

[Theme]

You're listening to Shifting Subjects: Stories from Asian Australian life. I'm Lisa Divissi.

Lana Nguyễn (LN): Welcome aboard everyone the 'hat xe buyt' bus.

In this moment, I truly feel like I'm eight years old again and embarking on a school excursion. It's mid-morning and I'm seated in a mini bus that's parked in the driveway of the Footscray Community Arts Centre.

I'm one of 25 passengers who boarded the Hat Xe Buyt this morning. Hat Xe Buyt is Vietnamese for Singing Bus. That's the name of today's event.

LN: Today we're going to be moving across the lands of the Boonwurrung and Woi Wurrung language groups, and so that is the context that this project stems from. And particularly coming from a refugee migrant perspective it's important; that solidarity. And that's something that this project tries to build.

You know how a school bus full of kids kind of smells like sunscreen? I haven't thought about that in years! It's kind of fitting to feel this way, because my Vietnamese language skills make me feel like a Primary School kid - all the excitement and vulnerability that comes with it.

Today's bus rides are part of an event curated by Lana Nguyễn, who you just heard, and Hoang Tran Nguyễn who you'll hear from later.

Their purpose is two-fold: on the practical side, it's a way of transporting people between two art exhibitions... one at Footscray Community Arts Centre and the other at WestSpace, in Collingwood. And on the level of performance art, Hat Xe Buyt is a kind of requiem for a years-long battle to keep a well-loved language program running. More about that soon, But for now, all you need to know is the mini bus is done reversing and we're on our way.

LN: I have the immense privilege of introducing someone who I love very deeply and who inspires me a lot.

Every bus ride between the galleries features a different host. And for this trip:

LN: It's my dad, Sơn Nguyễn [applause]. So he's going to sing some songs and tell us about his life and yeah. I think that's probably a good enough introduction [laughs]. Are you ready Dad?

Sơn Nguyễn (SN): Yep. I'm a little bit nervous now but I'll get through it. I agreed to this gig without knowing that, you know, you guys; friends and relatives, are being ripped off for this trip [laughter]. And when Lana and Hoang engaged me I feel it's gonna be easy project in one of my weakest moments [laughter]. I said yes to it.

SN: And I grew up in Vietnam during the war, as you know, and I born 1958. So the war in Vietnam ended in 1975. And after the war, I stay up in Vietnam for another seven years before I escaped as a boat people

Sơn Nguyễn is one of so many Vietnamese refugees who settled in Melbourne's western suburbs in the 1980s.

Footscray is probably the best known of these suburbs. In the 80s, it was somewhat overlooked. It was historically blue collar and working class. It was home to factories and a huge meatworks. So it was a place that new and often poor migrants could afford to establish themselves in.

SN: I'll sing this song called *Bóng Mát* which is which is a song written by one of my teachers as well but very famous musician, *Phạm Thế Mỹ*, but it's a song not very popular with the common pop culture in Vietnam, but it's a song about the, the missing of the - the war, how it made people have to leave the village and how longing for you to come back one day

Each of us passengers was given a little booklet at the beginning of the trip. One double page spread shows the Vietnamese lyrics of *Bóng Mát* on one side, and an English translation that Lana and Sơn worked on together on the other.

[First verse, music then fades to underneath]

Here's the first verse, in English:

Where has it gone, where has it gone, the traditional lullaby sung to me when I came into this life?

Where has it gone, where has it gone, the singing of the young bird on the old tree at the old school?

And the green shade of the bamboo bush on the swinging of the hammock?

Don't you know, don't you know, all of these things have given me the shade of my life?

[music fades down over the following line]

There's something really nice about being driven somewhere. I guess it goes back to that school kid feeling, you know?

You're not sizing up the landscape to figure out which road will get you there quicker. You're being carried which means you can look out the window and drink in the world around you.

As the bus turns onto Ballarat road, I try to picture this place in the 80s. I look into the distance and try to mentally crop out the tallest parts of the city skyline.

Looking down at my lyric booklet, I imagine being under the cool shade of bamboo on a hot, humid day in Vietnam. I imagine arriving in Footscray some time later, and longing for that kind of weather, that kind of shade again.

As if in time with the music, the bus slows to a stop, hovering outside Victoria University, in Footscray.

[music fades up, song finishes, applause]

The bus is now at a standstill outside Victoria University in Footscray.

SN: And by the way, this used to be my uni, it used to be called Footscray Institute of technology during 1986, 87. And this is the admissions building. I used to study Civil Engineering on the other side in building D. And we used to come to building A because most of the Vietnamese multicultural class and all of the art space full of girls on this side, the engineer side all in for the boys. So we used to come here to hang around, you know the reason why. [laughter]

By the time Sơn was getting his degree, much work had been done to formulate radical new language policies to help newcomers like himself get settled.

Over at Footscray Primary School, a mother tongue maintenance program was established. It was designed to help newly arrived Vietnamese kids ease into their new lives and curb culture shock.

Eventually, it would be expanded into a fully fledged bilingual immersion program. The curriculum would be taught in English for half the week, and in Vietnamese for the other.

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[Outdoor atmos, sound of a paint roller on canvas)

LD: Capture some of your sounds

Hoang Tran Nguyễn (HTN): The Gesso?

LD: yeah that's right

HTN: The sound of gesso

I went to visit Lana and Hoang a few weeks earlier, during the preparation stages for Hat Xe Buyt.

While painting the sign that would eventually hang on the side of the bus... I asked Hoang about the shifting needs of Footscray's Vietnamese community throughout the years.

He said that by the time his kids were enrolled, Footscray Primary's Vietnamese students weren't just first generation refugees and migrants. There were second generation kids as well. Being taught in the Vietnamese language was a way of maintaining a connection with their culture and immediate community.

HTN: I was trying to raise my kids bilingually. And I was also struggling because my language skills are pretty bad, too. Like I'm in like a grade five level. And my kids at the time, were starting to transition from speaking Vietnamese with me at home, to then refusing to speak Vietnamese with me because they were becoming institutionalised in the school system. Once kids enter into the school system, the language they speak at home, if it's not English, really quickly evaporates, because there's nothing there supporting them and telling them that it's okay to speak a non English language.

So Footscray Primary's Vietnamese Bilingual Program was able to meet a range of it's community's needs, by normalising the use of Vietnamese language in everyday life. And for that, it was popular. In 2009, the school's Principal told a national newspaper that it was a large factor in the school's ability to reverse declining enrolments.

Over the span of a decade, the educators at Footscray Primary had succeeded in developing a crucial educational practice binding generations of students to a contemporaneous culture... one that was right there around them when they walked out of the school, and into the neighbourhood.

HTN: So there's that heritage of not just the programme itself, but what it represented in terms of the migrant working class history of the area, in terms of the Vietnamese community's relationship to the area. And I guess more broadly, you know, multiculturalism, what it actually means in practice

In the last few decades, Footscray has undergone rapid gentrification. As property prices crept up across the city, attention turned to Melbourne's western suburbs, still close to the CBD, as an affordable place to buy or develop property. In an about-turn, Footscray's multi-ethnic communities became a selling point to often middle class, white Melbournians who'd been pushed out of the property or rental market elsewhere. And with it, the narrative around the suburb's cultural diversity changed. Suddenly, being a middle class and white person amongst these communities, who frequented their restaurants, was to be cosmopolitan, cultured, worldly.

Here's Hoang a few weeks earlier.

HTN: People come to Footscray for multiculturalism, but what it means for them is, you know, going to a restaurant for a bowl of soup. And that's that for them is multiculturalism.

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[Westspace atmos, sound of bus motor running]

We're at our destination now; Westspace in Collingwood. There's another trip headed back to Footscray soon, so I stick around. I notice that Sơn does too, along with his guitar.

There are two hosts on this new trip... first up is Tess Do, a French studies academic. She's going to give us an introduction to the Vietnamese language.

Tess Do (TD): Can you hear me? Yes I think I can hear myself as well. So you know that Vietnamese has five tones. And I think that is one of the things which sounds to be fun, but actually quite difficult for English learners of Vietnamese. So we can try the 'ma'. I think that everyone can do that. Ma.

Audience: Ma

TD: That means Ghost. Má.

Audience: Má

TD: This means mother or cheek. Mả.

Audience: Mả.

TD: Wow, that's good. That is one of the hard ones. Mã.

Audience: Mã

TD: 'Mã' means poem or grave. Then we go for the horse: mã.

Audience: Mã

TD: Great! Wonderful. And then we go for the rice sprouted seedling: mạ.

Audience: Mạ.

TD: We go one more time, ma má mả mã mạ.

Audience: [laughs] ma má mả mã mạ

TD: Yeah! That's it. Yeah, that's right. So we can do that again...

Before I know it, we're being led in song, with Sơn joining in on guitar. Tess takes us through the French and Viet versions of Frère Jacques - or Kia Con Buom Vàng.

TD: so it means, 'time to eat now, time to eat now'...

[MUSIC FADE]

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So what happened to the Vietnamese Bilingual program at Footscray primary school? The short answer is it died a death at the hands of bureaucracy, which is to say, it was a saga. And what is a saga? Super long and not very conducive to a podcast format, unfortunately. But that's the power of bureaucracy: it's long, it's boring, it's maddening. It just grinds and grinds away at you, not in a sexy or fun way. And that's how it wins. Everything kicked off in 2016 when the school sent out a survey to parents. Here's Hoang again.

HTN: It was a very sly survey in that it didn't ask about the bilingual programme at all. It didn't ask about parents' views on language education, it just said, What are your hopes for the future of the school? So so obviously, people didn't know they were being asked about the language program.

Based on the survey, conducted only in English, the school deduced that none of the respondents valued or cared for the Vietnamese Bilingual Program. It then announced that the hours taught in Vietnamese would be reduced, in line with many LOTE - or Languages Other Than English - programs. What followed were years of back and forth. The school would make moves to curtail the program, and a group of parents would push back, Hoang among them. They'd write to the education minister, or call for an audit or an inquiry before a decision could be reached. That's the other thing about bureaucracy; it has its own language. Being able to speak it gives you agency within its system. And usually the people who can speak it... are almost the exact opposite of those most invested in keeping the Viet Bilingual program running. Then in 2020, deep in the chaos and confusion of lockdown, the school announced it was shutting down the Viet bilingual program for good... and replacing it with an Italian one.

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[Bus atmos]

HTN: So Tony, you're one of three kids?

Tony Bui (TB): Three kids

By this point in the trip, I notice we're taking a different route back from when we came. We're headed in the direction of Footscray Primary School. The second host for this trip is Tony Bui, who is joined by his son, Moon.

TB: I'm not sure about my children learning until one day I receive a survey from the school that they offer five other language without Vietnamese. This makes me surprised and I feel something unfair; if they want to change, why don't they let the parent make decisions?

In 2020, Tony created an online petition calling for a reversal of the decision to close down the Vietnamese bilingual program. It garnered around 18,000 signatures and made headlines nationally. Clearly the situation the program faced tapped into

something much larger. You can see this when reading people's reasons for signing. I'll read a few out.

Here's one:

"I truly feel for the Footscray community where Vietnamese is an immediately relevant language, not only in many of the households, but all through the retail precinct and community, allowing for a wonderful immersion program and the learning benefits that bilingualism brings to a growing child... One language class is not the same as another, when in such a context."

And here's another:

"We have to stop seeing school as a pitstop to a future job and education as a way to optimise wealth output for an individual. These are kids learning a language that is relevant to their immediate surroundings, imagine the excitement of being so holistically immersed in an educational experience like that."

What's striking about these responses is that they're about Vietnamese, but they're also not about Vietnamese. In a way, we could be talking about any language.

What's relevant is that the language - whether it's Italian or Vietnamese or whatever - relates to a community... which relates to a place... language acts as a kind of glue by helping people flourish in the places they live. It helps connect the young people to the old people, neighbours to the neighbourhood, songs to the voices.

And if a tree falls in the forest and says 'Ôi chúa ơi,' [oh my god] but no one responds because it hasn't said 'mama mia' [my mother] - did it really make a sound? What kind of tree community are we building here anyway??

By now we've pulled up outside Footscray Primary School and Tony's son Moon is telling us about his experience.

And then something wonderful happens, tying all of this together.

Moon: I strongly believe that I'm very confident at speaking Vietnamese and writing and reading

And then Son asks a question.

SN: and singing? Can you? Can you sing in Vietnamese?

Moon: Yes

SN: Really?

Moon: Yes

SN: Wow, that's beautiful. What can you sing? Not Kia Con Buom Vàng [laughs] that's the last one you did, I could hear you.

HTN: can you play that song for you to sing?

SN: bạn đã hát như thế nào?

TB: Trống Cơm, you can sing Trống Cơm

SN: [in Viet] You can sing Trống Cơm, huh? Oh!

[Son starts playing on guitar]

TB: My little daughter, only four years old can sing this song

[Son and Moon sing the song together. When they finish everyone exclaims and applauds enthusiastically]

OUTRO:

Shifting Subjects is a LIMINAL podcast and a proud member of the Broadwave podcast network.

It was written, cut and hosted by me, Lisa Divissi.

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It was fact checked by Mell Chun.

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Special thanks this episode to Lana Nguyễn and Hoang Tran Nguyễn - thanks so much for having me on board. Thanks also to the City of Melbourne Arts Grants.

If you liked this podcast, tell your friends about it! Especially if they're public transit enthusiasts - because my goodness, what a gift you're now able to give them.

I'm Lisa Divissi, see you next time.