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TREADING THE BATTLEFIELDS OF MEMORY
"Vietnam" and "America" Fifty Years After

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The cover of this issue of *Review of International American Studies* (*RIAS*) features a contemporary photograph of a building that bears witness to one of the most famous images of the twentieth century: A helicopter lifting evacuees from a rooftop in Saigon as North Vietnamese forces came closing into the capital. Commonly mistaken for the United States Embassy, the building at 22 Gia Long Street, now 22 Lý Tự Trọng, Hồ Chí Minh City, once housed the Pittman Apartments, the wartime residence of USAID and CIA station personnel, and was one of the designated points in the massive airlift evacuation of US civilian and military personnel, as well as high-risk South Vietnamese, known as Operation Frequent Wind (Snepp 1977; Butler 1985; Chong 2006). The photograph's symbolic magnitude is undeniable: Hubert van Es' iconic shot encapsulates both the end of a war and a perceived collapse of American power, a rupture in the Vietnamese national trajectory, and the beginning of an era of displacement, transnational engagement, and competing processes of memory-making.

The streets bear different names, but the building is still there, squeezed between mirrored high-rises. *RIAS* readers might notice how the rooftop is now topped by two large signs reading "LANDING ZONE" and "THE LAST MISSION." Strolling down Đồng Khởi, it is not uncommon to spot tourists climbing up the ladder for a photo-op courtesy of the building's security guards: as with many other corners of old Saigon, even here Vietnam's past has become commodified and turned into a must-see attraction for travelers and history buffs. This illustrates the impact of van Es' photograph, which to this day is widely circulated, recontextualized, and repurposed in a variety

of ways. The image endures as a visual shorthand for the complicated legacy of the Vietnam War and its afterlives from whichever perspective one chooses to look at it (Valverde 2013).

In fact, April 30, 1975 not only marked an end of US military involvement in Vietnam but also the end of a decade-long strife for political hegemony between rival Vietnamese state and non-state actors (Goscha 2016). According to Appy (2016), it set in motion a complex and contested postwar condition whose reverberations continue across hemispheres. For Vietnam, the fall of Saigon, officially framed as the Liberation of the South, signifies the culmination of a protracted and devastating struggle for reunification, behind which lay power struggles long kept from public knowledge (L.H. Nguyen 2012), whose scars are still visible both in-country and abroad. As argued by Schwenkel (2009) and others, this national victory narrative has always been haunted by counter-memories: of exile, fractured families, and political rupture.

Fifty years in, these contested memories surface in multiple forms. Hồ Chí Minh City residents and visitors will not forget soon the impressive military parade held in the early morning of April 30, 2025 to commemorate the communist victory. The city center woke up to lines of marching soldiers, colorful floats, fireworks, and roaring warplanes greeted by busloads of screaming boys and girls. This stands in stark contrast with the mournful "Black April" tributes held in overseas diasporic enclaves such as Westminster, CA's Little Saigon where the three-striped, yellow flag of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) is still raised and flies at half-staff, remembering a state that vanished from the map decades ago. In Vietnam "Liberation Day" is a public holiday; for the two million who fled after the Republic's collapse, the date marks instead the beginning of statelessness and dislocation—while at the same time inaugurating a newfound assertion of cultural identity (Aguilar-San Juan 2009; Bui 2017; P.T. Nguyen 2017; Kelly 2019). Across large segments of the Vietnamese diaspora, the memory of the Fall of Saigon lives on in commemorative rituals, political debates, oral histories, and cultural productions—variously presented as a story of abandonment and betrayal (Espiritu 2014), of gratitude (whether genuine or performed) toward host countries, or of survival and rebirth. If the war ended on that day, with the whir of the rotor blades of American Hueys giving way to the rumble of Soviet-made T54s rolling down Saigon's boulevards, it continued on the battlefields of memory, as the work of authors like novelist/scholar Viet Thanh Nguyen (2015; 2016) have eloquently shown.

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Remarkably still standing in the bustling city center of Hồ Chí Minh City—a shapeshifting hub where the bulldozers never sleep and even area names refuse to stay the same—22 Lý Tự Trọng is both a historical edifice and an enduring presence within Vietnam's rapidly transforming urban fabric. In postwar Vietnam, state-sanctioned memory has often emphasized themes of revolutionary triumph, sacrifice, and national unity. It is important to observe, however, that the image of the evacuation rooftop is preserved in photographs yet absent from official commemorations, as noticed by Heonik Kwon (2008). This demonstrates the ambivalence of remembrance, where memory is shaped not only by ideology but also by affect, trauma, and transnational circulation (Sturken 1997; Tai 2001). It also speaks to how abroad the war for memory has long turned the Vietnamese civil war into "Vietnam," an all-American construct made of prepackaged Hollywood icons still saturating pop culture.

As Vietnam Studies scholars have argued over the past decades, it is crucial to rethink the war as a Vietnamese affair that only later became a full-blown Cold War proxy conflict. Indeed, understanding modern Vietnam and its diaspora(s) requires widening the frame to include what happened to Southeast Asia before and after US (and Soviet/Chinese) involvement. 2025, for one, has not only marked the fiftieth anniversary of the Fall/Liberation of Saigon, the Khmer Rouge takeover of Cambodia, and the end of the Laotian Civil War. Upon closer inspection, several other significant dates in twentieth-century Vietnamese history end in "5." 1945 stands as arguably the most crucial year, witnessing the March 9 anti-French coup, the creation of a short-lived, Japanese-backed Empire of Vietnam, the August uprisings, the Việt Minh takeover, and the birth of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam on September 2 (Marr 1995). Ten years and a colonial war later, 1955 saw Ngô Đình Diệm crush his nationalist opponents and found the Republic of Vietnam, establishing a noncommunist state south of the 17th parallel with Washington's blessing (Tran 2022). 1965 ushered in all-out US military escalation, with the Marines landing at Đà Nẵng, the Ia Đrăng Valley battle, and the Rolling Thunder bombing campaign targeting the North. 1985 is arguably the peak of America's memory war, with the release of Hollywood-licensed fantasies of revenge regarding captive POWs (*Rambo: First Blood Part II*, *Missing in Action 2*). 1995, on the other hand, witnessed the US-Vietnam diplomatic rapprochement, President Clinton's visit, and the long-sought outcome of years of reconciliation efforts. Viewed through this lens, it is impossible not to reflect back on the 2025 anniversary with a new focus, looking back at the relationship between "Vietnam"

and "America"—both as political entities and cultural constructs—so as to reveal unseen continuities that transcend national borders and conventional timeframes, even at the risk of complicating rather than clarifying the matter at hand.

Much academic work has focused on US, Vietnamese, and diasporic Vietnamese memories of the war, and the 2025 anniversary has predictably not gone unnoticed. Anthologies, companions, op-eds, documentaries, museum exhibitions, all serve to demonstrate the irreducible multiplicity of perspectives surrounding this momentous historical juncture. With this issue we aim to venture a brief foray on this arduous terrain to offer a selection of focal points, exploring how literature has served as both repository and active agent in the mediation of these contested memories, as evidenced by the recent surge of diasporic literary perspectives on the war published across various linguistic/cultural contexts.

The first piece of our issue is a conversation with French illustrator, painter, and author Marcelino Truong, who retraces his decades-in-the-making artistic journey with a special focus on the historical research informing it. Born to a South Vietnamese diplomat and a French mother, Truong has dedicated a trilogy of graphic novels to Vietnam's tumultuous recent past. This interview, conducted in late 2023, focuses specifically on his latest work, *40 Men and 12 Rifles*, which recounts the First Indochina War through the eyes of an artist forced to join the Việt Minh ranks on the eve of the battle of Điện Biên Phủ. During the conversation, Truong discusses his creative process, the complexities of his mixed heritage, and his drive to humanize the "other side" while maintaining his political beliefs.

The issue continues with an interview featuring Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai, an acclaimed Vietnamese author, poet, and translator, whose works explore themes of historical memory, the aftermath of war, and the resilience of family. The interview delves into Nguyễn's literary journey and her dedication to decolonizing narratives about Vietnam. She discusses her novels, *The Mountains Sing* and *Dust Child*, both of which weave historical fiction with personal and national history. The interview highlights her approach to storytelling, blending Vietnamese traditions, autobiographical elements, and poetry, and her commitment to amplifying underrepresented voices.

As artists, both Truong and Nguyễn look past the conventional "American war" narrative, demonstrating how literary representations of Vietnam's history must necessarily account for its transnational dimensions. The first feature of this issue further expands this idea, redefining "Vietnamese America" beyond the northern US border.

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In his piece, Mattia Arioli discusses how Canada has appropriated the narrative of the Vietnam War to articulate its image as a progressive country and how it co-opted diasporic Vietnamese narratives to articulate a nation-building project that exalted the nation's multicultural ideology and fostered the image of the maple state as a peaceful kingdom. The essay also explores how Thuong Vuong-Riddick's memoir *The Evergreen Country: A Memoir of Vietnam* (2007), one of the first memoirs written by a Vietnamese Canadian, complicates our understanding of the diaspora by both reinforcing and resisting dominant narratives that cast the Vietnamese as emblematic victims and/or successful immigrants, grateful beneficiaries of liberal freedom, democracy, and wealth.

The second article reframes these same dynamics in the better-known context of US-based communities. Özgür Atmaca and Define Ersin Tutan examine the representations of Vietnam War trauma and the collective paths taken by Vietnamese refugees in the United States to heal their wounds in Lan Cao's seminal *Monkey Bridge* and *The Lotus and the Storm*. In both novels, although the trauma experienced by the Vietnamese in the United States stems primarily from their wartime experiences in their homeland, American intolerance toward Vietnamese presence and the resulting marginalization impede the community's self-healing efforts. The authors demonstrate that despite encountering difficulties in their homeland, during their journey to the US, and within American society itself, the Vietnamese do not choose passive existence but actively pursue recovery and healing through all available means.

In the third feature, Monika Kocot demonstrates once more how the political dynamics linking the US and Vietnam during wartime were inseparable from contemporaneous domestic movements like the civil rights struggle. Hers, however, is an original religious/spiritual perspective that delves into the philosophy and practice of interbeing as exemplified in the writings of the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist Monk Thích Nhất Hạnh. The article begins by offering a historical perspective on the collaboration between Thích Nhất Hạnh and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the 1960s before subsequently exploring the profound philosophical roots of interbeing, tracing its origins to The Avataṃsaka Sūtra. The discussion then moves to how interbeing is applied within Engaged Buddhism, as articulated by Thích Nhất Hạnh. Throughout, Kocot weaves together these insights to examine the practical implications of interbeing, drawing on numerous references from Thích Nhất Hạnh's writings and poems composed during and after the Vietnam War.

To close, Małgorzata Jarmołowicz-Dziekońska draws from Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* and Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone* to present dual perspectives on the Vietnam War, showing how a satirical spy novel from 2015 and a war memoir from 1973 both illuminate the persistent tensions that define US interpretations of the conflict. Building upon the concept of liminality as a tool to illustrate the mental states of Nguyen's narrator-protagonist and O'Brien's autobiographical projection, and drawing on anthropologist Victor Turner's theories (1974; 1977), Jarmołowicz-Dziekońska captures their "in-betweenness" and investigates how American literary perspectives on the war often revolve around such threshold spaces.

The discourse around post-1975 Vietnam is often narrated as one of rupture and displacement. The fall of Saigon and the mass refugee exodus seemingly mark a decisive break from the past. Yet this framing neglects the persistent transpacific solidarities and the imaginative reworking of identity, memory, and belonging that have flourished across Vietnamese and diasporic communities. As Arjun Appadurai (1996) argues in *Modernity at Large*, global cultural "scapes" destabilize fixed national narratives, producing deterritorialized identities shaped by intersecting flows of people, media, and memory. These dynamics are evident in how Vietnamese and diasporic Vietnamese writers and artists, as evidenced in the following pieces, recast war memory beyond United States-centric mythologies.

This theoretical approach aligns with Shelley Fisher Fishkin's (2004) provocative call for a "transnational turn" in American studies, which urges scholars to move beyond methodological nationalism. In this light, *Review of International American Studies* provides an ideal venue for scholarship that resists discrete periodization and national silos. Rather than a neat "postwar" moment, "Vietnam" and "America" after 1975 form a continuum of unfinished reckonings, where memory remains unsettled, solidarities remain in motion, and the past continues to press upon the present.

Abstract: Marking fifty years since the Fall/Liberation of Saigon, this issue of *Review of International American Studies* revisits the intertwined histories and memories of "Vietnam" and "America" through the lens of literature, visual culture, and transnational exchange. The introduction reflects on the enduring resonance of Hubert van Es's 1975 rooftop photograph—an image that has come to symbolize both the end of the Vietnam War and the beginning of a global struggle over its remembrance. As state-sanctioned and diasporic narratives continue to diverge, Vietnam's postwar landscape and its global diaspora reveal competing modes of memorialization: triumph and loss, exile and belonging, ideology and affect. The featured contributions trace how writers and artists—among them Marcelino Truong, Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai, Lan Cao, and Viet Thanh Nguyen—reconfigure these contested memories through

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narrative, philosophy, and art. The issue underscores how the "American War" must be reframed as a Vietnamese and transnational experience, extending beyond national or temporal boundaries. Engaging with the "transnational turn" in American Studies (Fishkin 2004), it argues that the afterlives of the war persist in literature's ongoing negotiation of trauma, identity, and reconciliation—revealing "Vietnam" and "America" as interwoven cultural constructs on the ever-shifting battlefields of memory.

Keywords: Vietnam War, Vietnamese Diaspora, Vietnamese literature, Vietnamese refugees, war and memory

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Giacomo Traina holds a PhD in English literatures, cultures, language and translation from Sapienza University of Rome (Italy) and the University of Silesia in Katowice (Poland). His research interests include the memory of the Vietnam War through the works of contemporary Vietnamese American authors and the narrative works of Herman Melville. In 2022, Giacomo Traina's article "Perverse Theaters and Refracted Histories: Violence and (Anti) realism in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*" has won the Emory Elliott Award for the Best Paper Delivered at the International American Studies Association World Congress. His first monograph on the fiction of Viet Thanh Nguyen has been published in Italian by Ombre Corte in 2024.

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