A post-modern mandala? Moving beyond methodological nationalism[1]

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Figure 1: 'Returning Home' by Anthony Key

The work of art entitled *Returning Home* (Figure 1) is a chest-high, cylindrical trunk made from thousands of chopsticks. Painstakingly built up from the inside out, it is a satisfying whole made of many parts that represents home in a solid and enduring, but 'rootless' way. As such, it challenges the notion of rootedness as a prerequisite for belonging, suggesting that 'home' can be conceived in ways that do not necessarily erect barriers to belonging for non-natives, or outsiders. Fittingly, it also represents the culmination of a long personal journey for its creator, Anthony Key, as a migrant to Britain. The piece featured prominently in a recent UK museum exhibition exploring nation-building in Vietnam. Co-curated by the author of this article, the exhibition was both an attempt to distil a decade of research for a non-academic audience, and an opportunity to challenge visitors' perceptions of nation-building more widely. Further, it offered a starting point for reflection on the theoretical

contribution of Southeast Asian studies to ongoing debates surrounding 'methodological nationalism' (Beck and Sznaider 2010 [2006]), which challenge the widespread use of the nation-state as a taken for granted category of analysis. Hence the playful coining of the term 'post-modern mandala' to bring Southeast Asian studies into conversation with these interdisciplinary debates.

Social science theorists have long cautioned against 'methodological nationalism' (Beck and Sznaider 2010 [2006]) and 'methodological groupism' (Brubaker 2002) in the study of social relations. These approaches take bounded, homogenous nations or ethnic groups as the starting point of analysis, and assume they are capable of collective action. Recognition of multiculturalism and individuals' multiple identities has tended to be within a limited spectrum of accepted nationalist and ethnic/racial categories that simply reproduce the notion of discrete ethnocultural groups and constrain rather than liberate people to choose who they want to be (Wise and Veluyatham 2009, 2014). The national and racial identifiers that feature strongly in both everyday and social science discourse have been termed 'limited and violent' (Barabantseva and Lawrence 2015, 913 fn. 8) in constraining people's sense of self into reductive categories. Though scholars across the humanities and social sciences have been questioning nation-state-centric analyses for some time, the academy is still far from a Kuhnian paradigm shift away from methodological nationalism (Kuhn 1962). Nations and nation-states also remain taken for granted, deeply embedded bases for individuals' identity construction, as suggested by visitor feedback to the exhibition. The following article connects these theoretical and empirical realms and thinks about how a critical awareness of the nation can be fostered in practice. It aims to challenge common sense notions of the nation across both realms in order to avoid essentialising nation-states and the minority and majority ethnic and racial groups within them.

The anthropologist Tim Ingold (2007, 2) has described colonialism as 'converting the paths along which life is lived into boundaries in which it is contained, and then […] joining up these now enclosed communities, each confined to one spot.' In Politics and International Relations (IR), for example, these communities have long been defined as nation-states, but this is changing as critical scholars "challenge (reimagine) the possibilities of state-based international relations" (Ni Mhurchu and Shindo 2016, 2). Postcolonial historians have also studied 'the inadequacy and the indispensability of the nation' (Burton 2003, 1), highlighting the deep impact of imperialism on colonizing countries that often goes unnoticed to this day. This is a corrective to the kind of national history 'that serves as justification for the existence, the particularity and often the greatness of the present nation state' (Berger and Conrad 2015, 4), although it is also possible to imagine national history as a critical, polyphonic arena which a challenging museum exhibition could aspire to emulate (Curthoys 2003).

Given that the nation-state system is and remains the world's dominant organising paradigm, it is still tempting to use it as the starting point of political enquiry. Geographers have long recognised this as a 'territorial trap' (Agnew 1994), however, and have been influential in developing more performative understandings of territoriality (Painter 2010). Anthropologists too are now imagining human (power) relations as 'tangles' (Ingold 2007) or 'knots' (Green 2014), in order to escape the limiting mental map of communities bound in what Benedict Anderson (1991) called homogenous, empty time (Horstmann and Wadley

2006). In the Southeast Asian context that informed Anderson's work, the historical, colonial translation of nationalism and sovereignty has often been accompanied by a methodological translation akin to 'methodological nationalism.' Historians of Southeast Asia, keenly aware of this paradigm's relative novelty, have been vocal in rejecting nationalist historiography and instead writing 'Borderless Histories' (Tran & Reid 2006; Tagliacozzo 2009). There is much to learn from them "about how state centricity limits our imaginations of political life" (Ni Mhurchu & Shindo 2016, 2).

The article begins by exploring Southeast Asian studies' contribution to interdisciplinary debates around what I will call critical nationalism studies. The next section thinks about ways of transcending national analytical boundaries in theory, before analysing one attempt to do this in practice, always with the aim of fostering a critical awareness of the nation, its far-reaching ramifications and implications. What the article does not do is attempt a historical comparison of precolonial and postcolonial polities, though it could be argued that there are Southeast Asian examples of "states with a patina of modern governmental institutions but whose citizens live daily lives far removed from the modernizing impulses of their leaders" (Acuff 2012, 134). Rather, it uses the idea of a postcolonial mandala as a heuristic device to question methodological nationalism and explore alternative ways of approaching contemporary politics.

Section I

In historical studies of Southeast Asia, the meta-narrative of national sovereignty is commonly understood to have superseded what O.W. Wolters (1998) called the pre-colonial mandala model. The mandala model describes the power exerted by a sort of central 'sun king' (Lieberman 2003) whose gravitational pull weakened with distance and was overlapped by other spheres of power in a complex system of tributary relationships. It does not evoke a bounded polity in any sense, but emphasises rather a 'tangle of relationships in which [people] are enmeshed' (Ingold 2007, 2). To this extent, and to the extent that the mandala model depended on the regular performance of sovereignty by the monarch's messengers and agents, it chimes with analyses emphasising encounters and webs of relations as an alternative means of theorising (national) community (Closs Stephens & Squire 2012). It also resonates with a postcolonial '*critical return* to the connections between metropole and colony, race and nation' (Burton 2003, 2, emphasis in original). Similarly, the exhibition discussed later in this article sought to encourage a critical return to the nation and national identity for an audience outside the academy. Criticality in this context is understood as self-awareness and conscious reflection about the national construct and its consequences.

Historians have done much to illuminate the porous and shifting nature of Southeast Asia's empires. Anthony Reid's *Southeast Asia in the age of commerce* (1998) and Victor Lieberman's *Strange parallels* (2003) offer a magisterial sweep of the region. Keith Taylor (2013), John Whitmore (1983) and Alexander Woodside (1976) have explored Vietnam's premodern period, work continued by a new generation of scholars including Li Tana (1998), Nola Cooke (1998) and Liam Kelley (2003), among others. Today, Oliver W. Wolters' interpretation of the mandala concept is still often used as a shorthand to characterise the age of empires. Benedict Anderson's *Imagined communities* is frequently applied to the age of

nations, whereas James C. Scott (2009) and the related field of Zomian studies have developed a competing focus on the 'ungoverned' uplands of Southeast Asia. The imposition of Westphalian borders and the attendant concept of sovereign states clearly had a profound impact on Southeast Asian power dynamics, shaping everything from anti-colonial nationalism (Marr 1971; Tai 1992), through geopolitical imaginations (Thongchai 1994) to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' constitution and decision-making conventions (Sutherland 2005a; 2009). However, marking a caesura between the pre-modern and modern histories of Southeast Asia can obscure possible, messy continuities, whilst perpetuating the idea of linear progress through developmental stages that is so central to national imaginaries.

The historian of South Asia Sheldon Pollock (1998, 6) makes a tentative link between the "creation of one cosmopolitan order at the beginning of the first millennium and another and far different one - through colonialism and globalization - at the end of the second." According to this view, an emphasis on transformation should trump a monolithic, essentialising view of "the unexamined territorial frame of the nation-state" (Harvey 2008, 267). Beck and Sznaider (2010 [2006], 389) called for scholars to move away from 'a nation-state definition of society and politics to a cosmopolitan outlook' and questioned the familiar binary between domestic and international politics, unthinking reproductions of the nation-state as 'society', and the use of Westphalian borders as analytical frontiers. Cosmopolitanism is a political, cultural and ethical ideology or *Weltanschauung* (Sutherland 2011), but it is also 'a set of projects toward planetary conviviality' (Mignolo 2000, 721) from which a less state-centric methodological approach can be derived. Scholars have highlighted the dire political consequences of failing 'to understand that we are already cosmopolitan, however much and often this mode of being has been threatened by the work of purification' (Pollock *et al* 2000, 588). Nationalism is one such mode of purification, though its apparent incompatibility with cosmopolitanism is not as clear as may first appear (Cheah 2003; Sutherland 2012; Sutherland forthcoming). In sum, "methodological nationalism needs to be transcended because, rather than allowing us to capture the actual complications of the history of the nation-state in modernity, it turns the nation-state into the natural organizing principle of modernity" (Chernilo 2006, 13).

Nationalist ideology and nation-building are such a pervasive part of today's world order that the temptation is strong to project their legitimacy back through history, and to treat phenomena like migration as correspondingly marginal or peripheral. Similarly, there is a tendency to view economic networks, trade, international security, regionalism and international law through the prism of the nation-state, skewing analysis from the outset (Sutherland 2011). One way to destabilise this 'hegemonic imaginary' (Mignolo 2000, 736) is to listen to subaltern voices. Another gesture towards 'disciplinary cosmopolitanism' (Pollock *et al* 2000, 588) is to learn from historians, who are well placed to identify anachronistic approaches and highlight alternative models from the past. As O.W. Wolters (1998, 41) put it with reference to nations and nationalism, 'the historian should be surprised that these tendencies have been accepted with such indifference.' Wolters (1998, 27-8) defined the mandala as a "particular and often unstable political situation in a vaguely definable geographical area without fixed boundaries.' The term post-modern mandala, in turn, seeks to reconnect contemporary politics with these characteristics, in contrast to the nation-state structures associated with modernity. Crucial to the mandala polity were

attributes that would often be associated with 'soft power' (Nye 2011) today; intelligence-gathering, diplomacy and the ability to engender loyalty through force of personality. Clientelism, patronage and factionalism were probably rife. The centre was concerned with events on the fringes of its control and beyond. Relations of power would shift. Claims to spiritual authority would ebb and flow. Lesser princelings would report to the overlord. Networks of messengers and mediators to manage relationships within and outwith the territory were essential to maintaining the loyalty of vassals and vicariously project the king's magnificence to the outer reaches of the mandala. These 'sinews of government' (Wolters 1998, 31) enabled the kind of surveillance that encouraged obedience, tempered by the sovereign's role as a spiritual guide and benefactor.

The aim of this summary is not to emphasise continuities between pre- and postcolonial politics, even if it might be instructive to challenge this binary (Acuff 2012, 136). Clearly, the mandala model does not describe contemporary nation-states, though aspects of the power relations it describes do still ring true today. Indeed, Wolters identifies early Vietnam as the one example that did not conform to the mandala model, due to its permanent capital, fixed borders along mountain ranges, dynastic succession and territorial, provincial hierarchy. What is striking about the mandala model is its inherent dynamism, and the constant activity required to exert domination and maintain 'networks of loyalty' (Wolters 1998, 34). The purpose of nation-building as the legitimating ideology underpinning nation-states is no different; it must mobilize loyalty to maintain the state's *raison d'être* as the representative of a people, or nation. However, in a direct comparison, Wolters (1998, 36) opined that mandala probably did not engender the 'persisting prejudices' associated with European nationalisms. It is useful to examine just how pervasive these prejudices have become using the work of another historian of Southeast Asia, Keith Taylor.

Keith Taylor's *History of the Vietnamese* begins by recasting "what we know as the country of Vietnam [as] the mountainous western edge of a broad plain" (Taylor 2013, 1). In contrast to his earlier work *The birth of Vietnam* (Taylor, 1983), whose very title is redolent with nationalist imagery of belonging projected back in time, Taylor's *History* explicitly rejects nationalist historiography. He does not set out to examine the past for "evidence of people who attain significance primarily as precursors of people today [and] an internal logic of development leading to the present" (Taylor 2013, 3). In Taylor's view, his history is Vietnamese only inasmuch in that it is now associated with the country of Vietnam, and what has been taught to Vietnamese speakers as 'their' past. Taylor's explicit attempt "to move beyond the propaganda of memory and memorializing" (Taylor 2013, 7) thus has clear parallels with a shift away from state-centrism.

Keith Taylor's view of human history as ultimately episodic resists both temporal continuity and spatial boundaries, exploring instead the "possibility of imagining Asian surfaces as something other than parts of nations" (Taylor 1998, 973).This is not to assert that the nation-state does not exist or that it is not important, but simply not to assume it to be central to analysis. Taylor's approach rejects dichotomous thinking that tends to reinforce linear national narratives, and his refusal to imagine the nation as the starting point of investigation enables us to perceive other forms of political organization. The environmental historian David Biggs (2009) is clearly influenced by what Keith Taylor calls a surface orientation, understood to mean the "surface of fluid human experience in time and terrain,

which softens and fables the coherencies of historicized regions and nations" (Taylor 1998, 954). It is perhaps no surprise that Biggs focuses on the watery realm of southern Vietnam and the Mekong Delta, "a society in which the lines between 'the local' and 'the foreign' (or between 'traditional' and 'modern') had long been blurred" (Biggs 2009, 141).

Even though Biggs has a very specific definition of nation-building applied to Cold War South Vietnam, his approach can be applied to the wider definition of nation-building adopted here, namely state-led nationalism. By focusing on the local, Biggs' work shows how grand nation-building plans were adapted to conditions 'on the ground' with widely varying results across Vietnam. Similarly, Shawn McHale (2009, 105) points to the growing post-war autonomy of the Mekong Delta, something that was unsurprisingly underplayed in subsequent nationalist propaganda. Biggs and McHale question accounts of border zones being gradually brought under the state's purview through the Socialist Republic of Vietnam's New Economic Policy. This is not to cast doubt on this process and the scholarship elucidating it (Hardy 2003), but merely to point out that research questions framed to fit the nation-state container might overlook more fine-grained findings and the "forging of new representations" (Biggs 2009, 143). Neither is this about dealing in counter-factuals, or looking for unfulfilled potential (Duara, cited in Taylor 1998), but simply about looking for perspectives, narratives, approaches and insights outside the nation-state frame. For example, the historian Christopher Goscha (1995) has shown how the borders of Indochina and Vietnam remained fluid in the minds of the Vietnamese (erstwhile Indochinese) Communist Party for much of the 1930s and 40s, an ambivalence that found expression in Vietnam's Cold War relations with Cambodia and Laos. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam's ascendant leaders did not feel constrained by a particular nationalist narrative, which they only began to promote *ex post facto*. Similarly, there is nothing 'natural' about the nation-state.

Keith Taylor's (1998, 950) work restores historical specificity to enduring, nationally or regionally-imbued stereotypes and breaks the spatial and temporal linearity of nationalist narratives, embodied in the notion of the Red River Delta as the cradle of Vietnamese civilization and its southwards march (*nam tiến*). Yet in substituting the temporal plane of *longue durée* for a territorial plane, Taylor retains some of the restricted, two-dimensional approach he is attempting to transcend. Similarly, Tappe and Pholsena (2014, 9,10) question the 'holism' of the national community and the 'state-staged national imaginary,' only to conceptualise landscape as a 'contextual horizon of perception' that frames people's sense of place, time and community (Tappe and Pholsena, 2014, 6). Their evocation of layers of meaning also suggests flat, delineated surfaces that recall cartographic representations, rather than three-dimensional nodes or networks (Sutherland 2010, 22). The following section asks how an approach inspired by the notion of post-modern mandala might find expression today.

Section II. Moving beyond methodological nationalism

What are the normative projects to emerge from existing critical deconstructions of the nation-state container? We can look for them in the vast and varied literature on political cosmopolitanism (Held 2005, Pollock *et al* 2000), in critical geography (Closs Stephens 2013), in citizenship studies (Isin 2012) or in Bridget Anderson's (2009) radical conception

of a borderless world. We can seek them in critical border and migration studies (Belcher *et al* 2015), critical geopolitics (Parker & Vaughn-Williams 2012), anthropology (Green 2014) and postcolonial history (Burton 2003) as well as in the Southeast Asian histories discussed above. What these approaches have in common is that they focus on the practice/performance of sovereignty in a way that recalls the mandala model of exerting power, thereby shifting the focus away from the Westphalian and colonial concept of the bounded and sovereign nation-state. The implications of this are not confined to the academy, but also help challenge political hierarchies that stymie regional responses to refugee crises, entrench moral binaries that put obligations to compatriots before others, and stoke popular fears and incomprehension of 'non-nationals.'

Belcher *et al* (2015, no page) point out that the concept of migration is a product of the modern international world, in that it presupposes movement across borders from one nation-state to another (see also McKeown 2008). This goes much further than simply defining territorial limits. Bordering practices are also embodied in the very act of ascribing migrant status and whether it is 'irregular' or 'illegal'. As a powerful 'geopolitical imaginary' (Belcher *et al*, 2015, no page), borders go to the heart of relationships of sovereign power. Even recognising that 'margins are central to nationalism' (Harms 2011, 20) reproduces the dichotomy of centre and periphery, insider and outsider (Roszko and Sutherland 2015). Migrants, for example, are "contained through multiple borders (geopolitical, economic, juridical and racial)" (Tazzioli 2015). Geographers have turned their attention to bordering practices and the construction of sovereignty as 'theatre' (Cuttitta 2014) in order to break away from 'the geometric habits that reiterate the world as a single grid-like surface' (Whatmore 2002, 6). Using notions of knots, nodal points or even the post-modern mandala as heuristic devices 'transcends borders' (Tran and Reid 2006, 3) by not delimiting the 'geobody' (Thongchai 1994) in two-dimensional terms. Rather than a given, borders become an element of discourse, a performative space that contributes to creating the 'imagined community' of the nation and its attendant institutional structure, the state. As the unpredictable lifting and enforcement of the European Union's eastern borders to migrant flows in the summer of 2015 clearly demonstrate; 'delimitation, contiguity and coherence have to be constantly reproduced to sustain the effect of territory through time' (Painter 2010, 1105).

Elsewhere (Sutherland 2005c), I have used discourse theory to analyse the nation as a nodal point of discourse, defined as a privileged discursive point of partial fixation (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 112). Similarly, the notion of a post-modern mandala entails looking for nodal points of power rather than bounded sovereign blocs, and not assuming these will be synonymous with, say, Hanoi or Bangkok. It imagines agents of power as being 'enmeshed' (Ingold 2007, 2) in complex, overlapping networks, just as tributary relationships ebbed, flowed and overlapped. To take another example, translation is a bordering mechanism in that it can entrench, undermine, erase or recreate borders, thereby highlighting their lack of fixity. The consolidation and codification of selected languages as national languages has been crucial in delimiting the contours of modern nation-states in a way that was never the case in pre-modern empires and city states. Strong associations between language proficiency and integration in today's naturalization regimes is a clear legacy of this, with the native speaker as an aspirational norm. The study of language is therefore one means of

transcending the fixed categorizations inherent in methodological nationalism. As Mezzadra and Sakai (2014, no page) point out:

> It is a truism that a language is something one acquires after birth, but against all counterevidence, the concept of the native speaker reconstitutes an individual's belonging to the nation in terms of his or her innate and almost biological heritage. This is how the concept of nationality is most often asserted in ethnic terms.

Benedict Anderson (1991) showed how the introduction of the census, map and museum served to entrench bounded and exclusive ethnic, racial and national categories in Southeast Asia. Census and other such statistical data are still extensively collected across the globe and used for policy-making in all areas of public life, from housing to university admissions. Even when census categories are periodically modified in order to capture population change through intermarriage and migration, they uphold the prevailing view of community diversity as multiple ethnicities and nationalities living side by side, rather than taking a more dynamic and holistic view of people as engaged in a constant process of becoming (Appadurai 1990). Echoing Anderson's (1991) account of the census, Mezzadra and Sakai (2014) show that languages have been bordered off from each other into comparable, countable units. In practice, however, these are no more real than the unity of the nation itself. They are a construct that is reproduced and further entrenched each time the nation-state is used, explicitly or implicitly, as a category of analysis and a badge of belonging to a nation-state whenever would-be citizens are required to assimilate. Yet in his discussion of the linguistic diversity of Vietnamese across territories and centuries, including its written form of *Nôm*, Keith Taylor (1998, 972) suggests that "the actual practice of language on the surfaces of pronunciation, vocabulary, and syntax where local orientations have arisen in response to unshared experiences, aspirations, and creativities" fatally undermines any notion of a common (national) language.

Similarly, a new turn in translation studies challenges the discipline's long-standing but rather simplistic binary that translation takes place from the language of one national culture to another. Edwin Gentzler (no date) points out that translation is inherent in the everyday lives of migrants, commentators, journalists and others whose written and spoken language render a mix of cultural references that cannot easily be disentangled into neatly bounded 'national languages.' Some original language texts are already translations of protagonists' multicultural experience into an imaginative and often innovative vernacular. According to this view, translation is not a unidirectional process across linguistic borders, but rather an ongoing activity within every society, however defined. As a result, the idea of meaningful boundaries breaks down. To 'think without borders', Gentzler suggests we weave a path through 'the translational fabric of a nation.' We are encouraged to seek the lines of communication that have little or no regard for traditional boundaries, and ultimately to leave borders behind completely as part of an analytical framework (though not as a subject of study). Cultural or migrant flows can be defined on their own terms rather than in terms of crossing borders.

In an attempt to break away from the conception of community as a bounded whole dividing insider from outsider, Reiko Shindo posits that no translation can completely render a word's every connotation and association into another language. Rather, translation is

multivocal; its meaning derives from many people sharing it. Shindo (2012, 153) extends this idea to community; 'At the threshold of community is trans-lation (sic) communication where people expose their inability to exist alone.' This, in turn, makes it possible to imagine community not as a closed circle but 'as a line woven by endless sharing' (Shindo 2012, 153), or a continuum of shared moments. According to this relational reading, self and other are not a bordered binary but 'emerge only through surface contact' (Shindo 2012, 158), a momentary meeting in time. Shindo's approach allows us to step outside binaries of insider and outsider, national and foreigner and follow a different route. A relational reading helps to make sense of the patchiness and arbitrariness of border crossings and enforcement, passports, policing and other trappings of the nation-state construct (Lentz 2014, 3; Viyas Mongia 2003; McKeown 2008). This brings me a little closer to something that may or may not be called a postmodern mandala, but is certainly not premised on the nation-state. The final section begins to imagine what an alternative to methodological nationalism might look like in practice through critical reflection on a museum exhibition and visitor responses to it.

Section III. Museums and national metaphors

In *Routes: travel and translation in the late twentieth century*, the anthropologist James Clifford (1997, 24) already critiqued his discipline's 'focus on separate, integral cultures,' arguing instead that "one needs to focus on hybrid, cosmopolitan experiences as much as on rooted, native ones." Clifford's account of travel and translation as integral to cultural analysis made 'constructed and disputed *historicities*, sites of displacement, interference, and interaction, come more sharply into view.' (Clifford 1997, 25, emphasis in original). Museums were central to his analysis. Traditionally powerful centres of 'scientific' authority, museum expertise in preservation and 'accurate' interpretation has been increasingly called into question by the source communities whose cultures it seeks to represent. As both instantiations of power relations and 'performances of identity' (Clifford 1997, 197), museums have a responsibility to be as inclusive as possible and to surrender complete curatorial control over exhibitions. Artefacts and works of art can entrench but also challenge dominant nation-building paradigms in powerfully emotionally or spiritually evocative ways (Miller 2008). As '3D narratives' (Albano 2014, 2) that create atmospheres and evoke emotion through film, photographs, objects, exhibition layouts and other sensory techniques, museums are suitably multifacetted fora for exploring critical responses and alternative approaches to the nation.

Museums have always been and continue to be key nation-building sites (Anderson 1991; Aronsson and Elgenius 2015) as well as contested sites of identity in themselves, and this applies not only to national museums (Kaplan 2006, Sutherland 2010, 2014a, 2014b). Many museums have become more responsive and inclusive towards both local and source communities, however defined (Montanari 2015). In an analysis of a French ecomuseum in a multicultural community, for example, Montanari notes that its local commitment encourages self-reflection and self-awareness, reflecting the view that ecomuseums should be like a 'mirror in which a population could seek to recognize itself and explore its relationship to the physical environment' (Rivière, cited in Montanari 2015, 369). Montanari emphasises stable identity, cultural memory and rootedness in a place, however, whereas a museum's role may

also be to challenge and explore supposedly stable identities. For example, Kylie Message (2006, 4-1) examines the Centre Culturel Tjibaou in New Caledonia as embodying an image of "Kanak culture as flexible, diasporic, progressive and resistant to containment by traditional museological spaces." Message identifies this institution as one of the 'new museums' that explicitly challenge contemporary nation-states and their boundaries in a self-consciously political, postcolonial and inclusive way, often through non-linear exhibitions, and the mingling of contemporary art with everyday artefacts in innovative architectural spaces. According to Message, this readiness to embrace the contradictions and tensions within contemporary culture works against static or essentialising representations, privileging instead interactive displays of renewal and becoming. In the New Caledonian context of a postcolonial 'struggle over nationhood' (Message 2006, 4-1), for example, such an approach is in stark contrast to depictions of the nation in terms of historical *longue durée* and 'bounded serialities' (Anderson 1991). Angharad Closs Stephens (2010, 2013) has successfully critiqued linear and bounded 'ways of seeing' the nation, using contemporary art installations to develop alternative imaginaries that convey the fragmented and fluctuating nature of identities.

In Vietnam, analyses of museum exhibits have been used to illuminate aspects of its postcolonial nation-building, including colonialism (Sutherland 2005b), the Vietnam War (Schwenkel 2008), the subsidy period (Mclean 2008), and nationalist historiography (Sutherland 2010). The following discussion adds to this scholarship from the perspective of an exhibition co-curator, also incorporating evidence of visitor responses. It is important to contrast this critical approach to Vietnamese nation-building with the voices of those contemporary political dissidents who are deconstructing myths of Vietnamese nationhood, challenging the Vietnamese Communist Party's nation-building narrative, and searching for new values to fill the empty vessel of the Vietnamese nation-state. Even though they variously define Vietnam as 'a fragmented, inorganic, and shifting collection of insecure and confused individuals' (Phạm Thị Hoài cited in Vu 2014, 47), or "a giant formless mass" (Vương Trí Nhàn cited in Vu, 48) they remain within the analytical frame of the nation. They neither engage in the semantic acrobatics of earlier VCP leaders attempting to reconcile nationalism and international socialism, nor do they adopt the sub-state perspective illuminated in the work of McHale and Biggs, or the regionalist views chronicled in Goscha. Finally, they appear to eschew what we might call the cosmopolitan model, exemplified in online communities of like-minded activists, to create new allegiances by connecting with political exiles, diasporics and other supporters beyond Vietnam. The exhibition discussed below set out to do something else again, namely to challenge visitors' assumptions around the nation-state paradigm itself.

Curated by the Oriental Museum in Durham, a small university town in the north-east of England, the aim of the exhibition 'Vietnam; A Nation not a War' was to highlight the constructed nature of the nation through a country case study unfamiliar to most visitors. Although something of a cliché to observers and researchers on Vietnam, the title immediately resonated with curators as an appropriate 'hook' to draw in visitors, whilst acknowledging the fortieth anniversary of the Vietnam War's end. The paying exhibition attracted 849 visitors over three months. An accompanying schools education programme – initially titled Parallel Lives - was designed to encourage young visitors to compare their

sense of national identity to selected aspects of Vietnamese national identity. One of the exhibition's achievements was to develop the Oriental Museum in Durham as a principal collection of Vietnamese artefacts in the UK, since initial research had identified limited holdings elsewhere. Alongside ceramics and colonial objects, the exhibit featured personal belongings, specially collected everyday items and consumer goods, confounding some visitors' expectations that a museum exhibition should predominantly contain antiques (personal communication).

In some ways, the exhibition did not represent a radical departure from linear nationalist narratives. Partly for reasons of limited space, the exhibition was laid out along a predetermined, snaking path, first chronologically and then thematically. This did not in itself encourage visitors to interpret the nation and national identity as 'contested, diverse and multicultural.' (Sutherland 2010, 103; Message 2006). The exhibition also began with a timeline, reinforcing the linear structure through a conventional nation-building narrative stretching back thousands of years. Two separate cases devoted to Vietnam's ethnic minorities probably gave a first impression that they stood apart from the majority ethnic *Kinh*. This is a curatorial strategy I have explicitly criticised in Hanoi's National Museum of History's aestheticised – as opposed to historical - representation of Cham culture (Sutherland 2010, 126). The predominance of textiles in these cases, roughly separated into inhabitants of Vietnam's central and northern Highlands, may have reinforced an essentialising view of ethnic minorities as unchanging and folkloric. Practical display constraints excluded an item of Bahnar clothing combining a 1960s, 'hippie' aesthetic with traditional woven colours and techniques, which could have helped undermine this perspective. The case displaying Hmong textiles, however, included items that had been produced for the tourist market, as well as commentary from young Hmong women themselves who have become part of northern Vietnam's tourist economy by selling handmade items in Sapa (Turner *et al*, 2015, 125). The accompanying information panels explicitly addressed the idea of minorities as being on the geographical and discursive periphery of Vietnamese nation-building. The exhibition was also designed to subvert and disrupt the display techniques outlined above, thereby challenging the dominant narrative at the same time as 're-presenting' it. In so doing, it took a small step outside methodological nationalism as a frame for understanding Vietnameseness, to offer less nation-state-centric perspectives. For example, the panel accompanying the timeline explicitly questioned this way of presenting history. A large storycloth stitched by Hmong refugees dominated the section on the 'Vietnam War,' in order to highlight its devastating impact on Laos and Cambodia. Installations by the contemporary artist Anthony Key, interspersed among glass-cased exhibits throughout the exhibition, were the principal means used to question the dominant national narrative. These had the advantage of not addressing national identity through predefined groups or even individual experience (Purkis 2013, 55), but through conceptual art open to a wide range of interpretations and personal reflections. The curators also made a conscious decision to present the exhibition space as a 'white cube', in order to distance the visitor somewhat from the more immersive space of a museum.

A British citizen of Chinese heritage, who grew up in South Africa, Anthony Key has spent his life as an artist exploring hybrid identities through the ironic and playful appropriation of stereotypes surrounding Chinese food. It was the artist's express wish that

his works be allowed to 'speak for themselves.' Accordingly, the pieces had short labels, as in an art gallery setting. The artist's statement was also kept to a minimum, whilst situating his work in the following way:

> Anthony Key's work encourages us to think about national identity in the UK context and to draw parallels between Vietnam and our own countries of origin. His focus on food is a good way to grasp more difficult ideas like national belonging, especially as lots of people first encounter other cultures through their most famous dishes [...] Anthony Key's experience as a migrant to Britain is powerfully expressed in his artwork, from the sense of 'Trespassing' evoked through barbed wire, through the waiting room for residency rights documented in 'Jerusalem', to the cultural intermingling captured in his food-based works. He prompts us to reflect on who we are and how we identify with, or exclude, other members of our chosen national community.

On turning the first corner of the exhibition, visitors encountered *Trespassing*, a large-scale installation composed of delicate coils of barbed wire made of noodles and twisted around a wooden spool. Further on, they passed *Jerusalem*, a wall of numbered tickets picked from the floor of a UK immigration office, and a specially commissioned tea cosy made of knitted noodles. An intricate and fragile evocation of tea-drinking as a shared 'national tradition' in Vietnam and the United Kingdom, the unusual material could be read as a comment on how migrants were knitted into the fabric of British society. Humour pervaded the works, such as a satellite dish made from a wok set alongside a case on Vietnam's economic renovation (*đổi mới*). In *Peking Ducks,* a series of Chinese takeaway containers 'flew' across the wall above an old-fashioned fireplace in place of the decorative ceramic ducks popular in post-war British homes. At the end of the exhibition, a touchscreen survey and feedback wall composed of questions above line-drawn maps of the UK and Vietnam encouraged visitors to explore national identity further. There were only 36 responses to the seven question survey – perhaps because it was relatively time-consuming or easily overlooked - but 14% of visitors (n=114) left post-it notes on the feedback wall. This was a high response rate for this medium, suggesting that the exhibition was thought-provoking. Indeed, all but two survey respondents (95%) felt the museum was an appropriate place to address nation-building, and 61% saw similarities between the UK and Vietnam with regard to nationhood and identity. Follow-up answers singled out a shared, defining attachment to history, ethnic diversity and integration, national pride, and a commitment to family linked to a wider allegiance to the nation-state. A single comment sidestepped the comparison with what might be described as a relaxed, cosmopolitan response; 'all humanz man, we aint so different (sic).'

    Visitor tracking was undertaken for 5% of visitors, giving an impression of how much time was spent at each exhibit. Figure 2 shows that, taken as a whole, less time was spent viewing and discussing the art works than the exhibits. This also applied to the time spent specifically looking at the objects in glass cases, rather than reading the accompanying text panels. Despite the art gallery aesthetic, then, visitors preferred to examine museum objects than contemplate art works. Visitor feedback to museum staff suggested they would have valued more information on the art works to aid interpretation (Rachel Barclay, personal communication). The relative lack of guidance appears to have left visitors nonplussed, rather than inspiring them to reconsider the nation-state construct. Similarly, a large-scale survey of

visitors to nine national museums in Europe found that although the exhibition structure, approach and contents could influence national identity construction, visitors 'tended to use their visit in order to reinforce and support their pre-existing views and ideas' (Bounia *et al* 2012, 17).
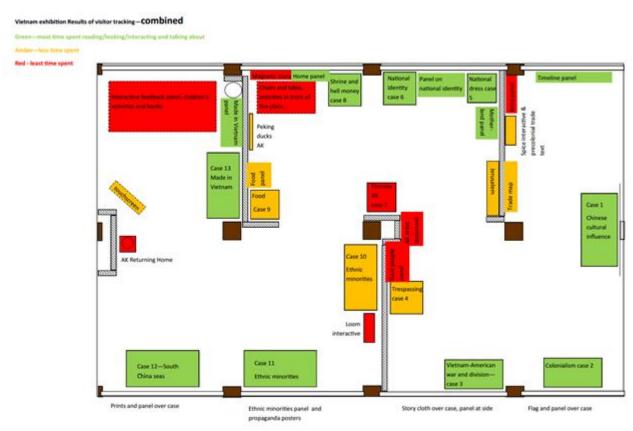

Figure 2: Results of visitor tracking

An analysis of the feedback wall using the Generic Learning Outcomes framework, which was developed for museums to code qualitative data (Hooper-Greenhill *et al* 2003), showed that 55% of the comments related to attitudes and values and a further 19% to enjoyment, inspiration and creativity. This was a very positive result in relation to the aims of the exhibition, which set out to challenge notions of the nation as much as inform the visitor about Vietnam (only 9% of responses related to knowledge and understanding). Further analysis of substantive comments in the attitudes and values category showed that many respondents reproduced dominant paradigms of nationhood, variously singling out tradition, borders, culture and memories in response to the question 'What is a nation?'. All the Vietnamese visitors who posted on the wall, among them the Durham University students whose input had helped inform the displays, expressed pride in their country and gratitude that an exhibition should be mounted about 'little & humble Vietnam.' Two of them also signed off on behalf of the Vietnamese people, their narrative of the nation clearly reconfirmed rather than destabilized. Many postings on the feedback wall's outline map of the UK suggested positive associations with the nation, including tolerance, compassion, humour, sharing, family, community and specific characteristics like the countryside, industry, good food and good football teams. Others, by contrast, evoked strongly critical

connotations, commenting in the following terms; 'worthless atavistic throwback' and 'aggressive, bullying, arrogant.' The eighteenth century English writer Samuel Johnson's view of patriotism as 'the last refuge of the scoundrel' was also quoted approvingly. Nobody commented on the appropriateness or otherwise of using two-dimensional outline 'logos' to represent nations (Jazeel 2009), or on the (mapmaker's) choice of 'national' landmarks for illustration. Many of those posting comments on the UK map chose to affiliate with a city or region on that map, suggesting that this was a more immediate identifier for them. Only three respondents rejected the national frame of reference altogether, professing pride in being human or in being themselves. The single negative piece of feedback on the exhibition was also the most attuned to the subjectivity permeating its themes and artefacts; "I've learned that whoever designed the exhibition is very forceful in imposing his/her political beliefs on every aspect of the exhibition."

Although several responses singled out Anthony Key's artworks for praise, none linked these explicitly to reflections on the nation. Yet *Trespassing* and *Returning Home* (as described in the introduction to this article) were chosen to open and close the exhibition precisely because they comment powerfully on the spatial metaphors that constitute conventional, imagined geographies of the nation-state. In Anthony Key's *Trespassing* (Figure 3), the barbed wire wound around a central core presumably lies ready to be extended against the trespassing of the title. However, the fact that the barbed wire is made of Chinese noodles suggests a different reading, namely that if the 'foreign body' forms the border, then that also dissolves the binary of belonging. In other words, if this is the barbed wire embodying the border, perhaps the 'Essential Outsider' (Chirot & Reid 1997) that serves to delimit the boundary between 'us' and 'them', in this case nation and other, is not as clear-cut as the nation-state construct would have us believe. *Trespassing* calls to mind Bruno Latour's 'skeins' (cited in Sutherland 2010, 6) and the 'skein of journeys through which each state was experienced' (Anderson 1991, 115) initially by colonial functionaries, increasingly by indigenous intelligentsia and today by migrants. At the very least, it draws attention to the violence inherent in bordering and exclusion, without which nation-state sovereignty would be largely meaningless. Although the foreign body is only represented in abstract terms, the imposing presence of *Trespassing* disrupts the 'Insider's' unquestioned sense of national belonging.

Figure 3: 'Trespassing' by Anthony Key

Conclusion

"It is no easy matter" as Sheldon Pollock (1998, 32) put it, "to displace let alone replace the notion of the nation form." Stepping outside methodological nationalism requires us to think outside the conceptual apparatus of the nation-state model, as bequeathed by modernity. The once heralded decline of the nation-state (Ohmae 1996) has been overstated, but the analytical and methodological imperative to escape or at least question its structural logic remains. The notion of a post-modern mandala is but another metaphor to add to that of knots (Green 2014), webs (Closs Stephens and Squire 2012) or tangled lines (Ingold 2007) as a means of moving beyond analyses premised on bounded communities. It pays homage to the pioneering work of historians of Southeast Asia in writing 'Borderless Histories' (Tran & Reid 2006). In a recent interview, the eminent anthropologist and historian Anne Laura Stoler (2015) referred to a student's work on bombs in Lebanon. Rather than ask how predefined communities responded to the presence of these bombs, the student's approach was to examine how their existence produce relationships and political claims. In other words, the student did not assume bounded communities and investigate these, but rather set out to address the knot or tangle of relationships created by a particular object and situation. Similarly, museums exhibitions use - less explosive - objects as a starting point for reflection. As a means of representing and interpreting the nation, artifacts and works of art can entrench but also challenge dominant nation-building paradigms in powerful ways that encourage

critical reflection and open up alternative approaches to methodological nationalism. By disrupting the linear national narrative of *longue durée* with thought-provoking works of contemporary art, the exhibition 'Vietnam: A Nation not a War' encouraged visitors to question notions of national belonging that are often taken for granted. The evidence suggests that this ambition was only partially realised. Nevertheless, many visitors were led by the Vietnamese example to interrogate their own view of the nation, and were touched by Anthony Key's works, which offer innovative perspectives on national belonging for further research.

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