Journey to India: Vicki Viidikas, Tommo and Me

Adrienne Sallay
Macquarie University

Abstract

Vicki Viidikas was one of the Balmain poets of the Generation of ’68. Her poem “Loaded Hearts” is the working title for my creative writing project, because the poem encapsulates the feeling of the 1970s which I want to convey. Viidikas’s fascination with India lead her to journey to the sub continent many times over a period of twenty years. A Literature Board grant enabled her to complete her last published volume of poetry, India Ink, in which she describes the Kulu Valley in the Indian Himalayas.

Tommo Johnston (not his real name) was a Vietnam Veteran whom I interviewed in order to reveal the journey towards healing and recovery which some veterans endure. In real life he also journeyed to India. He drove the Overland Route from London to Delhi five times with a double-decker bus full of backpacker passengers. Tommo’s journey to India coincided with the fascination for India with which writer Vicki Viidikas was consumed.

My own journey to the Himalayas in 1975 was journalled in aerogrammes sent back to my family in Sydney. After reading my letters thirty years later, I asked myself could it be that Viidikas and I shared rooms in the same ex-British Raj house high in the mountains overlooking the Kulu Valley? Was she, like me, fortunate enough to be given an audience with the Dalai Lama? And was it likely that she might have met my Vietnam Veteran, Tommo?

This paper details the creative journey I took to combine these and other sources into one moment of epiphany for Tommo. Using methodologies described by Kevin Brophy, Tess Brady and Eva Sallis, in which a writer integrates the critical, research and creative components, I embedded Viidikas, Tommo and the Dalai Lama into the novel in a scene which aims to exemplify Hillis Miller’s idea that through fiction “we investigate, perhaps invent, the meaning of human life”.