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“Khi mô về?” (When will you go home?) Evocative Autoethnography on Death, Impermanence, and Time-Space Extension

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Abstract

This article is motivated by my personal wish to pay tribute to my beloved grandfather, who passed away during the COVID-19 pandemic while I was stranded in Australia. Relying on an evocative autoethnography of a grandson, a father, a PhD candidate and graduate, and a researcher, and in reference to the concepts of place-making theories such as time-space expansion, I tried to embrace my experience of grief and loss as well as to make sense of my feelings of distance, impermanence, and death during this chaotic period. The story I will tell below chronicles my emotional and spiritual journey from the moment I first learned of my grandfather's illness (early 2020) until the time after his passing (October 2021). I have found out that during this process of attempting to converse with, heal, and take care of myself, I have transcended the physical-social aspects of place and touched on spiritual space.

Keywords

death, impermanence, time-space expansion, COVID-19, place-making, evocative autoethnography

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This article is motivated by my personal wish to pay tribute to my beloved grandfather, who passed away during the COVID-19 pandemic while I was stranded in Australia. Relying on an evocative autoethnography of a grandson, a father, a PhD candidate and graduate, and a researcher, and in reference to the concepts of place-making theories such as time-space expansion, I tried to embrace my experience of grief and loss as well as to make sense of my feelings of distance, impermanence, and death during this chaotic period. The story I will tell below chronicles my emotional and spiritual journey from the moment I first learned of my grandfather’s illness (early 2020) until the time after his passing (October 2021). I have found out that during this process of attempting to converse with, heal, and take care of myself, I have transcended the physical-social aspects of place and touched on spiritual space.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has unprecedentedly changed many lives, especially international students (Chirikov & Soria, 2020; Coffey et al., 2021; Mospan & Slipchuk, 2020; Phan, 2021). Like them, I have been greatly affected by the “new normal” (Zinn, 2020), including mobility restrictions, border closures, lock-downs, and social distancing, to name a few. In addition to psychological injuries such as stress, depression, loneliness, and fear (Feng et al., 2021; Song et al., 2021; Yassin et al., 2021), I have suffered from the great loss of my grandfather in October 2021. This trauma has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic as it trapped me in Australia, preventing me from visiting my grandfather before and after his death.

The emotional pain motivated me to talk with myself, grasp what I have been through, heal and seek inner peace. The story I am going to tell below will concentrate on the themes of fears of death, time-space expansion, and impermanence - a sense of “the fleeting and transitory nature of everything worldly or earthly” (Stambaugh, 1990, p. 2). But as Thầy Thích Nhất Hạnh (2011, p. 83) teaches me, “[u]nderstanding the notion of impermanence is not enough to change the way you experience and live your life,” but rather we need to maintain our “awareness of impermanence all the time and never los[e] sight of it, in everything you do.” Writing has proven to be a helpful “technology of self” (Foucault, 1986, 1997; Nguyen-Trung, 2020) for me in my efforts to cultivate this awareness of impermanence since it has allowed me to attend to and release all the emotions and thoughts that have been bottled up in my head and are difficult to talk about or vocally convey with others. I did not want my wife or my parents' mental health to be impacted by these messages, which were loaded with misery,

pessimism, dismal thoughts, hopelessness, and fears. Writing in this situation is a personal conversation with myself.

Evocative Autoethnography and the Writing Process

Truth be told, I was not planning on writing a research paper on my grandfather's death. Even simply thinking about it hurts. But when my grandfather became ill, I started to fall into crisis. To record my feelings, I started writing notes and sending them to my email address. I expressed in the notes that I was worried about losing my grandfather, that I might not be able to see him while the borders were closed, that I felt estranged from him and my extended family, and that there was nothing I could do to change these circumstances.

The sense of loss and grief increased after the passing of my grandfather. I would usually wake up in the middle of the night and must pen down every emerging feeling and thought that rushed through my head like an irresistible flood after a dam cracked. Dread, heartbreak, and hopelessness. His smile, my guilt, and my homesickness. They were too jumbled. I had to keep going until I was mentally and physically worn out. As a researcher, I wanted to make sense of them. When I began reading autoethnography studies at that time, I could relate to, for instance, Ellis's anguish following the death of her brother (Ellis, 1993). I was also inspired by the power of autoethnography that helped Neville-Jan (2004) comprehend her disability and chronic pain. These studies inspired me as an academic to weave together all the isolated notes I had taken into a narrative so that I could communicate it to myself and readers. Evocative autoethnography, defined as "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)" (Ellis et al., 2011), is a potent method that not only aided in my understanding of my experience but also enabled me to transform myself and seek inner peace. It gave me some relative freedom, outside the rigid rules of traditional research methods, to write my story in a way that fits "in the space between fiction and social science" (Ellis, 1993, p. 724).

As Ellis suggested in her recall of her writing process (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 27), evocative autoethnography allowed me to use my sociological imagination and knowledge of geography to construct a story that helps make sense of my fear of my grandfather's death, sense of time-space extension, and the impermanent nature of human beings. This approach helped me come back inward, speak with myself, and, by doing so, "engage [me] in processes of becoming and... show [me] ways of embodying change" (Holman Jones, 2016, p. 2). The method helped me to write and revisit my notes, organising them into a chronological narrative that links the events of my grandfather's illness, death, and funeral with those of the pandemic, my communication with my extended family in Vietnam, the activities of my small family in Melbourne, and my feelings and thoughts. I see this reflexive process of writing as a "technology of self" (Foucault's terminology) that supports the care for my grandfather, my family, and myself in times of crisis (Foucault, 1986, 1997; Nguyen-Trung, 2020) and addresses my "fears of illness, death" (Ellingson, 2006, p. 18). In doing so, I focused mostly on "narrative analysis" (*thinking with a story*) that enabled me to spend time spiritually with my grandfather, reflect on him and our relationship (Bochner & Riggs, 2014), and meaning-making the experience that I had been through (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). In other words, the main goal of this evocative autoethnography is to embrace my experience of grief and loss, to reflect on my grandfather, and to heal myself (Bochner & Riggs, 2014, p. 206).

I also went beyond the story itself and thought about this story (*narrative-under-analysis*; Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Bochner & Riggs, 2014). As a chief investigator of another research project on place-making, I had a chance to engage with theories of place-making, particularly the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on place-making and time-space extension.

This existing knowledge affected the process of writing my notes and the way I reflected on my trauma, especially when it came to the sense-making of my feelings of disconnectedness and distance. As I analysed my notes, I “work[ed] back and forth with available literature to compare similar insights and patterns in other stories or studies” (works such as Ellis, 1993; Phan, 2021); “[brought] in concepts from other studies that might be relevant” (concepts from for instance Bissell, 2021; Harvey, 1989) and made a connection between my case and the theories of place-making reconfiguration under the impact of the pandemic (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 187). Despite combining two forms of analysis, portraying the story of grief and loss (*thinking with a story*) is prominent in this evocative autoethnography (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 186). The sections that follow chronicle my emotional and spiritual journey since my grandfather's failing illness to the period after his death, starting with the visit of my mother to my family in Australia in early 2020, followed up by the discussion of the time-space expansion and the transformation of my private and spiritual space.

My Story in Chaotic Times

The COVID-19 epidemic began in late 2019, when my wife and I were about to welcome our first child. As a newlywed couple, we were very nervous about her arrival. We had no idea how to care for a newborn infant. That was why my mum travelled to Australia for the first time to assist us in easing the early stages of our daughter's existence. By that time, we and many Australians were still unaware of the new infectious disease emerging somewhere in China.

As early as March 2020, the World Health Organisation proclaimed the disease a global pandemic, and it began to manifest itself in the lives of Melbourne residents. As the confirmed cases surpassed 100 and the first deaths were reported, the Victorian and Australian governments swiftly implemented the initial lock-down measures. My mother was fortunate enough to avoid the lockdown and the border closures since she returned home one week before on a pre-booked flight. She would have stayed with us until now had she not taken that plane. However, as she informed me prior to leaving for the airport, a secret she kept until her final day in Melbourne, my grandfather suffered a stroke in late 2019. He was fortunate to escape death at the time, but his body has deteriorated significantly since then, with his legs unable to walk for more than a few minutes. That was the first time I became aware of impermanence and death. I had the distinct impression that something was awry, that something was not right.

Yet, our lives never came to a halt. This sense of impermanence and death was washed away by my PhD project at Monash University, my part-time away-from-home job, and the care of our newborn infant. She would keep us occupied all day. At first, these everyday routines overwhelmed me and obscured the COVID-19 pandemic's influence. Fast forwards to mid-2021, after multiple lockdowns, the pandemic had become more genuine and pervasive than it had ever been. It has expanded, matured, and penetrated further into our lives. I was acutely aware of how this pandemic could shake our lives. Avoiding contact with others, panic-buying toilet paper, restricted mobility, border closures, and curfews, all contributed to the gradual rise in fear of contracting the new disease and concern for our loved ones, not only in our small family but also, more importantly, in Vietnam, where our hands could not reach. Vietnam fared well during the pandemic's initial wave in 2020, but 2021 was different. The country caught up with the third and fourth waves, resulting in increasing numbers of infections and deaths.

It was simpler to be pessimistic when the entire social media landscape was filled with terrible news about infection rates, death tolls, economic crises, and so forth. As the days passed, the COVID-19 drained me mentally and emotionally. At first, I tried to ignore this sensation to focus on working part-time and completing my PhD thesis, which was originally

scheduled to be completed in August 2020. However, it was hard to keep the COVID-19 pandemic out of our homes, given how easily it might enter our thoughts via a simple smartphone click. Our perception of this pandemic is largely shaped by what the media portrays it to us.

Time-Space Expansion and the Construction of Spiritual-Virtual Geography

What is notable is that, since the pandemic spread globally, a new normal order has taken hold, influencing virtually every area of our lives, including place-making or making sense of one's surroundings. As Bissell (2021) notes, the pandemic has compelled our place-making to adapt. One of the most significant reconfigurations is the change in the time-space relationship, which has reverted to time-space expansion from time-space compression.

Time-space compression is regarded as a basic property of postmodernism, in which the pace of life has accelerated to the point where spatial barriers have collapsed inward on us, creating the illusion that people located in distant lands live in a “global village” (Harvey, 1989, p. 239). It is true that advancements in telecommunications, the birth of the Internet and the World Wide Web in the 1990s, the proliferation of social media as a “global phenomenon” (Vasalou et al., 2010), the increasing popularity of internet-connected devices (e.g., smartphones, tablets, laptops), and the innovation of transportation technologies and infrastructure (particularly airlines), have shrunk the entire globe, reducing travel time and distance. Due to the growth of information technologies and social media, the interaction order based on bodily copresence (Goffman, 1956, 1959, 1983) has been supplanted by the multifarious interaction order based on both physical face-to-face and virtual copresence (Jenkins, 2010; Ling, 2010; Nguyen-Trung, 2015; Rettie, 2009). Even people living in remote regions of the world can still feel linked because of these improvements.

Nonetheless, time-space compression has given way to time-space expansion, with people now experiencing diverse paces of life as a result of lockdowns, curfews, mobility limitations, border closures, and extended times of waiting and delay (Bissell, 2021). The sense of distance and the illusion of time due to long periods of staying at home have permeated virtually everyone in the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than being drawn together and attached, we feel detached and split apart.

For me, the sense of separation grew in lockstep with an increasing sense of homesickness, concern about health risks, and worry about my loved ones. This was especially true in the instance of my grandfather, whom I was unable to visit prior to his death. Restricted mobility, the closure of Australia's border with Vietnam, and the fear of getting our children infected, all contributed to my situation of being stranded overseas, similar to that of many other international students and migrants (McDermid et al., 2022; Phan, 2021). I had never had such a sense of separation from my hometown as I had when my grandfather became ill and raced for his life. I desperately wrote in my diary:

Grandpa, I felt hopeless. I felt disabled. I felt worthless and remorseful that I wasn't able to be with you at this time.

My grandfather felt strongly that his time had arrived, so that every time we video called, he asked me:

When will you go home? (*Khi mô về?*)
By the end of the year, I said.

He kept repeating the question, and I kept framing my responses in infinite time, over and over. I merely tried to reassure him because I, too, was sceptical about such a deadline. He continued to enquire until the stroke rendered him speechless. However, even in that state, he conveyed his desire to meet me before passing on to the next life through his eyes. I was only able to cry during and immediately following each video call.

The link between time and space was severely broken. My distance from him grew wider and wider. Prior to the COVID-19 epidemic and border closures, it took only eight hours to travel from Australia to Vietnam and an additional four hours to reach my hometown. We needed only one night of sleep before we could visit our family. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and its subsequent new normal order had altered everything. As a result of border closures as well as new laws requiring coronavirus testing, quarantine limitations, and vaccination requirements, the time-space interaction had been expanded. I had never felt as if my home was so far away. As Bissell (2021) asserts, it felt as though two distinct worlds existed between Melbourne and my hometown, each moving at a different pace. The COVID-19 pandemic has shaken almost everything we previously took for granted, including the speed of flights, the evolution of transportation systems, and the ease with which we may travel between countries. The pandemic has eroded or increased the value of those benefits to the point that I realised how critical they are to our time-space connectivity.

Place is created by the ongoing imposition of social meanings on the physical environment in which we live (Holton, 2015). We transform space into place by continuously constructing our actions and meanings, incorporating cognitive, emotional, and social values into the physical environments we inhabit, from the buildings we live in to the modes of transportation we use, the natural scenes we sightsee, the park where we exercise, and the school where we study, to the people with whom we connect over coffee or beer (Relph, 1976; Stedman, 2003; Tuan, 1977). We do not simply inhabit physical environments; we make sense of them through our social ties, symbols, and values. However, I believe that, in addition to the physical and social dimensions, a third one exists: the spiritual. This layer is formed when individuals transcend their physical and social environments and enter their mind and soul, utilising the power of memory, imagination, emotions, symbols, and even religion to create a sphere distinct from the former two. Our spirit is affixed to space. The spiritual realm draws on our experience and relations in our physical and social worlds, but it could exist independently in our imagination.

In this imagined world, we could create anything to satisfy our needs. Through religious imagination, we may meet God. In my case, when the sense of impending death became much more real, I appeared to be non-existent in my own physical-social world and would enter the spiritual sphere where I could converse with my grandfather and relieve the events we shared with each other. I constructed the sphere with my imagination and my fear.

I feared a lot. Yes! I feared the end was near for my grandfather. I even dreamt of him six or seven months before his death. Here is what I recalled of such a dream when I woke up:

I stayed with my grandmother in my dream, and soon my grandfather entered my room. I couldn't see anything since everything was so bright. I could only recall something happening to him that caused me to cry so hard that when I awoke, tears were streaming down my face, and I was physically and emotionally exhausted.

After that strange, yet very vivid dream, I started to feel strongly concerned about my grandfather. My concern was right. In August 2021, my grandfather became unwell because of another stroke. My hometown, Ha Tinh province in Central Vietnam, was hit hard by the pandemic, as were many other parts of the country, as it battled the fourth wave of the COVID-

pandemic since April 2021. As the rate of infection increased, movement was restricted, and the rule of social distancing was established. Worse, hospitals were overburdened and could only accept emergency patients. My family had to wait a few weeks to transfer him to the nearest hospital. My mother lamented at the time that if it had not been for the constraints, we could have rushed him to the nearest hospital and treated him better.

There was, however, no “if.” My grandfather spent his remaining three months on Earth from August to October 16, 2021, when he passed away. Every day, every hour, I exchanged messages with my parents, and everyone was concerned about my grandfather. The more I observed my grandfather laying paralysed in a hospital bed, eating through a little pipe pushed through his nose to his stomach, and exhaling each breath as if it were his last, the more I felt his death. The stronger this perception developed, the more concrete the experience of life's vulnerability became. The Buddhist idea that one's life is impermanent (*vô thường*) came to mind. I know that, as Thầy Thích Nhất Hạnh explains, my grandfather, and everyone including me, are “impermanent” and in “three hundred years from now [will be] dust” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2011, pp. 83-85). This understanding of impermanence, which implies that everything is fleeting and usually subject to uncertainties and risks, has led to the transformation and reconfiguration of my private place.

His death occurred unexpectedly while I was working part-time. My brother called me through Facebook Messenger. The crying could be heard in the background. I had a horrible feeling. Then he told me about the death. I recall how I felt at the time:

Even though I expected it, I couldn't believe it. I couldn't breathe regularly, I had to get permission to return home. I cried the entire way back home. I'm sure driving under those conditions was hazardous. But I needed to be at home, where I could find out what had happened and be with my family.

This was the most traumatic experience I have ever had since I was born. My granddad was one of the closest family members to me, and one of the ones I loved most. I sobbed more than I had in the previous 30 years of my life.

Transforming the Private Place and Entering a Spiritual Space

In this great sorrow, I experienced the transformation of my private place under the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has forcefully accelerated innovation in digital technologies, necessitating virtual communication and working venues and tools. However, the fact that we are frequently confined to our homes has resulted in the alteration of private space. We have changed our private area into a working or public environment by inviting people into our bedrooms via internet services such as Zoom (Bissell, 2021). We are compelled to reconfigure our private space, adapting it to our communication needs and requirements. The private place originally functions as a place to rest and relax, a place to retreat from the busy life, and a place to care for our well-being (Foucault, 1986, 1997; Nguyen-Trung, 2020). We do not have the luxury of such privacy in the COVID-19 era. As we are forced to open our private space to people more regularly through the cameras of our laptops or computers, our private space has evolved into a source of stress, and we must adapt and renovate our private spaces accordingly.

However, where and how should adaptation occur? In my case, I needed to convert my private space into a platform that would enable me to communicate virtually with my extended family in Vietnam. I desired to be present with them during the most heartbreaking occurrence. Only in my own space during the video conference with my family, when I could hear and see

what was happening in my extended family during such a difficult moment, did I feel strong enough to overcome the sense of distance, or time-space extension.

Nonetheless, the time I spent with my extended family online was brief, usually no more than 10 minutes. Throughout the remainder of the time, a strong sense of time-space extension pervaded. I felt alone, hopeless, and worthless. To overcome these emotions, I needed to construct a spiritual sphere in my soul through which I could communicate with my grandfather. Thus, rather than Harvey's assertion that "[t]he home becomes a private museum [storing photographs, objects of value] to guard against the ravages of time-space compression" (Harvey, 1989, p. 292), I would assert that my soul and imagination become a bridge to connect the time-space divide created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Numerous rituals have been (re)invented because of the COVID-19 pandemic. One of them may be how to be present at a funeral. The notion of time-space extension was particularly palpable during a video call between me and my family at my grandfather's funeral. I donned a black shirt and observed my family members and others assisting with the funeral's organisation. I saw my family in tears. I noticed my grandfather's body lying there, cold and still. I witnessed the procedure of embalming his body. Then there are the rituals: incense offerings, reciting his biography, and carrying the casket to the nearby cemetery. Perhaps one of the most heartbreaking moments was when I witnessed my grandmother cry without a tear as she had already drained them. Her eyes were shut, her face was contorted, and her body trembled. To me, this is possibly the most fixated image. It struck me hard that I could sense death's strength and the fragility of our lives. Death is a ruthless force from which no one can escape. Similarly to the observation that "[h]omes and spaces within homes are transformed into temporary sacred spaces" (Bryson et al., 2020), at that moment, my being transcended the place's normal temporal and spatial dimensions and entered the realm of sacred and spiritual realism.

My spiritual space continues to expand following my grandfather's death. My grandfather has passed on to what we perceive to be an afterlife, but I and the rest of my family must make sense of this migration in our current time-space. This urge was heightened in my case because I was the one who was unable to bid him farewell. Although he had left, my trip with him was not yet complete. Due to the time-space expansion, everything that happened to me, even the funeral, appeared fictitious and illusory, or so I would believe. As a result, to connect with him and tackle my excessive tiredness, intense anxiety, a strong sense of guilt, and rapid mood swings, I have needed to continue strengthening my spiritual sphere. I utilised every memory I had of him as a brick in the construction and strengthening of a memorial to him. The spiritual realm has occasionally transcended active time and materialised in my dreams. For instance, the following is a description of one of my dreams about him:

I was conversing with my mother in the kitchen. Then I walked to your room and saw you lying in bed, as usual, with your head in your hands. When you saw me, you became enthralled, and your eyes gleamed. "I'm hungry," you said. "Are we going to eat something?" I hadn't heard your pleasant voice or seen your attractive grin in such a long time. I wished for it, and now I have it. I plunged my head into your arms, sobbing uncontrollably and bitterly, knowing full well that you had left. I cried because I felt guilty for not paying you a visit as promised. You gave me a soft grin, patting my shoulders to console me, as you always did. I can't thank you enough for your patience and generosity. You didn't even get mad at me. Grandpa, I love you so much.

It was the first time in two months since my grandfather's death that I was able to see him in a dream. It was so genuine and moving. Only in such a space did I sense that the time-space relationship was squeezed rather than broadened.

Conclusion

At this point in time, I cannot say that I have acquired inner peace following my grandfather's death. However, this evocative autoethnography has given me the chance to "experience" this loss under the impact of the unprecedented pandemic, which motivates me, and hopefully, the readers of this article, to "give voice to [my and] their own emotional experiences" (Ellis, 1993, p. 711). When the pain was overwhelming, writing became a reliable way to talk with myself. I tried to recall and write about "epiphanies" or the "remembered moments" (Ellis et al., 2011) with my grandfather. My narrative presents my grandfather's death and my traumatic experience from "an aesthetic distance" (i.e., to the extent that [I am] both participant in, and observer of my own depression; Scheff, 1979, p. 67). I feel the most pain when recalling my grandfather's question: "*Khi mô về?*" (When will you go home?). Experiencing the suffering in the similar way to Ellis's "intense emotion of loss" following her brother's death (Ellis, 1993, p. 727), I have had to construct my spiritual space to grieve for my grandfather and console my existential crisis. This process of writing that relives the moments with my grandfather in my spiritual realm also has proved critical to my healing (Anderson & MacCurdy, 2000; Trinh et al., 2022) and the care for myself in the time of crisis (Foucault, 1986, 1997; Nguyen-Trung, 2020). To write is then to listen, to embrace, to care, to transform.

As I engaged in this quest, I have realised that many things we take for granted have been disrupted by the pandemic, including our family's presence, our health, and our affection for one another. We all assumed that our family or loved ones were always "there"; even if we were thousands of miles apart, we could see them after a few airline rides or hours of travel. We all believed that our love for our family and friends was felt and understood by them because we could tell them how much we loved them with a simple phone call. The pandemic has shattered these long-held beliefs. It has made us realise how much we tend to forget that the safety and health of our family is one of, if not the most, crucial aspects of our existence. It has made us realise that life is as fleeting as a blink, and that we could lose a loved one at any time. You never know when a goodbye might be the last. This sense of impermanence is real, now and here: "Impermanence is the very heart of life. It makes life possible. Reject impermanence, and you reject life" (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2012, p. 100). Impermanence is a property of all life.

I find this sense of impermanence well explains the idea of transition back and forth between time-space compression and time-space expansion (Bissell, 2021; Harvey, 1989). Even time and space are impermanent. And we should not take time-space compression for granted; it was a win made possible by our modernisation and globalisation. The shrinking of the world is made feasible not only by transportation and information technologies, but also by cross-national agreements on movement among nations, or more broadly, globalisation (Harvey, 1989). Yet, time-space compression is becoming increasingly vulnerable to eventualities. Will there be another COVID-19 pandemic or a similar crisis? Surely there will be. How are we prepared for the upcoming ones? Is it really time, in this perilous and uncertain world, to live a bit slower and think about how temporary our lives and the world are and to care more about our souls and the people we love?

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