is told and the messages contained in the commemoration? What kinds of ‘ears’ are listening? How do these shape the retelling? Certain codes and narrative forms will have resonance to certain
listeners. If testimony takes place in the context of a political project, then those aspects that achieve most resonance with the audience of ‘listeners’ will be those that achieve the greatest effect. The retelling of stories, especially stories of trauma, requires sympathetic interlocutors.

In the East Timorese case, the important ‘community of listeners’ were the solidarity movement, the Catholic church, and the broader Australian ‘listening’ public, all of whom needed to ‘be onside’ for the struggle to achieve success. These groups provided meaning frameworks or enabling discourses that ‘heard’ certain kinds of narratives, and were responsive to certain kinds of identities. It does seem that they were most receptive to a certain kind of East Timorese diasporic identity that emphasized the suffering of exile as a particularly moral state of being. This ‘community of listeners’ offered a very particular set of narrative possibilities. This is an especially important point because of the prominence of the political struggle, religious discourse, and solidarity support, coupled with the bodily and affective nature of Timorese protest, and the fact that there are few other communicative outlets for the diaspora.

These listeners shaped the ways in which members of the diaspora made meaning of their experiences of trauma, their status as exiles, and their relationship to the homeland. These enabling discourses filter the re-experiences of trauma, and the flow of narratives, into which memories are reintegrated into meaningful ‘fictions of self.’ Indeed, narratives give meaning to life—Who am I? Where have I come from? Where am I going? How has my past caused my future? What is the meaning of past events in the course of my life? How are these valued in the world? What is the meaning of the ‘me’ who has suffered this trauma? That is, such discourses frame the ‘moral path’ of the refugee’s future. They also shape what might be termed trajectories of hope. For East Timorese in the diaspora, this moral path led firmly toward East Timor, and therefore invested moral authority in those who remained as exiles—their futures resolutely trained on the homeland.

Victims are frequently objectified and homogenized in contemporary Western societies, masking the reality that the experience of trauma is context dependent. The iconographic ‘victim’ often becomes a politicized, commodified category (Humphrey 2000: 23). As Sturken (1999: 241) has shown, throughout the twentieth century in the West, trauma survivors such as war veterans and Holocaust survivors have carried enormous cultural weight, and been awarded a great deal of moral authority for their experience. East Timorese in Australia were only ever portrayed as representatives of the struggle. They were invoked either as iconographic victims, freedom fighters, or representatives of Timorese indigenous culture.

In many ways, solidarity groups were the key driving force behind the public face of the Timorese community in Sydney, and they placed great moral value on the involvement of East Timorese people in the struggle. It seemed that to be considered a genuine and committed East Timorese by solidarity supporters, you had to be involved in the struggle. Indeed, I heard a number of stories of activists berating members of the East Timorese community for not being
involved enough. In one instance, a solidarity activist actually visited an East Timorese organization in Western Sydney to insist that they have a responsibility to become more active in the struggle. To be admonished thus was very troubling for those East Timorese who chose not to be involved. Although equally well meaning, Catholic solidarity groups often invoked similar frames of representation. Here, East Timorese were constructed as Christ-like in their pious innocence and suffering. They were spoken of as small, gentle, cultured people, represented as 'gentle singing Pacific islanders,' inherently peaceful and good, overrun by years of colonization, yet culturally pure underneath the layers sullied by centuries of colonization. This is also a particularly gendered discourse: wives, mothers, daughters, and children were considered to be the ultimate icons of moral victimhood. It seems fair to say that East Timorese refugees in the diaspora were only ever invoked as a means to support the cause.

In other words, these discourses invested particular meaning and worth in remaining culturally pure and oriented toward exile. This was because East Timorese in Australia were rarely represented as full human beings who have lives and families in Sydney, who have dreams for the future, who may wish to try to settle here. These would have undermined the power of the political cause. Instead, East Timorese were only invoked as representatives of the nation of East Timor, as representatives of the group whose sole aim was to free the homeland and return. East Timorese in the struggle had to show they were worthy of outside support, that they were representatives of those suffering oppression by the occupier, that they were innocent and peaceful victims. While not arguing in the least that these things were not true, the political struggle drew on powerful discourses such as those described above, to resonate with the 'community of listeners.' In this way, the struggle had a homogenizing effect on East Timorese identities in Australia.

In making this point, I am by no means dismissing the genuine support offered by Australian solidarity and church supporters. They have consistently demonstrated real empathy with the suffering of East Timor's people, and their support has been central to the success of the cause. Most East Timorese are grateful to them for their tireless efforts, and these groups continue to do useful and important work in fundraising and other charitable activities in East Timor. However, those discourses which were useful in advancing the independence struggle, and which were important to its ultimate success, also had unintended effects on the ways in which East Timoreseness was imagined and experienced by East Timorese refugees living in Australia.

On Return

All of this has vast implications once the very difficult realities of actually returning home are faced. My research has shown that only a small percentage of Timorese actually wish to return now that East Timor has independence. Many have found they do not wish to or are not able to return. Although there was an
enduring desire to pursue the dream of an independent homeland, perhaps not surprisingly, most East Timorese refugees also led normal lives simultaneously with the struggle. People fell in love, married, had children, obtained an education, got jobs, and bought homes. These are all future oriented activities that required many to bracket, at the level of everyday life, what was happening in East Timor. Love for their children—and the hope and future orientation that goes with such love—required Timorese-Australian parents, in particular, to separate their ‘exiled’ self from the quotidian demands of parenthood. Yet there was, and is still, a great deal of guilt attached to ‘settling’ in Australia. As Josefa’s statement demonstrates (and there were a great number like it from members of the community I have interviewed), the notion of return still holds an important place in Timorese identity: “I guess if you always ... feel that you are a Timorese person in your heart, then you have to have that desire of wanting to go back. I believe that that is among every Timorese that is outside.”

Those Timorese with whom I have spoken are quick to apologize when they admit to not wanting to go back to East Timor. They seem to feel a great deal of shame at what they perceive to be a selfish decision, and seem to feel some pressure or need to express a desire for return. A central challenge for those who choose to remain in Australia is how to translate the symbolic function of exile now that the possibility of return is available. The desire for return has been an important way of imagining and demonstrating ‘we-ness,’ but was somehow an easier identity to embrace while it remained an unattainable fantasy. Yet the symbolic importance of return and refugeeeness, in many ways, masks the reality of contemporary East Timorese experience. Faced with the reality of return, Timorese have to negotiate the very painful contradictions that can undermine the sense of self and identity inherent in the performance of loyalty to homeland that the desire for return embodies. My research in East Timor showed that many of those who actually went back found that return has not fulfilled the fantasy of home. Most have ambivalent feelings about their homecoming, and many felt they were not accepted back with open arms as expected. Many were surprised at how much East Timor had changed, and indeed, at how ‘Western’ they had become, all of which made it hard for them to find a sense of belonging.

The challenge facing former East Timorese exiles is to find new strategies for negotiating this new and unexpected feeling of perhaps a permanent state of only partial belonging. Some have become increasingly ‘translocal,’ dividing their time between East Timor and Australia; some have turned their attention to participating in philanthropic activities—from remittances to charitable fundraising—in order to help East Timor from Australia. Others have developed a kind of ‘deferral’ strategy, maintaining a fantasy of return at some point in the future ‘when the time is right;’ which, perhaps, it never will be. Sadly, as many have discovered before them, former exiles such as the East Timorese can never really return home. Home is something they will have to negotiate anew, for, despite their fantasies of return, they and their homeland have changed forever during the long years of exile.
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the Mary MacKillop Institute for East Timorese Studies for their advice and access to their amazing photo collection, and, most importantly, the East Timorese community in Sydney and those Timorese ‘returnees’ with whom I worked in East Timor. Thanks also to Mandy Thomas, Greg Noble, Len Ang, and Selvaraj Velayutham for their feedback on this work.

Notes

1. This article is based on four years of research with the East Timorese refugee community in Sydney between 1998 and 2002. The research focused primarily on questions of identity, home, exile and belonging, pre- and post-independence, and ethnographically included voluntary work in an East Timorese community center, participation in community and political events, and thirty in-depth interviews in Sydney and East Timor.

2. See Dunn (1996), Gunn (1999), and Taylor (1999) for more background on East Timor’s history.

3. I use the terms ‘affect’ and ‘affective bodies’ to denote bodily emotion. It relates to the German term, Leib, as Ots describes it, referring collectively to the “living body, my body with feelings, sensations, perceptions, and emotions” (1994: 116). I use the term especially in relation to the sorts of emotions inscribed in the body through traumatic experience. For more on the embodied nature of traumatic memory, see trauma theorists, such as Caruth (1995b) and Culbertson (1995).

4. The ‘Dili massacre’, as it has become known, took place on 12 November 1991 in the Santa Cruz cemetery in the East Timorese capital of Dili. Indonesian military shot dead somewhere between three hundred and four hundred peaceful protesters attending a memorial service. The massacre was secretly filmed by British journalist, Max Stahl, and was subsequently shown on news services around the world. That video is credited with raising international awareness of and sympathy for the East Timorese cause for the first time.

5. The tas is the traditional cloth of East Timor, as recognizably East Timorese as the sarong is to Indonesia or the sari to India.

6. By ‘primary trauma’ I refer to the initial trauma experience or experiences in East Timor.

7. An example of such trauma is illustrated by Eva Hoffman (interview with Eva Hoffman in Zournazi 1998) who relates her parents’ re-experience of trauma in the process of migration to Canada. As Holocaust survivors, Hoffman felt that her parents embodied, in very real ways, the horror and suffering of that period in history. As new arrivals in Canada, these formative experiences were relived, in a bodily way, through the isolation and shock of new immigration. Hoffman reports that her parents felt extremes of insecurity, anxiety, depression, and loss. In Poland they were able to cope due to a broader sense of spatial, familial, cultural, and sensory belonging. However, migration reignited those feelings in them again because of the profound isolation and loss they experienced at that time (Goertz 1998; see also Zournazi 1998: 19).

8. Australia’s 2001 Census indicated that fewer than one thousand of an estimated twenty thousand East Timorese had returned.

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