REVIEW

of International American Studies

AMERICA AND VIETNAM
Fifty Years Since

edited by Justin Michael Battin
and Giacomo Traina

ISSN 1991–2773

RIAS Vol. 18, Fall–Winter, № 2/2025

Review of International American Studies
Revue d'Études Américaines Internationales
RIAS Vol. 18, Fall–Winter № 2/2025
ISSN 1991–2773

AMERICA AND VIETNAM
Fifty Years Since

edited by
Justin Michael Battin
and Giacomo Traina

UNIVERSITY OF SILESIA
PRESS

ISSN 1991—2773

PUBLISHER UNIVERSITY OF SILESIA PRESS

ABOUT RIAS
Review of International American Studies (*RIAS*) is the double-blind peer-reviewed, electronic/print-on-demand journal of the International American Studies Association, a worldwide, independent, non-governmental association of American Studies. *RIAS* serves as agora for the global network of international scholars, teachers, and students of America as a hemispheric and global phenomenon. *RIAS* is published by the University of Silesia Press in Katowice, Poland, twice a year (Fall—Winter and Spring—Summer). *RIAS* is available in the Open Access Gold formula and is financed by the University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland. All topical manuscripts should be directed to the *RIAS* Editors online via submissions website: www.rias-journal.org. General correspondence and matters concerning the functioning of *RIAS* should be addressed to *RIAS* Co-Editors-in-Chief at rias@iasa-world.org

EMAIL: rias@iasa-world.org
WEBSITE: www.rias-journal.org
COVER ART: "Landing Zone," Justin Michael Battin © 2025

DOI: https://doi.org/10.31261/rias.2025.18.2

AMERICA AND VIETNAM
Fifty Years Since
edited by
Justin Michael Battin and Giacomo Traina

Review of International American Studies
RIAS—Vol. 18, Fall-Winter, № 2/2025
ISSN 1991-2773
DOI: https://doi.org/10.31261/rias.22859

APOCALYPSE THEN
Visual Memory and the Transnational Afterlives of the Vietnam/American War

Paweł Jędrzejko
University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland
RIAS Co-Editor-in-Chief
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3251-2540

When I think of the global afterlife of the Vietnam War—or, as the Vietnamese call it with unsettling accuracy, the American War—I do not begin in the tropics but in Warsaw, Poland. My earliest association with that distant, tragic conflict is, in fact, an indirect one: Chris Niedenthal's world-famous photograph of an armored personnel carrier standing before *Kino Moskwa*—the Moscow Cinema—on December 14, 1981.

Above the gunmetal-gray hull, the marquee blazes with a title that could not have been more topical: *Czas Apokalipsy—Apocalypse Now*. It is the second day of martial law in communist Poland—the very same Poland that, if not mentally, then at least officially, still belongs to the anti-American camp of the Eastern Bloc. The authorities had chosen to screen Coppola's film precisely because its searing critique of American imperial appetites aligned conveniently with the propaganda needs of the regime. And yet, in Niedenthal's frame, the irony folds in on itself. The armored SKOT, menacingly parked before the cinema that bears the name of the capital of the Soviet Union, transforms the scene into a grotesque self-portrait of totalitarian regime. What was meant to expose the madness of distant America becomes, before the camera's lens, an unintentional allegory of repression at home. Beneath the promise of an American antiwar epic, the machinery of a local, communist, dictatorship hums in the snow. The photograph freezes a double theater: one cinematic, one political—both born of the Cold War's manic choreography of control.

Yet the singular power of Chris Niedenthal's 1981 photograph lies not only in the double entendre between the film's title and the name of the cinema, nor in the coldness of the winter mirroring the chill

of the Cold War. It derives above all from a remarkable historical and cultural coincidence. Here, three mythic trajectories intersect: the American film's adaptation of the Polish-British writer Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899); the Polish site of the image, captured under martial law; and the photographer's own dual sensibility, shaped equally by Polish historical memory and Western media literacy. Each element carries its own ideological freight, but together they generate an image whose resonance far exceeds the documentary moment. It is as if history itself had staged an allegory in which Poland's twentieth century meets the global iconography of apocalypse.

Fig.1. Chris Niedenthal, *Czas apokalipsy* [Apocalypse Now] Dec. 14th, 1981. Reproduced by permission of the FORUM Polish Photographers' Agency

Paweł Jędrzejko
University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland
RIAS Co-Editor-in-Chief

Coppola's film, released in 1979, offers the first of these trajectories—an adaptation and transposition, a cinematic reimagining of Conrad's colonial Congo now set in the moral quagmire of the Vietnam War. The narrative of imperial madness, once European, becomes American; the darkness of the tropics becomes the darkness of the self. Yet in Niedenthal's photograph this translation comes full circle. The Polish-born Conrad—who wrote *Heart of Darkness* in English but carried within him the moral geography of the partitioned Polish lands—returns to Warsaw through Coppola's cinematic text, now refracted by the lens of another Polish observer. The myth migrates back to its birthplace, transformed by war, ideology—and irony. What had been a tale of colonial guilt became, in this context, a mirror of occupation, surveillance, and rebellion.

And thus, for Polish viewers in 1981, the poster of *Apocalypse Now* above the sign *Kino Moskwa* could not have been a neutral advertisement. The very word *Moskwa*—Moscow—condensed centuries of historical trauma: the partitions, the Soviet presence, the erasure of autonomy. No wonder that the juxtaposition of "Moscow" and "Apocalypse" in the public sphere of martial-law Warsaw amounted to nothing less but a semiotic explosion. The foreign war in Vietnam, whose images had circulated through Western media, became entangled with Poland's own myth of resistance and moral trial. Niedenthal's photograph crystallized that entanglement. In it, the American narrative of imperial hubris met the Polish mythology of suffering and martyrdom under Soviet imperialism—and with it, the national longing for moral clarity.

What Niedenthal's photograph ultimately reveals is a larger cultural mechanism: global conflicts, even when geographically remote, are absorbed into national mythologies that translate the universal into the local. In this case, it is the Vietnam War—distant, tropical, and mediated—that becomes incorporated into the discourse of the distinctly Polish narrative of moral struggle. For Poles in 1981, the image of *Apocalypse Now* above *Kino Moskwa* did not evoke the tropics or the abstractions of the Cold War; it resonated with their own sense of catastrophe, rebellion, and historical repetition. The *Apocalypse* has migrated: from the Mekong to the Vistula, from Saigon to Warsaw, from the jungle to the gray winter streets of Eastern Europe. The photograph performs what might be called the mythological domestication of transnational history. In this way, the Vietnam War's afterlife cannot be understood merely through American guilt or Asian tragedy; it must also be read through the peripheral imaginations that adopted

it, transformed it, and made it speak their own languages of oppression and renewal.

In more rigid theoretical terms, this coincidence reveals what might be called a process of *mythological transference*—the way global conflicts are absorbed into local symbolic systems and rearticulated through national mythologies. As Roland Barthes explains, myth is not a lie but a form of speech that "steals" meaning and returns it in distorted form:

> Ancient or not, mythology can only have an historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the "nature" of things.
>
> Speech of this kind is a message. It is therefore by no means confined to oral speech. It can consist of modes of writing or of representations; not only written discourse, but also photography, cinema, reporting, sport, shows, publicity, all these can serve as a support to mythical speech. Myth can be defined neither by its object nor by its material, for any material can arbitrarily be endowed with meaning: the arrow which is brought in order to signify a challenge is also a kind of speech. True, as far as perception is concerned, writing and pictures, for instance, do not call upon the same type of consciousness; and even with pictures, one can use many kinds of reading: a diagram lends itself to signification more than a drawing, a copy more than an original, and a caricature more than a portrait. But this is the point: we are no longer dealing here with a theoretical mode of representation: we are dealing with *this* particular image, which is given for *this* particular signification. Mythical speech is made of a material which has *already* been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication: it is because all the materials of myth (whether pictorial or written) presuppose a signifying consciousness, that one can reason about them while discounting their substance. This substance is not unimportant: pictures, to be sure, are more imperative than writing, they impose meaning at one stroke, without analysing or diluting it. But this is no longer a constitutive difference. Pictures become a kind of writing as soon as they are meaningful: like writing, they call for a *lexis*. (*Mythologies* 108–109)

As a semiological system that transforms history into alleged "nature of things" by converting cultural phenomena into "self-evident truths," myth performs an operation resulting in ideology's circulation under the guise of common sense. It is precisely this mechanism that allows *Apocalypse Now*—a film born from American guilt over imperial overreach—to acquire, in Poland, the naturalized authority of a parable about moral struggle and political subjugation.

For the United States, the Vietnam War became a story of disillusionment and the limits of power; for the Vietnamese, it was a struggle for survival and self-determination. But for Poland—geographically distant, yet psychologically proximate through its own history of oppression and devastating conflicts—the war's imagery func-

Paweł Jędrzejko
University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland
RIAS Co-Editor-in-Chief

tioned as allegory. Even if the jungles of Southeast Asia would not be reimagined as the forests of Eastern Europe, the madness of Colonel Kurtz still echoed the moral corrosion of *any empire*; the rebel's cry of conscience mirrored Poland's underground culture of defiance. In Barthesian terms, Niedenthal's photograph does not merely depict an event but performs the work of myth: it translates the ideological contradictions of the Cold War into a visual common sense—a tableau of sorts, where both imperial systems, American and Soviet, appear equally entrapped in their own performative fictions.

In this sense, the photograph operates as a *visual palimpsest*. It layers multiple histories—the colonial, the Cold War, and the national—into a single field of vision. The *studium*, in Roland Barthes's sense, is dense with cultural legibility: the viewer can decode its historical ironies, its cinematic intertext, its political staging (*Camera Lucida* 26–30). Yet the *punctum*—that which "pricks" or "wounds" the viewer—emerges precisely from this uncanny overlap. The title *Apocalypse Now*, the sign *Moscow*, the silent tank: together they form a constellation of meanings that cannot be reduced to interpretation alone. The photograph pierces the viewer not only through spectacle but also through recognition—through that Barthesian moment when image and consciousness collide, and the contingent becomes unbearable in its precision (*Camera Lucida* 42–43).

For the Polish imagination, this convergence strikes a deep chord. National mythology, forged through partitions, uprisings, and occupations, has long oscillated between messianic suffering and morally grounded rebellion—a pattern discernible in both Romantic literature and twentieth-century resistance narratives (Benjamin 22–26; Sontag 89–96). The very word *apocalypse*, in its etymological sense of revelation, resonates with this dual heritage: catastrophe as unveiling, destruction as truth-telling. In Niedenthal's photograph, that apocalypse is secular and political. Rather than divine judgment, it reveals the absurd theater of power: tanks before a cinema named after Moscow, soldiers performing the choreography of repression beneath the glowing promise of an American antiwar epic. And yet, beneath that absurdity, the image carries what might be called a sacramental undertone, as if the photograph itself bore witness to a metaphysical drama unfolding within history's gray fabric—an uninvited grace glimpsed through irony.

Yet, the brief analysis Niedenthal's photograph through the dual lens of Barthes's *studium* and *punctum*, poses certain dangers: we must therefore pause before the seductive clarity of that interpretation lures us into false conclusions. To read the image solely as myth would risk

detaching it from the historical reality from which it arose. As Mariusz Grabowski observes in his article on Poles in Vietnam, Poland was not merely a spectator to the Vietnam War, nor was its engagement limited to the ideological sphere. Quoting Piotr Długołęcki, a historian at the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the author writes:

> To begin, let us outline the political background of the events. Piotr Długołęcki observes that Poland became involved in the Indochina conflict as early as the 1950s: "The war, fought on one side by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV, North Vietnam—a state established in 1945 from three former French colonies in Indochina) and on the other by the French Expeditionary Corps supported by the British (the so-called First Indochina War), ended with the Geneva Conference in 1954. Representatives of France, Great Britain, the United States, the Soviet Union, and China decided that Vietnam would be temporarily divided into two zones along the 17th parallel. The northern part (DRV) remained under the control of the communist Viet Minh, while the southern part (also a former French colony) was to constitute the territory of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), supported by the United States." (Grabowski)[1]

The conflict reached deeply into Polish public discourse and private imagination, especially that, as Grabowski further reminds us,

> [a]t the turn of the 1960s and 1970s, at the height of the conflict, the most serious incident involving Poland occurred. In December 1972, American aircraft accidentally bombed a Polish merchant ship moored in the port of Haiphong. Długołęcki recalls that in the raid—part of the so-called Christmas Bombings—four sailors were killed: "The Ministry of Foreign Affairs submitted a note of protest. In response, the Americans stated that 'damage remains an unfortunate possibility anywhere hostilities are conducted, and it must be assumed that vessels entering North Vietnamese ports during such operations accepted the risk of such damage.' The United States refused to pay compensation. However, the ship was insured—Poland, the families of the deceased, and the wounded received compensation."
>
> Warsaw chose not to take a firm stand against Washington. The Polish Foreign Ministry also refrained from providing legal assistance to the victims' families, who sought civil compensation before US courts. The filing of the lawsuits coincided with Edward Gierek's visit to the United States, and in order not to jeopardize relations, it was decided "to act through our embassy in Washington to quietly suppress the matter." (Grabowski)

Polish soldiers—whether those wearing the uniforms of foreign armies (including Polish Americans serving in the US Army and others who had joined the French Foreign Legion) and fighting directly against the Viet Cong, or those officially dispatched to serve within

1 All of the translations of the quotations written originally in Polish—Paweł Jędrzejko.

Paweł Jędrzejko
University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland
RIAS Co-Editor-in-Chief

the International Commission for Supervision and Control—found themselves in the same Vietnam, though on opposite sides of its divided history:

"Initially, the Polish authorities estimated that to carry out the tasks within the three commissions, they would need 335 people, including 110 civilian employees and 225 officers and non-commissioned officers (the Indian and Canadian delegations were roughly the same size). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of National Defense, and the Ministry of Public Security were all involved in the preparations. However, soon the Polish delegation to the three commissions was increased to 401 representatives, of whom 114 positions were reserved for employees of the Ministry of Public Security," writes Długołęcki.

Those selected for departure were first sent for training, which took place in the so-called Unit No. 2000, established by military intelligence. They had to be prepared in terms of language, professional competence, health (vaccinations), and culture (knowledge of the situation in Indochina). Among those deployed were communication specialists, doctors, medical assistants, orderlies, administrative staff, drivers, interpreters, and kitchen personnel. "Their equipment also included, among other things, sidearms for officers and semiautomatic weapons for non-commissioned officers." Part of the supplies was shipped by sea, while the rest was transported by Soviet aircraft via Irkutsk. (Grabowski)

During the 1960s and 1970s, the official image of Vietnam in Polish media reflected the ideological strictures of the Cold War. State-controlled press, radio, and television repeated the Soviet narrative. Vietnam was a just struggle for national liberation against imperial (read: American) aggression. The message was clear: the socialist world defended the oppressed and America embodied the violence of capitalist modernity. Within this visual grammar, the war served as proof of communist virtue—a mythic script that required no interpretation.

"Essentially, throughout the entire conflict Poland—with lesser involvement under [Secretary General of the Polish United Workers' Party] Gomułka and greater involvement under Gierek—supported North Vietnam," asserts [historian] Piotr Długołęcki. Hanoi received preferential loans from us, but also deliveries of a wide range of goods. Over twenty years we supplied food and medical supplies, cars, rails, metallurgical materials, concrete mixers, bridge spans, power generators, and even musical instruments (50 pianos and 200 violins) and—hard to believe—even circus wagons. Initially they planned to hand those over together with live horses. […] Deputy Prime Minister Józef Tejchma wrote in his memoirs: "They presented our government with a rifle bearing the following dedication: 'This rifle was delivered by the Government of the People's Republic of Poland and the Polish nation as part of aid to the Vietnamese people fighting against the American aggressors for national salvation. In September 1972 this rifle was used to attack a convoy of military vehicles on road N.14 on the Central Highlands plateau; 27 vehicles were destroyed, including 9 enemy tanks.'" (Grabowski)

Yet within this script, irony still flourished. The communist state eagerly amplified American voices that condemned the Vietnam War, since their message aligned with its anti-imperialist narrative. Some of the songs by Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Country Joe McDonald, and Phil Ochs circulated in official media and student clubs not *despite* censorship, but, quite possibly, thanks to it. What could not be foreseen, however, was how Polish listeners would *reinterpret* these sounds. For the youth of Kraków, Poznań, and Warsaw, the same protest ballads that denounced US militarism also revealed a different kind of freedom—the freedom to oppose one's own government. As Katarzyna Koćma's essay "Kwiatem w karabin. O kontrkulturowych reakcjach na wojnę w Wietnamie" [*Flowers against Rifles: Countercultural Responses to the Vietnam War*] clearly suggests, the transnational idiom of protest carried a resonance that escaped ideological control. In this paradox, the Polish media that sought to expose America's moral failures seem to have ended up broadcasting the very sound of dissent that would later echo in its own streets.

The paradox extended beyond music into the moral geography of everyday life. For many Poles, America was not an abstraction but a "relative": an uncle in Chicago, a cousin in New Jersey, a family photograph showing a suburban lawn and a Chevrolet. Remittances from emigrant families arrived as both economic aid and emotional oxygen. In private conversations, "America" meant prosperity, openness, the chance to speak one's mind. To read about the Vietnam War, then, was to read about one's extended family gone astray—a war fought by the sons of cousins, the same America that once harbored the Polish dream of liberty. This intimacy made propaganda less believable, if not altogether hollow. The Polish imagination could not sustain politically fabricated hatred for a nation that had once welcomed its exiles and heroes; it could only interpret the war through the prism of its own divided soul—half loyal to Moscow by necessity, half enthralled by America by affection—and of images that affected it differently than all-too-familiar slogans ever could.

On the political scene, perhaps no figure embodies this inner division more dramatically than colonel Ryszard Kukliński. In 1967, as part of Poland's military mission to the International Commission for Supervision and Control (ICSC) in Vietnam, Kukliński witnessed firsthand both the devastation of the war and the hypocrisy of Soviet "anti-imperialism." Officially, he was there to assist the North Vietnamese cause; privately, he began to see the same patterns of domination that had long subjugated his own country. As Sławomir Cenckiewicz recounts in "Kukliński w Wietnamie" [Kukliński in Vietnam],

Paweł Jędrzejko
University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland
RIAS Co-Editor-in-Chief

the experience planted in him the first seeds of revolt. The Polish officer, observing Soviet generals treating Vietnamese officers with disdain and exploiting the war for political ends of their own "empire," came to recognize the mirror image of colonial arrogance. Vietnam thus became his awakening—the place where loyalty to the socialist camp began to curdle into disgust. In his conversation with the novelist Maria Nurowska, the author of the biographical novel *Mój przyjaciel zdrajca* [My Traitor Friend], Kukliński explains his breakthrough thus:

> I witnessed the cruelty of that war: I saw children with their heads cut off, whole families slaughtered—father, mother, seven siblings—lying in a row in the middle of a village. I also saw horrific scenes when the Viet Cong stormed Saigon. I felt ashamed that I was not on the side I wished to be, but there was nothing I could do. During the Têt Offensive, when a regular North Vietnamese division attacked Saigon and we had evidence that civilians were being butchered, I was not permitted to go on an inspection. If I had gone and written the truth in my report, they would have sent me home the next day, and at that point I was not yet ready to begin my own war against the system. (quoted in Cenckiewicz)

Soon, that disgust ripened into defiance. From 1972 to 1981, Kukliński transmitted thousands of secret documents to the CIA, revealing Warsaw Pact nuclear strategies and the Soviet plan for suppressing the Solidarity movement. In his article "Pułkownik Kukliński—atomowy szpieg" [Colonel Kukliński: The Atomic Spy] Maciej Danowski shows him as the man who betrayed an empire to save a nation. For the communist regime, he was a traitor, sentenced to death *in absentia*; for the opposition, he became a living emblem of conscience over obedience. His life traced a moral parabola from the jungles of Vietnam to the corridors of Langley, Virginia—from an emissary of one empire to a defender of another, and ultimately, to a symbol of the moral autonomy Poland long claimed as its own. After 1989, the sentence was annulled, and Kukliński was posthumously recognized as a national hero (Jakub; IPN). His trajectory distilled, in one biography, the larger dialectic of Polish history: complicity, awakening, betrayal, redemption.

Against this background, the Vietnam War reemerges not as a distant colonial conflict but as a mirror in which Poland examined its own entanglement with power. Official ideology glorified the struggle of the oppressed, while private morality identified with the very society that state propaganda vilified. The Polish experience of Vietnam thus oscillated between the state's narrative and personal empathy—between the staged solidarity of communism and the lived solidarity of human conscience. Through Kukliński's story we see that the war's meanings were not imposed from outside; they were contested within the very soul of the Polish state itself.

This tension is crucial because—as our Barthesian analysis has already suggested—in public reception "factography" often matters less than mythology, and visual media played a decisive role in shaping that mythology. And yet, as Mariusz Grabowski reminds us, Poles *did* have access to reportage and first-hand accounts from the combat zones:

> Those sent to the fronts of the Vietnam War were mainly advisers, experts, and doctors. A separate category included diplomats as well as journalists and writers. Among them were war correspondents such as Daniel Passent, who in 1968 published the antiwar reportage *Co dzień wojna* [War Every Day]; and Monika Warneńska, author of numerous books including *Most na rzece Ben Hai* [The Bridge on the Ben Hai River] (1964), *Alarm na ryżowiskach* [Alarm in the Rice Fields] (1966), *Taniec z ogniem* [Dancing with Fire] (1974), *Córka jego ekscelencji* [His Excellency's Daughter] (1978), *Raport z linii ognia* [Report from the Line of Fire] (1981), *Nie ma pokoju dla pól ryżowych* [No Peace for the Rice Fields] (1981), and *Skarby z dalekich podróży* [Treasures from Distant Journeys] (1986). Also active at the time was Grzegorz Woźniak, who later became a well-known television personality in the People's Republic of Poland and anchor of its main news program, *Dziennik Telewizyjny*. (Grabowski)

It is precisely at this juncture that Marcin Kempisty, in his article "O filmowych reprezentacjach wojny w Wietnamie" [On Film Representations of the Vietnam War], makes a significant point:

> Although academic studies on the American–Vietnamese conflict of 1962–1975 continue to be written, they rarely (especially in Poland) break into public consciousness. When such discussions do arise, they are far more often emotional than factual. The numbers of the dead slip from view—300,000 soldiers and around 500,000 civilians on the southern side, as well as, in all likelihood, over a million soldiers and several tens of thousands of civilians on the northern side. The people fleeing the war zones are scarcely remembered at all. The geopolitical context fades, and the reasons for American involvement become blurred and ambiguous. What remains are deeply rooted images: the execution in Saigon […],[2] the "napalm girl" from Trảng Bàng,[3] the piled corpses after the Mỹ Lai massacre.[4] The trauma of American society lasted for many

2 Eddie Adams, "Saigon Execution" (Associated Press, 1 Feb. 1968), is the Pulitzer-winning photograph of a Viet Cong prisoner's execution during the Tet Offensive, which serves as an archetype for debates on photography's ethical power and its capacity to "change history"; it is directly reference in the quoted article and in Niedenthal's conversation with Katarzyna Najman, quoted below. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Saigon_Execution.jpg. Accessed 7 Nov. 2025.

3 See "'Napalm Girl' 50 Years Later." Event, Fotografiska New York, https://newyork.fotografiska.com/en/events/napalm-girl. Accessed 9 Nov. 2025.

4 See Paul Alexander. "Thirty Years Later, Memories of My Lai Massacre Remain Fresh." Digital History, University of Houston, https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active_learning/explorations/vietnam/mylai_survivor.cfm. See the image at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:My_Lai_massacre.jpg. Accessed 9 Nov. 2025.

Paweł Jędrzejko
University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland
RIAS Co-Editor-in-Chief

years, for the documentation gathered by the press was like a persistent specter. The phantasmagoric visions of hell on earth were also fueled by the machinery of Hollywood. The films that emerged on the subject of the Vietnamese conflict took hold of the mass imagination, and although the most significant of them were made after the war had ended, they permanently set the direction of the discourse. (Kempisty)

Culturally, the resonance of Vietnam endured first and foremost in the visual sphere—in images and films that circulated internationally and, for reasons previously discussed, reached Polish audiences with particular intensity. If, as Kempisty notes, public memory, irrespectively of the country, gravitates toward myth rather than fact, then Vietnam became a global narrative not through documents or geopolitical analysis, but through a sequence of overpowering images. On the one hand, films like *The Deer Hunter*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon*, and *Full Metal Jacket* forged a visual grammar of the war that eclipsed historical nuance; on the other, these images shaped the very horizon against which Polish consciousness encountered, or still encounters, Vietnam.

The scholar makes a valid point arguing that the extraordinary critical acclaim garnered by these four canonical films—the Oscars, Golden Globes, BAFTAs—testifies not merely to their artistic merit but to the mythogenic force they exerted over the global imagination. Despite vast differences in style, all four directors converged on a shared visual logic: Vietnam appears as a psychological vortex rather than a geopolitical conflict, a landscape where moral coordinates disintegrate and American soldiers are reduced to solitary figures stumbling through chaos. The camera never steps back to reveal the web of colonial, ideological, and regional histories that produced the war; instead, as Kempisty points out, it plunges directly into the hallucinatory immediacy of battle. Stripped of context, the war becomes a timeless spectacle of terror, madness, and masculine unravelling. The visual field—flames, helicopters, mutilated bodies, the green-black jungle swallowing men whole—is the field in which meaning is generated. In this regime of representation, the viewer is invited not to *understand* Vietnam but to *experience* it viscerally, as if knowledge itself were subordinate to the shock of perception.

This image-driven approach is inseparable from the profoundly US-centric logic that shapes these films: the Vietnamese remain spectral presences, emerging only as victims or faceless threats, while the emotional universe belongs entirely to the American protagonists. What persists, therefore, is not memory of Vietnam but memory of American trauma—a trauma magnified by the camera's relent-

less search for spectacle and psychological collapse. In the absence of historical framing, these films create a paradox: they denounce the horror of war while centering the suffering of the invader, turning Vietnam into a stage for the existential dramas of young American men. A later cinematic stream, epitomized by the *Rambo* franchise, radicalizes this tendency into pure myth: the war becomes a wound to be avenged, a humiliation to be reversed through superhuman violence. If *Apocalypse Now* and *Platoon* mythologize the war as psychological apocalypse, *Rambo* mythologizes it as heroic reclamation—a fantasy in which America returns to Vietnam not to understand but to dominate. In both cases, history disappears behind the spectacle; what remains is the overwhelming power of the image, which outlives fact, eclipses context, marginalizes real people, and colonizes the popular imagination across decades and continents.

When on February 1, 1968, Eddie Adams captured with his camera the execution carried out by South Vietnam's police chief Nguyen Ngoc Loan, he allegedly changed the course of history and indirectly contributed to ending the Vietnam War. The contorted face of the victim, from whom life was already departing, and the impassive features of the executioner were taken as stark testimony to the brutality and dehumanization of the Americans and the forces they supported. The public shooting of a civilian was treated as an assault on fundamental human rights. The photograph appeared on the covers of major American magazines, was repeatedly used during anti-war demonstrations, and earned its author the Pulitzer Prize the following year. The fate of this photograph made unmistakably clear that the press was scrutinizing the Vietnam War with exceptional attention, meticulously documenting the actions of the soldiers. The power of the image proved immeasurable, and the unleashed "television war" heralded the arrival of a new era for the "fourth estate." (Kempisty)[5]

And yet, as Marcin Kempisty's analysis demonstrates, the powerful cinematic representations of the Vietnam War ultimately overshadowed the non-Americocentric dimension of the very photograph believed to have triggered a breakthrough in American public opinion. The unbearable images—the naked children fleeing a napalm strike, the piles of bodies in Mỹ Lai, a man executed in the street—produced in American viewers a profound sense of guilt and moral disorientation. Yet, rather than illuminating the Vietnamese experience, filmmakers redirected attention toward

5 See also Jennifer Peltz's article "In an Instant, Vietnam Execution Photo Framed a View of War." The Associated Press, 28 Jan. 2018, https://www.ap.org/media-center/ap-in-the-news/2018/in-an-instant-vietnam-execution-photo-framed-a-view-of-war. Accessed 9 Nov. 2025.

Paweł Jędrzejko
University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland
RIAS Co-Editor-in-Chief

the trauma of the *American observer*. The shock of these images, witnessed firsthand by journalists and then circulated globally, may have provoked a psychological defense mechanism: a denial that shifted the focus from perpetrator to victim. But the victim was increasingly imagined as American—the psychologically shattered soldier, the misled conscript, the nation betrayed by its leaders. In this way, the mythogenic force of the image both exposed violence and displaced its historical context, drawing the gaze back toward the anguish of the United States itself.

What emerges from Kempisty's analysis—and from the larger constellation of images that shaped global perceptions of the Vietnam War—is a remarkable asymmetry between the abundance of available Vietnamese voices and their limited impact on public memory. Nowhere is this more evident than in the United States itself. According to the 2020 census, the country is home to more than 2.3 million Vietnamese Americans, including survivors of the 1975 exodus, their US-born children, and newer waves of migrants. Their cultural presence is profound. Writers such as Viet Thanh Nguyen, Ocean Vuong, Lê Thị Diễm Thúy, and Thi Bui have produced some of the most incisive meditations on historical trauma and refugee memory in contemporary literature—works that, through their formal experimentation and ethical clarity, challenge inherited narratives of the war. Yet, as numerous scholars have noted, these contributions, however celebrated, have not displaced the dominance of the cinematic imagination, which continues to frame Vietnam as an American psychological event rather than a Vietnamese historical catastrophe (Szymańska-Matusiewicz; Halik & Nowicki).

A parallel structure operates in Poland. Although smaller in absolute numbers, the Vietnamese community in Poland—estimated between 25,000 and 60,000 people—is one of the country's most established migrant diasporas, with multi-generational roots and a growing body of cultural expression (Halik & Nowicki; Przybył). Emerging Vietnamese-Polish authors such as Việt Anh Do, Karolina Do, and Ngo Van Tuong, whose work appears in the anthology *Inny głos* [Another Voice] (Bocheńska & Domańska), have begun articulating experiences of dislocation, linguistic hybridity, and the complex negotiations of belonging in post-1989 Poland. Their writing—often intimate, ironic, and quietly political—adds layers of nuance to what "Vietnam" means in the Polish cultural field. And yet here too, the gravitational pull of visual myth proves stronger than the corrective power of testimony. Popular awareness tends to follow the silhouettes cast

by American film rather than the textures of Vietnamese narrative or Vietnamese-Polish experience.[6]

This convergence suggests not a failure of Vietnamese cultural production but a broader structural condition: the primacy of the image over the witness. The dominance of cinematic tropes—helicopters cutting through jungle canopies, bodies illuminated by napalm, the tortured American soldier wandering through moral ruin—continues to mediate how Vietnam is imagined across vastly different societies. In this sense, both the United States and Poland participate in a shared perceptual economy in which the American visual archive eclipses the Vietnamese historical one.[7] The result is a paradoxical global consensus: in the Western world, Vietnam becomes a metaphor before it becomes a memory.

It is within this field of displaced meanings that Chris Niedenthal's photograph acquires its singular force. What makes the image so resonant is not merely its semiotic density—an armored SKOT before Kino Moskwa beneath the luminous promise of *Apocalypse Now*—but the fact that its meaning emerges from a collision between accident and interpretation. Like Eddie Adams's "Saigon Execution," Niedenthal's photograph was not staged to express an idea; it was taken in the unrepeatable *vérité* of a moment saturated with adrenaline, fear, instinct, and the primal urgency of witnessing. In this sense, one might say the photograph contains two temporalities at once: the immediate, embodied "punctum" of the photographer's pupils at the instant the shutter clicked, and the expansive cultural "studium" that would later enfold the image within broader mythological frameworks. The photograph's power, then, lies not in its conscious symbolism but in the way it becomes symbolic afterward—how an accidental

6 Research on the Vietnamese American community, its literary output, and the limits of its influence on US cultural memory includes: Szymańska-Matusiewicz; Nguyen; Vuong; Bui; Lê Thị Diễm Thúy. For analyses of the Vietnamese community in Poland and its emerging cultural voices, see: Halik and Nowicki; Przybył; Piwowarska; Wojewódka; and the anthology *Inny głos. Młoda literatura migrantów w Polsce* [Another Voice. The Young Migrant Literature in Poland], edited by Joanna Bocheńska and Maria Domańska, which features work by Việt Anh Do, Karolina Do, and Ngo Van Tuong. These sources collectively document the demographic scale, cultural richness, and relative marginalization of Vietnamese and Vietnamese-diasporic perspectives in both US and Polish public memory.

7 On the subject matter of the archive, see Krzysztof Pijarski's *The Archive as Project: The Poetics and Politics of the (Photo) Archive* and *The Archive as Project* (digital re-edition), as well as his Archeologia fotografii: czy można zarchiwizować gest?" [Archeology of Photography: Is It Possible to Digitize a Gesture?].

Paweł Jędrzejko
University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland
RIAS Co-Editor-in-Chief

encounter is retroactively claimed by history, meaning, and collective memory.

And yet the value of Niedenthal's image cannot be understood without acknowledging this dual structure. The photograph does not depict Vietnam; it captures the moment when Vietnam became visible as a metaphor within another society's own drama of repression and resistance. It stages, unintentionally, the very mechanism by which distant conflicts are absorbed, mis-seen, and redeployed in local myth-making. To understand this interplay between the visceral and the hermeneutic, we must return to the photographer himself—to the embodied experience behind the lens, the fear and the intuition, the hurried decision-making and the shock of recognition. It is here, I believe, that Niedenthal's own account becomes indispensable.

Katarzyna Najman: The poster announcing the premiere of F. F. Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, above it the sign "Kino Moskwa"; in front of the cinema, an armored SKOT personnel carrier and soldiers. This photograph from 1981 is known not only to photography enthusiasts. When you took it, were you thinking about the possible consequences? About what might have happened to you if someone had caught you?

Chris Niedenthal: It was the beginning of martial law, and we didn't yet know exactly what kind of danger we were in, although fear was probably at its greatest then. No one knew what awaited them, how the soldiers or riot police might react. Yet when you're working and you want to get something done, fear somehow recedes into the background. Working for *Newsweek* at the time, I was fully aware that I had to take as many photographs as possible in the shortest possible time. I was afraid, but I also knew I would have felt terribly foolish if I hadn't done anything. The fear was there, under the skin, but the sheer thrill of taking "forbidden" photographs was enough to keep it in check. A bit of adrenaline is always useful in situations like that.

Katarzyna Najman: You saw the situation and thought you had to capture it?

Chris Niedenthal: We were driving around Warsaw with some friends, looking for places worth photographing—that is, military checkpoints. We knew we could only photograph them from above, from windows. Taking pictures out on the street would have been suicide. In the first days of martial law, we were driving down Rakowiecka Street toward Puławska. We stopped at the traffic lights at the intersection. In front of us stood a soldier directing traffic. I noticed that the *Kino Moskwa* cinema was just ahead. I saw the *Apocalypse Now* billboard, but I hadn't yet seen the armored carrier with the soldiers standing at the entrance of the cinema—it was hidden behind trees. I knew immediately that I had to photograph it. I was riding as a passenger, so I quickly took a shot through the car window, just to have *something* in case we couldn't get closer—luckily, the soldier had his back to us.

We turned onto Puławska street and immediately spotted the SKOT in front of the cinema. We parked and started looking for an entrance to a nearby building

from which we could shoot from above. Today it would be harder—with intercoms and building attendants everywhere—but back then it wasn't a problem. We were afraid to knock on the doors of strangers, especially in that area, so close to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Fortunately, the stairwell itself proved a perfect location. All we had to do was come close to the window and take a few quick shots. That part wasn't complicated anymore.

As we left the stairwell, bundled up in thick winter jackets under which we had hidden our equipment—we looked like bears, or maybe like pregnant fish—we ran to the car and, of course, in the heat of the moment, the car alarm went off. We were terrified the soldiers would notice us, but they didn't even flinch. We managed to get away. We did get lucky. […]

Katarzyna Najman: You were a photojournalist, a reporter, an observer of those times. The power of the photograph lies above all in the juxtaposition between the film's title and what was happening on the streets of Warsaw. But do you think the film itself also contributed something to Polish awareness—did it serve as a metaphor, a symbol?

Chris Niedenthal: It was a film about the Vietnam War, and that alone evoked an association—the fact that that war, too, was anti-communist. After all, the point was to drive the communists out of that part of the world. Of course, the film itself had a slightly different theme—the rebellion of a mad American officer—but I think the word *rebellion* was very important for Poles as well. The film was based on a novel by Joseph Conrad, and that, too, was significant for us. And then there was the music. Alongside Wagner, there's that song by The Doors—"The End"—which spoke about freedom. Coppola himself would probably be surprised at how perfectly it all came together, at that very moment in history. In fact, he apparently saw my photograph, and I believe he even has a copy of it.

Katarzyna Najman: *Apocalypse Now*, like your photograph, has become a cult piece. What do you think makes certain works exert such a strong social impact?

Chris Niedenthal: Associations, associations, and more associations! In the case of my photograph, it's the combined impact of those three elements in the frame. They're such simple connections—and yet so beautiful. They matched exactly what Poles thought about Moscow, about Russians, and about communism. And the film itself was also cult and extraordinary. That moment marked a perfect convergence of events. I don't want to sound pretentious, but I'm pleased that the photo is considered iconic. Why? Simply because it was good. Three powerful associations—but not arranged by me. I was just passing by, saw them, and took the picture. Many people saw the same thing, but not everyone photographed it. […]

Katarzyna Najman: Do you think photographs are capable of changing history, or do they merely comment on it?

Chris Niedenthal: I think they are mainly a form of commentary. Every photographer would like to believe that his photograph could change history or the world, but the chances of that are small. My picture didn't change anything—it is simply a document of that time. But there's that famous photograph by Eddie Adams, the well-known American photographer, taken during

Paweł Jędrzejko
University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland
RIAS Co-Editor-in-Chief

the Vietnam War: in the street, a South Vietnamese officer drags a Viet Cong prisoner out of a basement, suddenly raises a pistol to his head, and shoots him. Adams captured that moment. That image truly could have influenced public opinion in the United States. It was simply too much. Public opinion began to turn against the war and forced the US government to withdraw. Another photograph that had a similar impact is the one showing […] naked children burned by napalm. […] The children are running, their clothes burned off by the napalm, their faces contorted in pain as they scream and flee. Those photographs moved public opinion so profoundly that people began to turn away from the war and pressure the American government to end it. So yes, there are photographs that can change things—but it's hard to think that every picture can. If that were the case, the world would change every day! (Najman)

What emerges from Niedenthal's recollection is the stubborn materiality of the photographic act:[8] a cold stairwell, a window frame, heavy winter coats concealing a camera, the hurried click of the shutter before a soldier might turn his head. Nothing in his testimony suggests symbolic intent; nothing gestures toward the interpretive density that scholars now discern in the resulting image. The photograph, which for later generations would crystallize an entire constellation of Cold War anxieties, began as a moment of instinct rather than vision—an attempt to register what was happening before the opportunity disappeared. The distance between that embodied immediacy and the monumental readings subsequently grafted onto the image reveals a structural paradox at the heart of modern visual culture: that photographs accrue meaning precisely by exceeding the conditions of their creation.

This paradox is not unique to Niedenthal. Adams's "Saigon Execution," Ut's "Napalm Girl," or the wartime photographs of Đoàn Công Tính, Mai Nam, and Võ An Khánh—all share the same trajectory from contingency to canonicity. Their afterlives are shaped less by the intentions of those who produced them than by the interpretive economies that later absorbed them. Visual culture is never static: images travel, detach from their origins, and reattach themselves to new political, emotional, and ideological contexts. What Niedenthal describes as just "a form of a commentary" becomes, once it circulates, a node in a global archive of meaning—a visual idiom through which entire societies negotiate the moral grammar of their own historical position.

To recognize this gap between production and reception is to recognize the limits of the photographic gaze within any national narrative. The Vietnam/American War was not only a conflict but a profound epistemological rupture: a war filmed, televised, reframed, appropri-

8 On the subject of the "non-human" element, see Joanna Żylińska's book, *Non-human Photography* (2017).

ated, muted, mythologized, and repeatedly overwritten by foreign imaginations. As Niedenthal's photograph shows, even images created far from the war zone were drawn into its gravitational field. But such appropriations—Polish, American, Western European—inevitably disclose their own blind spots: they privilege the shock register, the cinematic scale of destruction, the moral crisis of the observer. They rarely sustain the granular, locally situated, historically specific perspectives that Vietnamese writers, artists, filmmakers, and survivors have articulated for decades.

It is therefore necessary, at this juncture, to shift registers. Having followed the photograph's Cold War itineraries through Warsaw's martial-law streets, we must now broaden the frame to include the Vietnamese and diasporic archives that have long insisted on a different horizon of memory. These archives—textual, oral, photographic, and musical—do not merely supplement Western visual narratives; they unsettle them. They remind us that the war's global circulation has often obscured the very voices most intimately shaped by its devastation. They offer not an alternative myth but an alternative epistemology: one grounded not in the spectacle of conflict but in the continuity of lived histories, intergenerational transmission, and cultural survival.

The movement from Niedenthal's anecdote to these broader archives is not a detour but the structural pivot of this essay. For what his recollection quietly demonstrates is the essential instability of all transnational visual memory. Images migrate more quickly than testimonies; spectacle outpaces continuity; and the Cold War's systems of circulation ensured that certain ways of seeing Vietnam dominated the global imagination while others remained marginal. A hemispheric and transoceanic framework—one attentive to crossings, asymmetries, and contested genealogies of remembrance—is therefore indispensable. It is only within such a framework that Niedenthal's Warsaw image can assume its proper role: not as a self-sufficient symbol, but as a point within a larger constellation of transnational afterlives that the Vietnam/American War continues to generate.

In this light, the next movement of our reflection turns toward precisely those afterlives: toward the Vietnamese, Vietnamese-American, and Vietnamese-Polish literary and artistic traditions that complicate and enrich the war's visual archive; toward the Cold War and post-Cold War migrations that reshaped the demographics of memory; and toward the theoretical commitments—hemispheric, transoceanic, and transnational—that guide the mission of the *Review of International American Studies*. Niedenthal's photograph opened a portal. What follows requires stepping through it.

Paweł Jędrzejko
University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland
RIAS Co-Editor-in-Chief

Abstract: This article examines the global afterlives of the Vietnam/American War through the intertwined lenses of photography, cinema, and Cold War cultural circulation. Beginning with Chris Niedenthal's iconic 1981 photograph of an armored SKOT before Warsaw's Kino Moskwa during martial law, the essay analyzes how a contingent act of witnessing became a visual allegory that re-situated the American War within Poland's own history of repression. Drawing on Barthes's concepts of *studium* and *punctum*, it argues that the image's enduring force lies in the tension between the photographer's embodied immediacy and the mythological readings later attached to it. Juxtaposed with globally circulating images such as Eddie Adams's "Saigon Execution" and Nick Ut's "Napalm Girl," Niedenthal's photograph becomes a case study in the transnational migration of wartime imagery and the asymmetries that structure public memory. The essay then turns to Vietnamese, Vietnamese-American, and Vietnamese-Polish literary and artistic archives, highlighting how these testimonies unsettle the dominance of American cinematic narratives that have long framed the war as an American psychological event rather than a Vietnamese historical catastrophe. The conclusion outlines a hemispheric and transoceanic framework for the *Review of International American Studies*, urging contributors to explore the war's dispersed legacies as a shared, global archive of memory, representation, and resistance.

Keywords: Vietnam/American War memory, transnational visual vulture, hemispheric American Studies, Cold War media circulation, photographic testimony, diasporic Vietnamese archives

Bio: Paweł Jędrzejko, PhD, D.Litt., is an Associate Professor at the University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland, and a Faculty Member in the PhD Programme in Studies in English Literatures, Language, and Translation at the "Sapienza" University of Rome. He served as President of the International American Studies Association (2021–2023) and is the Co-Founder and Co–Editor-in-Chief of the *Review of International American Studies*. He is also an Associate Editor of *Er(r)go. Theory–Literature–Culture*. An Ocean-Going Yachtmaster, musician, and lyricist, he previously directed the University of Silesia Press. In 2015–2016, by ministerial appointment, he served on the Advisory Committee for the Implementation of the Strategy of Open Access to Academic Contents at the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education. During the same period, he represented the President of the Conference of Rectors of Academic Schools in Poland (CRASP) in an international contact group at the European University Association in Brussels. His research interests include literary and cultural theory, history of literature, comparative cultural studies, and translation theory and philosophy. Departing from the assumption of the aporetic (ontic/discursive) character of reality, Jędrzejko pursues research into the shared grounds of human cognition and creative activity, focusing on the interdependencies between individual awareness of the worldmaking power of language and the shape of daily interpersonal and intercultural relations. His areas of particular interest include the philosophy of friendship, the philosophy of existence, nineteenth-century American literature, the literary philosophies of the American Renaissance, the oeuvre of Herman Melville, postcolonial and post-dependence theories, and translation studies. His full CV is available at: http://www.jedrzejko.info

WORKS CITED

Alexander, Paul. "Thirty Years Later, Memories of My Lai Massacre Remain Fresh." *Digital History*, University of Houston, https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active_learning/explorations/vietnam/mylai_survivor.cfm. Accessed 9 Nov. 2025.

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard, Hill and Wang, 1981.

Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version." *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, edited by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, translated by Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, Howard Eiland, and others, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008, pp. 19–55.

Bocheńska, Joanna, and Maria Domańska, editors. *Inny głos. Młoda literatura migrantów w Polsce*. Fundacja Inna Przestrzeń, 2018.

Cenckiewicz, Sławomir. "Kukliński w Wietnamie." *HistMag.org*, 16 Nov. 2014, 16:48, https://histmag.org/Kuklinski-w-Wietnamie-10292. Accessed 9 Nov. 2025.

Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. 1902. Project Gutenberg, 1 July 1994, https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/219/pg219-images.html. Accessed 9 Nov. 2025.

Coppola, Francis Ford, director. *Apocalypse Now*. United Artists, 1979.

Danowski, Maciej. "Pułkownik Kukliński – atomowy szpieg." *CiekawostkiHistoryczne.pl*, 7 Oct. 2022, https://ciekawostkihistoryczne.pl/2022/10/07/jack-strong-atomowy-szpieg/. Accessed 9 Nov. 2025.

Grabowski, Mariusz. "Nierozwiązana tajemnica. Czy Polacy brali udział w wojnie w Wietnamie?" *Naszahistoria.pl*, 23 Mar. 2018, 14:27, https://naszahistoria.pl/nierozwiazana-tajemnica-czy-polacy-brali-udzial-w-wojnie-w-wietnamie/ar/c15-13034177. Accessed 9 Nov. 2025.

Halik, Agnieszka, and Michał Nowicki, editors. *Wietnamczycy w Polsce: Integracja, czy izolacja?* Instytut Spraw Publicznych, 2002.

Jakub. "Ryszard Kukliński – historia ściśle tajna." *JackStrong.org.pl*, 10 July 2022, https://jackstrong.org.pl/ryszard-kuklinski-historia-scisle-tajna/. Accessed 9 Nov. 2025.

Kempisty, Marcin. "Kulturawka #3 – O filmowych reprezentacjach wojny w Wietnamie." *Filmawka.pl*, 17 July 2018, 20:56, https://www.filmawka.pl/kulturawka-3/. Accessed 9 Nov. 2025.

Koćma, Katarzyna. "Kwiatem w karabin. O kontrkulturowych reakcjach na wojnę w Wietnamie." *Fragile: Pismo Kulturalne*, 8 May 2017, https://fragile.net.pl/kwiatem-w-karabin-o-kontrkulturowych-reakcjach-na-wojne-w-wietnamie/. Accessed 9 Nov. 2025.

Najman, Katarzyna. "Kino 'Moskwa' i Czas Apokalipsy – historia pewnego zdjęcia i kultowego filmu." *Onet Film*, 13 Aug. 2009, 10:15 a.m.,

Paweł Jędrzejko
University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland
RIAS Co-Editor-in-Chief

https://kultura.onet.pl/film/wiadomosci/kino-moskwa-i-czas-apokalipsy-historia-pewnego-zdjecia-i-kultowego-filmu/zeytd75. Accessed 9 Nov. 2025.

"Napalm Girl 50 Years Later." Fotografiska New York, https://newyork.fotografiska.com/en/events/napalm-girl. Accessed 9 Nov. 2025.

Peltz, Jennifer. "In an Instant, Vietnam Execution Photo Framed a View of War." *The Associated Press*, 28 Jan. 2018, https://www.ap.org/media-center/ap-in-the-news/2018/in-an-instant-vietnam-execution-photo-framed-a-view-of-war/. Accessed 9 Nov. 2025.

Pijarski, Krzysztof, editor. *The Archive as Project: The Poetics and Politics of the (Photo) Archive*. Fundacja Archeologia Fotografii, 2011.

———. *The Archive as Project* (digital re-edition). vnLab / Łódź Film School, n.d., https://archive-as-project.vnlab.org/. Accessed 9 Nov. 2025.

———. "Archeologia fotografii: czy można zarchiwizować gest?" *Narodowe Centrum Kultury*, 2011, nck.pl/upload/archiwum_kw_files/artykuly/krzysztof_pijarski_-_archeologia_fotografii__czy_mozna_zarchiwizowac_gest.pdf. Accessed 9 Nov. 2025.

Piwowarska, Anna. "Kultura wietnamska w Polsce: Mosty i napięcia." *Kultura Współczesna*, no. 3 (113), 2021, pp. 45–62. Accessed 9 Nov. 2025.

Przybył, Sebastian. "Wietnamczycy mniejszością narodową w Polsce? Szef rządu Hanoi oświadcza." *Interia Wydarzenia*, 16 Jan. 2025, 14:25, https://wydarzenia.interia.pl/kraj/news-wietnamczycy-mniejszoscia-narodowa-w-polsce-szef-rzadu-hanoi,nId,7893651. Accessed 9 Nov. 2025.

Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.

Szymańska-Matusiewicz, Grażyna. *Vietnamese in Poland: From Socialist Fraternity to the Global Capitalism Era. Migration – Ethnicity – Nation: Studies in Culture, Society and Politics, vol. 8*. Peter Lang, 2019.

Wojewódka, Paweł, host. *Społeczność wietnamska w Polsce. "Czują się tu akceptowani."* Featuring Ton Van Anh, *Pomówmy o tym*, Polskie Radio 24, 8 July 2024, 21:07, https://polskieradio24.pl/artykul/3401019,spolecznosc-wietnamska-w-polsce-czuja-sie-tu-akceptowani. Accessed 9 Nov. 2025.

Żylińska, Joanna. *Nonhuman Photography*. MIT Press, 2017.

Review of International American Studies
RIAS—Vol. 18, Fall-Winter, № 2/2025
ISSN 1991-2773
DOI: https://doi.org/10.31261/rias.18025

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

Justin Battin
RMIT University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
Giacomo Traina
The "Sapienza" University of Rome, Italy/ University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2104-323X
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0761-3235

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.

Justin Battin
RMIT University,
Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
Giacomo Traina
The "Sapienza"
University of Rome, Italy/
University of Silesia
in Katowice, Poland

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.

Justin Battin
RMIT University,
Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
Giacomo Traina
The "Sapienza"
University of Rome, Italy/
University of Silesia
in Katowice, Poland

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

Justin Battin
RMIT University,
Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
Giacomo Traina
The "Sapienza"
University of Rome, Italy/
University of Silesia
in Katowice, Poland

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

Bios: Justin Michael Battin is Associate Professor of Communication at RMIT University in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. His research intersects strands of phenomenological and existential philosophy with the everyday uses of mobile media technologies and mobile social media. He is the author *of Mobile Media Technologies and Poiēsis: Rediscovering How We Use Technology to Cultivate Meaning in a Nihilistic World* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) and co-editor of *We Need to Talk About Heidegger: Essays Situating Martin Heidegger in Contemporary Media Studies* (Peter Lang, 2018) and *Reading Black Mirror: Insights into Technology and the Post-Media Condition* (transcript, 2021).

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.

WORKS CITED

Aguilar-San Juan, Karin. *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America*. University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

Appy, Christian G. *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity*. Viking, 2015.

Bui, Long T. *Returns of War: South Vietnam and the Price of Refugee Memory*. New York University Press, 2017.

Butler, David. *The Fall of Saigon*. Simon & Schuster, 1985.

Cao, Lan. *Monkey Bridge*. Penguin 1997.

———. *The Lotus and the Storm*. Penguin, 2014.

Chong, Denise. *The Girl in the Picture: The Story of Kim Phuc, the Photograph, and the Vietnam War*. Penguin, 2006.

Espiritu, Yến Lê. *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es).* University of California Press, 2014

Fishkin, Shelley Fisher. "Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies." *American Quarterly*, vol. 57, no. 1, 2005, pp. 17–57.

Goscha, Christopher. *Vietnam: A New History.* Basic Books, 2016.

Kelly, Gail Paradise. *From Vietnam to America: A Chronicle of the Vietnamese Immigration to the United States.* Routledge, 2019. Originally published 1978.

Kwon, Heonik. *Ghosts of War in Vietnam*. Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Marr, David. *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power.* University of California Press, 1995.

Nguyen, Lien-Hang T. *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam*. University of North Carolina Press, 2012.

Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai. *The Mountains Sing.* Algonquin Books, 2020.

———. *Dust Child*. Algonquin Books, 2023.

Nguyen, Phuong Tran. *Becoming Refugee American: The Politics of Rescue in Little Saigon*. University of Illinois Press, 2017.

Nguyen, Viet Thanh. *The Sympathizer.* Grove Press, 2015.

———. *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War.* Harvard University Press, 2016.

O'Brien, Tim. *If I Die in a Combat Zone.* London: Flamingo Seventies Classic, 2003 [1973].

Schwenkel, Christina. *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam: Transnational Remembrance and Representation*. Indiana University Press, 2009.

Snepp, Frank. *Decent Interval: An Insider Account of Saigon's Indecent End told by the CIA's Chief Strategy Analyst in Vietnam*. Kansas University Press, 1977.

Sturken, Marita. *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering.* University of California Press, 1997.

Tai, Hue-Tam Ho (eds). *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*. University of California Press, 2001.

Tran, Nu-Anh. *Disunion: Anticommunist Nationalism and the Making of the Republic of Vietnam*. Hawaii University Press, 2022.

Truong, Marcelino. *40 Men and 12 Rifles*. Arsenal Pulp Press, 2023.

Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1977.

———. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society.* Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1974.

Valverde, Kieu-Lien. *Transnationalizing Vietnam: Community, Culture, and Politics in the Diaspora*. Temple University Press, 2013.

Justin Battin
RMIT University,
Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
Giacomo Traina
The "Sapienza"
University of Rome, Italy/
University of Silesia
in Katowice, Poland

Review of International American Studies
RIAS—Vol. 18, Fall-Winter, № 2/2025
ISSN 1991-2773
DOI: https://doi.org/10.31261/rias.18524

GIVING A FACE TO ONE'S ENEMY
A Conversation with Marcelino Truong

Marcelino Truong
Graphic Novelist,
France
Giacomo Traina
The "Sapienza" University of Rome, Italy,
University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2104-323X

Marcelino Truong is a French illustrator, painter, and author. Born in Manila to a South Vietnamese diplomat and an artistic French mother, he spent his youth between Saigon, Washington D.C., London, and Paris. Between 2012 and 2015, he channeled his experiences into a critically acclaimed graphic memoir diptych centered on the Vietnam War (*Such a Lovely Little War*; *Saigon Calling)*. This was followed by *40 Men and 12 Rifles* (2023), a graphic novel recounting the First Indochina War through the eyes of a forcibly enrolled war painter. Our conversation took place in late 2023 over the course of two chilly autumn afternoons in Truong's newly built in-house atelier in Saint-Malo. Sipping beer while calmly stroking his brush against a canvas depicting two bathers in period swimsuits strolling along the *malouin* seafront, Truong answers all my questions about his ongoing artistic exploration of the war-torn corner of the 20th century that bore him. For hours, we weave together the threads of his life and the tangled, blood-soaked histories of France and Vietnam, from the battlefields of Điện Biên Phủ to the halls of the Sorbonne.

This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.

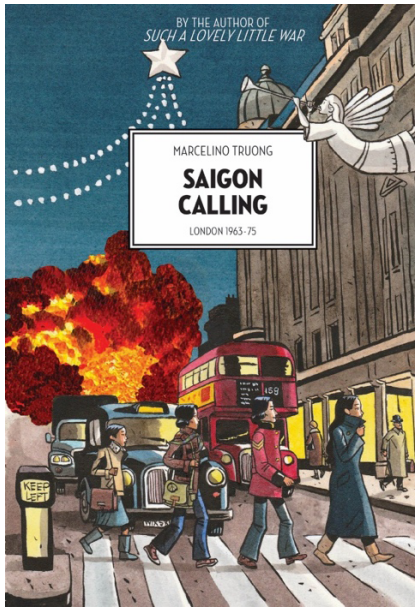

Fig. 1
Cover art of the English edition of *Such a Lovely Little War* (All figures reproduced with permission from the author)

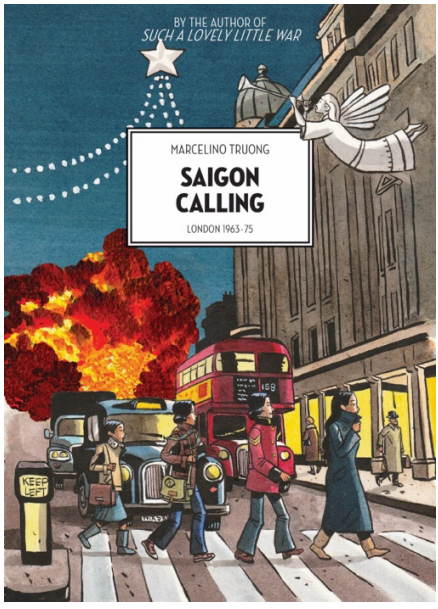

Fig. 2
Cover art of the English edition of *Saigon Calling*

Marcelino Truong
Graphic Novelist,
France
Giacomo Traina
The "Sapienza" University of Rome,
Italy,
University of Silesia in Katowice,
Poland

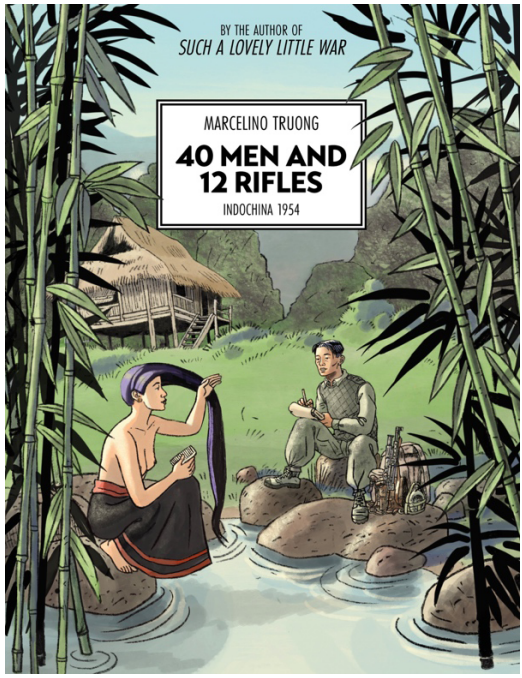

Fig. 3
Cover art of the English edition of *40 Men and 12 Rifles*

THE OTHER SIDE

Giacomo Traina: Given the circumstances of your life, I find it interesting that you devoted a whole work to the perspective of "the other side."
Marcelino Truong: My first two graphic novels were autobiographies—it was the story of my family. And through my family, I told the experience of a great number of Vietnamese families from the Republic of Vietnam. But for the last graphic novel, *40 Men and 12 Rifles*, I went back to a very old project which I began in the very early 1990s. One could almost go back even further in time, because before ever considering doing a graphic novel on the Việt Minh, on the communist-led resistance movement during the Indochina War, I had been accumulating documentation for years about one of the 19th century anti-French resistance fighters in Vietnam called Hoàng Hoa Thám. He was killed in 1913—there are streets in Vietnam called after him, there are films and books about him, there are probably monuments. And I was very interested in that character.

Why? Probably because when I was young, in the '60s and '70s, those were the counterculture years. One of the aspects of the counterculture was a rejection of the former colonial empires. This was

true not only in France but was very prevalent in England, or even in America. I was born from a mixed parentage of Vietnamese father and a French mother. So, there was this inner conflict in me, especially when I was an adolescent, between my Vietnamese side and my French side. At some point in my life, I didn't really like my Vietnamese side. I would have preferred to be completely French. Because then, as today, the mainstream culture always shows the white man as the standard. My mother could have been a pure Nordic beauty, she was blonde, very good-looking; and I didn't like my nose, I didn't like my mouth, I thought it was too large. I felt that I belonged to "the underdogs"; the peoples that have been colonized. That I had to come to terms with that. And when I reached the age of 16, I was in Brittany, doing the last two years of secondary school, I started reading books about the history of Vietnam. I was trying to figure out how those French colonialists who had been in the French Resistance, when they returned to Vietnam in 1945 as soldiers to disarm the Japanese, found themselves fighting not the Japanese, who had capitulated, but a new movement called the Việt Minh, which at that time was a very large front attracting people from all political persuasions dreaming of independence. I couldn't understand how the French had dared to subjugate another civilization.

The idea of romantic rebellion [was popular] among the youth in those years. Think of James Dean, or of *Star Wars*. The Empire looks like the Metropolitan Police, mixed with the Nazis, and the Japanese fascists with those samurai-looking armors. So, it's always the same story. Robin Hood is more popular than the Sheriff of Nottingham. I wanted to be like the hip people, the trendy people, who were more or less leftwing, even if they were from very wealthy backgrounds, especially at the French *lycée*. If you were leftwing, you were sympathetic to the Vietnamese people under the bombs. Look at Bob Dylan, Joan Baez. The cool guys could not side with Lyndon Johnson or with the South Vietnamese President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu. Solženicyn once said that in the West even politics are a question of fashion, and he was right. When you're young and cool and beautiful, you're leftwing. The idea of revolution as something very romantic was prevalent. If you claim to be on the side of "the underdog," you can advocate violent revolution and get away with murder, and people will think, "Oh, you are cool." But if you advocate *coups d'etat* or military takeovers? Then you're a baddie. But what is a revolution, apart from a violent takeover? My aim was to try to gently get the French reader to understand what was behind all the romantic myths concerning the Việt Minh and their war sacrifices. That one should be careful

Marcelino Truong
Graphic Novelist,
France
Giacomo Traina
The "Sapienza" University of Rome,
Italy,
University of Silesia in Katowice,
Poland

because, it is not that if people are ready to die in thousands for a cause, that the cause is necessarily good. And with this novel my objective was also to give a human face to the other side, which had been always depicted as a bunch of fanatics—like in the American movies.

GT: Indeed, you show the Việt Minh—at least the rank-and-file—as young guys gathering around pictures of naked women, etc. They come off in a very different light compared to the one-dimensional idea of the "Vietnamese communist soldier" we often see depicted.

MT: Yeah, because on one side they were idealized; the Left romanticized Mao Zedong, and these far-Eastern, exotic revolutions. There is a lot of orientalism going on here. And, on the other hand, the rightwing French soldiers from the CEFEO [*Corps expéditionnaire français en Extrême-Orient*], often presented a caricatured view of the Việt Minh; in their memoirs, the Vietnamese people, and more so the Việt Minh, are uniformly described as brainwashed fanatics. I'm sure there must have been brainwashed fanatics, but I'm also sure that for the French prisoners of war, their image of the Việt Minh was perhaps biased because of their experience. So, I wanted to show the people, the charisma that some leaders had, like the old captain in the book, who hops on Minh's truck, when Minh is traveling with a Chinese driver, and they pick up this officer.

GT: And he keeps speaking ill of the Chinese, because he was one of the Việt Minh old-timers who were fighting since 1947. And that after 1950, when the Maoists barged in, he becomes disillusioned.

MT: He's based on many people I've met, that I've been able to speak to, who are from the educated class and who often went to French schools, and saw the mounting of the class struggle, which became more and more prevalent, and fierce, from 1949 onwards, when Mao defeated the Kuomintang in China and started sending aid to the Việt Minh.

FAMILY TIES

GT: So what prompted you to give a "human face to the other side"?

MT: When I started going back to Vietnam in the early '90s, I was lucky to be received by my father's cousins. They all had come to France on the same ship in 1948. All of them with scholarships to go to study either in Paris or in Belgium. They had the same ideals, same upbringing, same education. But some chose the nationalist side. And others chose the Việt Minh at an early stage, and others chose first the Republic of Vietnam, and then opted for the National Liberation Front, but clandestinely.

Fig. 4
Marcelino Truong in his Saint-Malo atelier. Photo by Charles Montécot, courtesy of Marcelino Truong

GT: How many people in your family were on the communist side?
MT: The ones I know of, because my grandmother from Vietnam had eleven brothers and sisters, so you can imagine how numerous the offspring were. There was at least a cousin who joined the Việt Minh during the French Indochina War, or as they called it, "the first patriotic resistance." He spent ten years in the North, from '54 to '64, because he had been a "*tập kết*," a regrouped soldier.
GT: One of those 300,000 people who resettled in the North following the 1954 partition.
MT: That's it. Amongst whom were many Việt Minh soldiers who had been asked to regroup up north expecting to come back two years later after the reunification.

Marcelino Truong
Graphic Novelist,
France
Giacomo Traina
The "Sapienza" University of Rome,
Italy,
University of Silesia in Katowice,
Poland

GT: Because of the 1956 elections that never took place.
MT: Instead, he stayed ten years and started another family up north. He had a second wife and two children there. And his first, legitimate wife was in Trà Vinh with three children. He also had a daughter from a first, very short marriage, who is now living in Montreal and who left Vietnam as a boat person.
In Vietnam, the uncle I spent the most time with was a member of the National Liberation Front in the early '70s, and then a member of the Parliament in '75. He was called Lý Chánh Trung, he was a famous journalist in the South. He taught philosophy at the university. He was a leftwing intellectual, as leftwing as one could be in South Vietnam in those days. He wasn't harassed, but at one point he had a police car parked in front of his home in Thủ Đức. But he never actually went to jail or anything. And then there's my uncle Trương Bửu Lâm, who's now retired in Hawaii. He wrote a book at Yale called *Patterns of Vietnamese Response to Foreign Intervention* (1967). He presents these texts from Vietnamese history, that all tend to show the resistance against foreign invaders as a long tradition, that the Vietnamese struggle for independence owes nothing to foreign influences.
GT: One of the moments I love the most from the graphic memoirs is the panel in which we see the room of your alter ego with a South Vietnamese flag *and* a Hồ Chí Minh poster hanging from the wall. I love the paradox, the contradiction. Did you really hang those in your room?
MT: Yeah. When I arrived in France. Because I read Jean Lacouture's biography of Hồ Chí Minh. My father gave it to me; he was quite open-minded, he would say, "You have to read books from both sides, don't content yourself with reading books that support whatever opinions you may have." And Lacouture was one of the professors in the school I went to later. In 1977, I ran into him in the halls of the school. I'd read his book, and I recognized him immediately, and I said to him "Monsieur Lacouture, I know that you have returned to Vietnam; may I ask you, if you have a moment, to speak about it." He was in a hurry, he said, "Oh, I've written a book about it which will soon come out, please read that." This book was called *Vietnam: voyage à travers une victoire* (1976). He co-wrote it with his wife Simonne. I bought the book, and I read it. His enthusiasm was beginning to cool off a bit, but very slowly. In that book, there's a footnote at one point where he's talking about North Korea, and he says, "Here we have a socialist country which is full of promise, North Korea, we must keep an eye on the country which may prove to be something very positive" [Both laugh].

So, back to the question, I was always interested in "the other side" because in my youth, leftwing, peace-loving people, they were all sympathetic to the rebels. Think of Che Guevara. He was handsome, a sex symbol—this was Jesus wearing combat fatigues and a black beret. Handsome like Jesus, except he had a gun. In the case of Hồ Chí Minh, the "casting" was perfect. This old guy looking like the father of the nation with the goatee beard. The military plain-looking clothes with no decorations, no medals, no ranks. All that was very appealing.

GT: *40 Men* is about the First Indochina War. Have you ever considered writing this same story from the point of view of the Vietnamese nationalists who served under the French?

MT: Yes. Maybe I will do it one day, but graphic novels are a lot of work! I've been attracted by the idea of doing something on the Vietnamese paratroopers, the Vietnamese soldiers who joined the nationalist side either because they were politicized from the start or because they had been disappointed by the Việt Minh. Nguyễn Văn Thiệu was a Việt Minh, and also President Nguyễn Khánh, before becoming a paratrooper alongside the French, had been a Việt Minh for some time. Many of them became disaffected; others were just attracted by the prestige of the uniform, the red beret, etc. Nothing very romantic or idealistic. They just wanted to be part of the "big boys." A lot of them joined because of that. The prestige of the white beret of the Foreign Legion, or the red beret of the paratroopers. What the Vietnamese rightwing or center rightwing patriots were lacking in was that they didn't have the equivalent of the Marxist doctrine.

GT: Ngô Đình Nhu tried to introduce Personalism but that didn't work.

MT: It was too intellectual, and nobody could define it, whereas a sort of vulgarized bible of Marxism, made of catchphrases, was easily quoted all the time. I read this in the memoir of [the South Vietnamese Ambassador to the United States] Bùi Diễm. He says that we were lacking a doctrine, a gospel which could be recited. It wasn't that we didn't have a political program, including social welfare, but it wasn't as clear-cut as the other guys' program.

GT: I was thinking that Minh, the protagonist of *40 Men*, was originally supposed to be a nationalist soldier. That's the whole premise of the story.

MT: He gets his military papers, he's called up.

GT: But then his father sends him away to dodge the draft.

MT: His father is very disappointed to hear that his only son will not serve under the nationalist flag because he's too concerned with his artistic pursuits. You can imagine that Minh's mother must have

Marcelino Truong
Graphic Novelist,
France
Giacomo Traina
The "Sapienza" University of Rome,
Italy,
University of Silesia in Katowice,
Poland

intervened like, "Listen, if you don't do something for your only son, I will leave you immediately." She probably owns half of the property anyway. So, he obtains a deferment—which I checked, existed, when one was an only son. And maybe he paid off a few people.

REDRAWING HISTORY

GT: You stated that one of the main inspirations for the story was George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*.
MT: *Homage to Catalonia* is indeed one of my favorite books. Orwell describes the Spanish, the Catalans, as being really nice people, very generous, very friendly. And that's what I do too. The ordinary people are nice, they're friendly, they're generous, they're idealistic, quite often. They are ready to endure great suffering. And then what Orwell describes in *Homage to Catalonia* is how the Spanish Communist Party received the order from Moscow, who had just signed the non-aggression pact with Hitler, to get rid of the anarchists, because they were getting in the way of a peace with Franco, and Stalin wanted to make peace with Franco. To leave the country to the rightwing.

I also love Orwell's political essays. I used to read them when I was 20, at Sorbonne, studying English. *Down and Out in Paris and London*, I enjoyed them all. Orwell went to Eton School because his parents wanted him to have an upper-class education. But there was always in him this desire to understand and to mix with the underdog. When you read *Down and Out in Paris and London*, he has just spent a few years in the police in Burma. He's an Etonian and he returns to France and England and lives practically on the street. There's this affection for the everyman. Which I try to apply in my own life, and which is important when you depict a movement like the Việt Minh. The masses, the majority of the forces fighting on Hồ Chí Minh's side were from the people. Only the cadres were from the educated classes.
GT: I guess it's not a coincidence that in your book you never show the Việt Minh's leadership *directly*, but only through flashbacks, or pieces of propaganda art. You don't see Võ Nguyên Giáp, you don't see Hồ Chí Minh. You see people *thinking* about them, but you don't see *them*.
MT: Whenever you show historical characters, it's tricky, there is always someone that would tell you, "He wasn't like that," or "This is false, this is approximate." So, to avoid that, I avoid showing famous people. But in the original draft Minh is actually called up to draw a portrait of Giáp. Because in the First World War, in England, some artists, according to their style, were appreciated for their skill of drawing portraits of leaders like General Haig. A picture, or a sketch, and then

they will reproduce it on matchboxes, things that soldiers will exchange so that they can see what their leaders look like. This wasn't the age of photos everywhere; nobody had a smartphone.

GT: I guess it's the same principle as the Roman coins that bore the emperor's face.

MT: Exactly. So, I had planned to have him draw Giáp's portrait, having Giáp sitting in front of him, telling him to hurry, because he's expected somewhere as the battle is raging. And I wanted Minh to overhear a conversation between Giáp and a Chinese counselor who speaks Vietnamese. This would have been an opportunity for me to show the influence of Chinese counselors on the Việt Minh's war effort. But I didn't get to do it, probably because there wasn't enough space. And again, I always find it tricky to depict well-known people because it's easy to fall in caricature.

GT: Compared to the Vietnamese American authors I worked on, you seem to deal with a different political legacy.

MT: When I arrived in France, in the 1970s, the rhetoric around the Vietnam War was still very strong, and the Left, from the extreme to the center, all agreed on one thing, that decolonization was a good thing. France's colonial guilt played a huge part in that. "Grandad was in Indochina, so we have to make up for that." Even today I get people coming up to me in book fairs excusing themselves because their grandfather had fought in Indochina. They feel embarrassed about telling me that their one of their own has fought in that war, thinking that they should feel guilty about it. They excuse the wrongdoing of their parents. And my answer is that it may have been a colonial war at the outset, but it became something else in 1949.

GT: Indeed—a Cold War struggle fought by a seven-division army equipped with artillery pieces. In the novel we see the Việt Minh deploying a 105 mm American-made howitzer, taken in Korea, I reckon.

MT: Or from Chiang Kai-shek, from the Chinese nationalists. Mao gave them to the DRV along with the ammo, the ordnance they had, because their artillery was Soviet equipped.

GT: I was also thinking about another forgotten legacy of the Vietnam wars, the role played by Chiang Kai-shek, by Nationalist China. That in 1945, four years before Mao's victory, the Vietnamese communists were cooperating with Chiang's nationalists. Historian Christopher Goscha writes extensively about this.

MT: Very few people read David Marr's *1945* book enough. I must have read one third of it. Very fascinating, so much input. Very few people know that when the French arrived in North Vietnam between 1945 and 46, at one point, in certain parts, they may have fought alongside

Marcelino Truong
Graphic Novelist,
France
Giacomo Traina
The "Sapienza" University of Rome,
Italy,
University of Silesia in Katowice,
Poland

the Việt Minh to eliminate the nationalists, because some people in General Leclerc's 2nd Armored Division were pretty leftwing.

GT: 1945–46 is a very complex time. Regarding your sources, what about *China and the Vietnam Wars* (2000) by Qiang Zhai? It argues that until 1969, Hanoi was leaning more towards Beijing than Moscow, and that without Chinese aid the Việt Minh would have never beat the French. Was emphasizing the role played by Maoist China in the Indochina War another of your objectives?

MT: When I was young and I read these books on the Indochina War and the Vietnam War, there wasn't that much emphasis on the role of China, except in books written by former French soldiers. They would sometimes mention the Chinese influence, but that could easily be brushed aside by the leftwing French, who would stick to the romantic Vietnamese communist narrative that claimed, "This is all our doing, we did this on our own, grabbing the weapons of the adversary." And when you read Giáp's memoirs, he downplays the Chinese aid, he brushes that aside, it's all the Vietnamese people's victory. This info about the extent of the Chinese aid only became apparent quite late. But in the '70s we never heard about this. We learned later that in 1975 there were 300,000 Chinese in North Vietnam.

GT: Have you visited all the places you depict in the story?

MT: Yes. I went to Hanoi in 2013, and I also traveled to Điện Biên Phủ, by road, always in 2013. That was the last time I was in Vietnam. I met three former cadres of the Việt Minh. One was Đặng Văn Việt, also known as the "Grey Tiger of Colonial Route No. 4." Route No. 4 is the one along the frontier with China on the eastern border. Lạng Sơn, Cao Bằng…

GT: Where one of the early offensives of the war took place.

MT: Yes, November 1950. The first Việt Minh counteroffensive. Đặng Văn Việt came out of this a hero because he was considered as one of the artisans of some huge ambushes involving 6,000 soldiers attacking a French convoy.

GT: Did you draw sketches during that trip?

MT: I did a few sketches, but not that many, and not at Điện Biên Phủ. I did a lot of portraits along the way, faces, people I met, either on the street, or at the hotel, the receptionist, the driver…

GT: Did you turn them into characters?

MT: No, because I would have needed frontal sketches, all the perspectives. I could've made photos, but I didn't dare do that. When I got to do the book, this was a big problem—characterization. And so, I resorted to finding films on YouTube, Vietnamese films, not necessarily about the Indochina War. Black and white films, modern films,

anything. And I would use characters from those films, who will appear in different angles and make screenshots of those, to be able to draw their faces.

GT: This is a very "cinematic" book, in a way.

MT: My publisher told me, "Think of it as a movie," but even if he hadn't told me so, I suppose I always tried to imagine it as a movie. Because I'm not satisfied with the movies I see, the Vietnamese movies I see on YouTube. These movies can be very good, quality-wise, but it's the content which I find too ideological, too filtered. There's always this taboo of showing things as they really happened. In these movies you will never see a soldier insulting an officer or a cadre. You will rarely see exhausted soldiers. And so, I tried to imagine a story which could be made in film, I suppose, at great cost. I try to do stories which I would like to see but that don't exist.

AU COEUR DES TÉNÈBRES

GT: I wonder what you think of movies like *Apocalypse Now*.

MT: *Apocalypse Now*, I rushed to see it when it came out in October 1979, in Paris. And then I must have seen it about six or seven times. It's probably the only film I've seen that many times, and I also read a lot about it—anything I could find, including of course *Heart of Darkness*, but also J. G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, and books on Coppola. I love that film—I could even recite bits of the narrative. At lunch today we were discussing the idea of confession, I thought about Captain Willard's quote.

GT: "And if his story is a confession, so is mine."

MT: That's it. Our discussion reminded me of Coppola, being an Italian Catholic—the confession, repentance, and redemption, all these things. I had a Catholic education, and I can relate to all these themes. One of the most enlightening things I read about *Apocalypse Now* was a comparison between that movie and *The Godfather*, and that made many things clearer for me. The essay argued that—I hope I remember correctly—the American army in Vietnam was functioning almost like a mafia, with its leaders and its hitmen. Willard is a hitman who is sent by the Special Forces to eliminate a former hitman who has stepped out of line. He's gone nuts. He's doing things we would dream of doing but which aren't allowed in a democracy. He is using counter-insurgency methods that are used on the other side, but we can't really use, at least openly. It doesn't fit in with our democracy, so we have to eliminate him. So, this guy was part of the "mafia," but he has left it, and we have to eliminate him.

Marcelino Truong
Graphic Novelist,
France
Giacomo Traina
The "Sapienza" University of Rome,
Italy,
University of Silesia in Katowice,
Poland

I see this film as a sort of magnificent fresco of the different Vietnam Wars that existed. There was the conventional war, perhaps depicted in this film with the helicopter attack scene—the new conventional war that was fought in Vietnam by the Air Cavalry, which was born in Algeria, by the way, the French developed that but with far fewer means, in 1961, and maybe before, American Green Berets or soldiers would go to Algeria to see how Colonel Bigeard and the French were handling things, how they were using the helicopters to drop soldiers on top of a hill and then go downwards, since parachute drops are not that precise. That started in Algeria, and the Americans would go and take lessons from the French, who had fought against a communist Maoist rebellion, against rebels using Maoist techniques. So, there's the conventional war.

GT: Colonel Kilgore, et cetera.

MT: Exactly. And then the unconventional warfare, the secret war waged by Kurtz and the Special Forces, using the same unconventional militias and ruthless methods, where you have to spot, identify, and kill the right persons. There is no use in bombing 50,000 people. You want to find out who is the leader, what is the network, and eliminate them one by one. It's nasty, but in the end, one might say that it's more efficient and less blood-costly than carpet bombing. So, you have these two wars in Vietnam, and people who don't know about revolutionary warfare or have a very romantic idea of it, might think that Coppola was only criticizing the Americans. But the communists also used both techniques, from the start. And maybe they construed it as an anti-American film.

GT: There's even a club called *Apocalypse Now* in downtown Saigon.

MT: I've been there. Terrible music! So loud that you have to write a text on your phone and show it to the waiters. I hate that place.

So, it's a beautiful film with a beautiful soundtrack. I bought the album; I got it somewhere. I love "Suzie Q," and also the original themes written by Coppola's father. When they hit Kurtz's compound, and you hear *that* bassline! I really love that. And also, the guys on the ship, they were good. The Chef, and that black boy who gets killed, "the light and space of Vietnam really blew his mind," and the captain of the ship who's a nice fatherly figure. In literature, there are a lot of helmsman or guides who die when the hero reaches his destination. Charon showing you the way to the hell, through the River Styx.

GT: Did you like the 2001 *Redux* version? The one with the French plantation scene.

MT: I'm glad they cut that out. I think that the 1979 version was much better.

GT: I agree. It slows the pace down. But what do you think of the fact that the movie completely erases Vietnamese perspectives?
MT: That's quite true, because it's not the subject. They're just *figurants*, extras. Props. That used to shock me in the past. It annoyed me. But I always say, it's up to the Vietnamese to do their own films about the war. The communists do it and they do it well. There are lots of films about the Vietnam War on YouTube. *The Scent of the Burning Grass*, etc., which are quite good. And there are documentaries, that nine-hour documentary that was recently released.
GT: Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's *The Vietnam War.*
MT: But even that one is a film made for Americans, and they can only produce that because their public is American. It's up to the Vietnamese to do their own documentaries. I'd love to do that, but I never learned things like that, and Vietnamese people probably would say that I'm not "really Vietnamese."

Fig. 5
From the original French edition of *40 Men and 12 Rifles* (*40 hommes et 12 fusils*, Denoël Graphic, 2022)

Marcelino Truong
Graphic Novelist,
France
Giacomo Traina
The "Sapienza" University of Rome,
Italy,
University of Silesia in Katowice,
Poland

GT: Getting back to *40 Men*, the propaganda billboards that Minh draws, are all real?
MT: Yes, I can show you the photocopies. I found this one at the War Museum in Hanoi. I did it precisely, exactly as it was. It was impossible to read it properly. But the original at the museum was itself a photocopy. This was a press illustration, a cartoon in the bottom right-hand corner of the daily newspaper of the People's Army, *Quân đội nhân dân*, they were made so that the even the guys who couldn't read could appreciate that.
GT: Why did you pick this one in particular?
MT: There are several in the same style. I got them on my computer. It struck me of being very "Chinese." The large soldier with a huge arm, and a huge fist, strangling the French besieged combatant. The size of his chest and his arm are typical of Chinese and North Korean propaganda. And the way of killing by strangulation goes back to the martyrdom of some French priests, they were strangled with a rope.
GT: Throughout the story, sometimes you can "hear" other people thinking, through the balloons. In your mind, that's Minh seeing himself, say, through the eyes of the girls looking at him and thinking "he's cute"?
MT: Oh, that's just a running gag. I wanted to show that in spite of the fact that these young men and women are wearing uniforms and fighting, they're human beings, they're flirting.
GT: I was also wondering why you put *Bonjour tristesse* in the novel.
MT: That's a real story. One of the three men I met in Hanoi in 2013, Đỗ Ca Sơn, was at Điện Biên Phủ, with Regiment 174, which was an elite regiment. Đỗ Ca Sơn was as a cadre, the equivalent of a subaltern officer. The perimeter of the French and nationalist encampment was growing smaller day by day, as the Việt Minh were digging offensive trenches to get closer. A lot of the parachutes that were dropped to send food, ammunition, whatever the French and Vietnamese nationalist soldiers needed, would fall in the no man's land, and be picked up by the Việt Minh.

One day, one of such containers fell behind the communist lines; it held seven or eight perfectly new maps of the entire French defenses. The rule was that when Việt Minh soldiers got hold of one of these containers, it should always be opened in the presence of an officer who read French, because they often contained valuable military information. These guys, most of them couldn't read French. One day Đỗ

Ca Sơn's men told him, "We've got this container, and we need you to come over because there's some French documents." And he rushed to the place, and he was given a parcel containing books in French. But he soon discovered that these were just novels being sent to a soldier in the French lines. And he opened the parcel and found *Bonjour tristesse*.

The book was probably sent by a wife or a sister to a French lieutenant, there was his name on the parcel. So Đỗ Ca Sơn slipped the book into his pockets, and he read it during the many sleepless nights of the terrible battle for a position called *Les Élianes*, they were numbered. The hardest fighting was on *Éliane 2*, which the Vietnamese called *Đồi A1*, Hill A1. So, it's a real story and it struck me as being exactly the sort of thing I needed to, as I say, give a face to the enemy, to bring them closer to us, as *Bonjour tristesse* was a huge hit in France.

GT: Were you aiming for realism?

MT: I tried to produce something very exact, historically, with lots of detail, at the expense of doing something artsy. I wasn't trying to be artsy. I was striving for realism. So that people, for example in Vietnam, who know about these things could say, "These are the right uniforms, these are the right weapons, the right vehicles, the right faces, they're not too fat." In one of the series I watched for inspiration, *Đường lên Điện Biên Phủ*, they're too fat, they're too cute, they should have lost *at least* 5 kilos per person. They're too *clean*. They're not thin enough. Their uniforms are not large enough. Việt Minh uniforms were very baggy. During the Vietnam War the ARVN troops had very tight clothes because they didn't want to look like their enemies, who wore large, baggy uniforms.

TRUONG'S PROCESS

GT: I have a question about your use of colors. Is there a rationale for it?

MT: Yes. This story is very long, almost 300 pages. I was supposed to produce a story in 110 pages. So, I started off writing and illustrating the story, and when I reached page 55, Minh had only just left Hanoi! This is a one-man show, I do everything. And people tell me, "Oh yes, but you did this digitally." I worked on my iPad Pro with an app called Procreate, which is not an app about how to make children [Both laugh]. But this doesn't mean that the process is faster. Because of the possibility of enlarging very easily, I tended to work the detail closely. So, to color the whole story in full color would have been exhausting. But when I had to use black and white, it's not black and white, there is one color in it.

Marcelino Truong
Graphic Novelist,
France
Giacomo Traina
The "Sapienza" University of Rome,
Italy,
University of Silesia in Katowice,
Poland

GT: Blue and red, right?
MT: Blue when you are in Hanoi with the nationalists and the French, and then it's brick red when you're with the Reds. And this made the coloring process quicker, although it's still a lot of work. On an iPad, for each page, you can look up the info, the statistics. And they will tell you how many hours you've spent on this page. You can also use a video function and see the video in timelapse motion. And the statistics will tell you "This took 20 hours." So, I chose just to do the full pages and the double page spreads in color.
GT: Let's zero in on your creative process for a minute. Did you have an outline?
MT: For my first two graphic novels I had actually written a scenario. I had sat down for three months and wrote the story in detail, page by page, including the dialogues. And then I sat down to draw the rough pencil of each page. This I did for the first two novels, because I was really afraid of not being able to do this properly, so I needed to assure myself, to convince myself that I could do this. Whereas for this story I was influenced by a French comic artist with whom I did a tour in Canada, Sandrine Revel. She doesn't write things ahead. After having written a synopsis, she makes things up along. Drawing and writing. I thought, let's try this technique. I just didn't feel like sitting down for three months just writing the story, as I had done for the previous three graphic novels. And it worked, but I can tell you that when I started this job, I was really nervous about being able to do this.
GT: How much time did it take?
MT: Three solid years of hard work. 2019–2022.
GT: Every single day, 8 hours per day, something like that?
MT: Probably, yeah.
GT: And how many pages per day?
MT: Just one. One page per day is quite enough.
GT: Did you have to cut some stuff, eventually?
MT: If you compare it with the original synopsis, probably yes. Because writing a synopsis is very easy. It's very easy to write, for instance, "And he arrives on the battlefield of Điện Biên Phủ, and there is a lot of commotion." Now, when you have to *draw* that, that's another story!
GT: Minh's injury, for instance. Did you plan that from the outset, or did it come up along the way?
MT: I really can't remember; I wanted him to have an injury because I wanted the war to be lethal. This is no joke; we're talking about real war. This is not *Tintin*, where he fires his Browning at someone, the guy falls and there's no blood. That's why I take pains to draw weapons carefully.

GT: Have you considered writing a follow-up to the story?
MT: No. It's too much work. In a way, the follow-up to this particular story is *Such a Lovely Little War.*
GT: I wonder what would've become of Minh in post-1954 South Vietnam.
MT: I think he could very well have succeeded in South Vietnam even without a leg. As an artist, even without a leg, you can paint.

BECOMING A POLITICAL ARTIST

GT: Do you see yourself as a political artist?
MT: Not at first. I'm a self-taught artist. I learned the trade by myself, studying what others were doing, etc., and I was much too busy to think about politics. But at 17, I went to a famous school in Paris, the Institut d'études politiques de Paris, a.k.a. Sciences Po. A sort of temple of political studies in France, not because of its students, but because of the teachers. Many of them are academics, but many of them aren't—many are lawyers, people working for the state. They know what they're talking about.
GT: In *Saigon Calling*, you show the discussions that you entertained with them back then. I have the impression that you do so with the third graphic novel as well, as if you're projecting such discussions on the character of Phù Long.[1] As if a Việt Minh encampment during the Indochina War became a Sciences Po classroom in the 1970s.
MT: Thankfully, there were very few "Phù Longs" teaching at Sciences Po—I would have hated it! But there were experts on Vietnam, namely a guy called Philippe Devillers—I took a course with him. Devillers was an expert because he had been to Vietnam in 1945 with Leclerc's 2nd Armored Division. He was in their press service along with Jean Lacouture. They were friends. Later in life, Devillers became an academic, he wrote a book about the Geneva Accords and the 1954 partition.
GT: Did you clash with him?
MT: Oh, no. I just studied his course about Asian history, which, I must say, was pretty boring. He would go into the history of each country, Indonesia, Malaysia, and there was so much stuff that you couldn't remember all that. Luckily, on the day of the oral examination, he questioned me about the First Indochina War. And I got a 13, which is a good mark, the most you can get is a 14. He gave me an easy

1 Phù Long is a character in *40 Men and 12 Rifles*, a white French communist sympathizer who joined the Việt Minh and serves as the leading officer of the propaganda unit under which the protagonist works.

Marcelino Truong
Graphic Novelist,
France
Giacomo Traina
The "Sapienza" University of Rome,
Italy,
University of Silesia in Katowice,
Poland

question. He probably suspected I was Vietnamese. But I would never have crossed swords with him.

GT: What about Jean Chesneaux?

MT: I met him. My father gave me his books. I went to dinner at his place, not very long before he died. Chesneaux too was a French communist and I didn't cross swords with him either.

GT: So, who was your "Phù Long"?

MT: My "Phù Longs" are all those French or Western people—not necessarily intellectuals—fascinated with Vietnam. It can sometimes just be a guy with a Vietnamese wife, and this makes him think he knows all about Vietnam, and he will lecture you on your own history. That happens all the time. And they always know who the goodies and the baddies are. It seems that in France, the history of Indochina mainly captivates either the extreme left or the extreme right. The name Phù Long, in my graphic novel, is a joke. I know this guy who is a French Trotskyist, and his name sounds like Phù Long, but in French. I crossed swords with him many times on Facebook. He would really annoy me.

GT: You say he was a Trotskyist. Was he a follower of people like Tạ Thu Thâu or Ngô Văn Xuyết?

MT: No, he knew that the Vietnamese Trotskyists were slaughtered and silenced. This he didn't share with us. He would be on the side of "the underdog" against the Americans, etc. He was sure of being on the right side and he would say things like, "I can't understand how a guy like you, who had studied at Sciences Po, can be so silly or so bigoted." And I would say, Sciences Po isn't the Party school. Different professors have different opinions. And so, to make fun of him, I named the character acting the part of the French crossover in my story after the French Trotskyist's name. I named him Phù Long. He represents so many idealistic Westerners who supported Communism out of idealism, not only in Vietnam.

THE BOUDAREL AFFAIR

GT: While we're on the subject, tell me about your relationship with Georges Boudarel.[2]

MT: I met Boudarel through a Vietnamese friend at an exhibition at the École de Beaux-Arts in Paris, around 1995. After that, I began to exchange with him because the famous scandal, what we call

2 Georges Boudarel (1926–2003) was a French intellectual who became a Việt Minh political commissar during the First Indochina War.

l'affaire Boudarel, had begun in 1993. Boudarel was then a professor at the University of Paris VI. He was a specialist of Vietnamese culture and history along with Pierre Brocheaux, Daniel Hémery, and others. As a former member of the French Communist Party, he was invited to hold a conference at the Senate in France. As he began his talk in front of the Senate, suddenly a voice rang out, saying, "Are you Mr. Georges Boudarel? Are you the former political commissar of camp 113, in which many French officers were held captive during the Indochina War?" The man who had stood up and cried out asking that question had been a prisoner of the Việt Minh for five years. He had been captured in 1950 after the Cao Bằng defeat. There was an uproar, and Boudarel was interrupted, and he was led out.

And then the *affaire* started, because the former prisoners came forward to say, "Yes, we were prisoners of this guy, and this guy shouldn't be teaching our children." And at that time, I was in the mood of trying to "give a face" to the Việt Minh, trying to see if there was any good in them, because I had met my uncle in Vietnam. I was influenced by my uncle to believe that there were good guys on the other side too. I wanted to investigate about that, because I had realized that if my uncle was on their side, they couldn't be all that bad. I wanted to see for myself. I was also annoyed by the attacks on Boudarel. Not that they didn't have the right to hate him. On all accounts, being a prisoner of the Việt Minh was a terrible experience. But what I did know was that having met lots of former soldiers, some of them were racist, and some of them were very rightwing. And again, why did they have such a good conscience? How did *they* treat Vietnamese prisoners? No one comes out of a war clean. I've always been like this, when there's a group, like a pack of dogs attacking one person, I always try to, if possible, to defend that person, or try to see if they're right.

So, when that scandal broke out, I wrote to Boudarel and discussed things because I didn't like the way he was being pushed into a corner. And I didn't side with Boudarel, but I exchanged with him because he happened to be extremely knowledgeable about North Vietnam. We knew very little about the North; he had been behind the "bamboo curtain," and for once we had a French professor who had been there, who hadn't only studied books about the Việt Minh, but had sided with them.

GT: What happened to him after the war?

MT: First, he stayed a few years in Prague, working for some Eastern Bloc organization, and then in 1966 the French justice declared an amnesty of all crimes committed in Algeria or Indochina. And Boudarel had come to realize that Stalinism was a mistake. I picked a lot of ideas

Marcelino Truong
Graphic Novelist,
France
Giacomo Traina
The "Sapienza" University of Rome,
Italy,
University of Silesia in Katowice,
Poland

from his biography—I'm always interested in clothes, and he says that the further up north he would go, the stricter the uniforms would be, the button-up collars, this was clearly Chinese-influenced, before that they had open collars. He knew Vietnamese history, and he could read Vietnamese quite well. And his attitude had changed. He repented. He said, "J'ai été un con," I was a fool.

SUCH TWO LOVELY LITTLE WARS

GT: Getting back to my original question, I guess that you became a political artist by writing the two memoirs.
MT: Immediately, because the subject was heavily politicized. As you know, the Vietnam War divided societies in the West. You were for Hanoi, or you were for America. People were divided; this was a terribly political subject. You would read history books about Vietnam, written by Nguyễn Khắc Viện, who was a Vietnamese communist. It was a bit heavy-handed, but it worked, because it relied on raising empathy for the underdog. Any kind-hearted person would say, "How evil they were, the French, and how right the Việt Minh were to fight for their freedom." One of his books would be enough to convert you. Although we should have seen through the rhetoric, and we should also have raised the fact that there was very little information coming from the Eastern Bloc, from China, from Russia, from North Vietnam. We knew very little, but this was sort of accepted, as something almost normal, that there should be, for instance, 300 journalists in South Vietnam in a normal period, and in times of crisis like Tết 1968, the number would rise to 800 for reporters in the South, whereas in the North you could count them on one hand, and they were always accepted by Hanoi because they were sympathetic to their cause.
GT: When exactly did you start working on your first memoir? Can you give me a timeframe?
MT: I must have started it in the middle of 2010.
GT: And how much time did you let pass before starting the sequel?
MT: Very little. As soon as my book came out, in 2012, I started to work on a story, which was supposed to tell the story of a young patriot starting in 1945, who could have been Minh, but more like someone like my father or his cousins. So, I started reading David Marr, and I started writing this fiction. And then my publisher asked me, "Would you like to do a sequel?" So, then I gave up the fiction project, which is in my notes somewhere, and started working on the sequel to *Such a Lovely Little War.*
GT: *Saigon Calling*, which is about the Vietnam War as seen from Europe.

MT: I needed to tell people, especially in France or in the West, that in spite of what leftwing people in France would say, the Vietnamese were divided, and not everyone sided with Hồ Chí Minh. To say that the entire population sided with him is a lie. For me it's like saying, "All Asians look alike, can't tell one from the other."

My father's generation was stigmatized as being "pro-American," and that word really annoys me, because if you say stuff like "the pro-American Saigon regime," you should also say "the pro-Soviet Hanoi regime." Nobody calls De Gaulle's Free France "pro-American," although the only French equipment the Free French had were their rank insignias. All their equipment was American! It's rubbish to say that because you have received the help of a country you immediately and unconditionally become "pro-that" country. Unfortunately, you need their help. And when you rely on someone else to come and save you, you always pay for that. But it's kind of racist, dismissing us as "pro-American."

GT: How much of yourself is in Minh, as a character? You share a vague physical resemblance.

MT: There's a lot of Minh in me. Not out of narcissism, I often say. A lot of comic artists, or artists in general, tend to draw themselves naturally. To create these characters, if yours is a realistic style, you have to have models. And the mirror is the closest model available.

GT: Putting yourself in Minh's position, would have you made the same choices? Choosing art, and Paris, over the military.

MT: I'm not so sure about that. When I wrote this story, I was thinking about what I would have done in his situation. But the guy-who-wants-to-go-to-Paris situation, this was not so much my personality. I wanted him to be very much like the youth of *today*, who hope to study, to go on Erasmus to Barcelona. They don't want to join any fight or struggle. They're not particularly political, most of them. So, I wanted him to be a hedonist, more interested in pleasure, in the arts, than in the war. My case was different: although I was influenced by the anti-militaristic atmosphere in France, I was also curious of seeing what the French army was like. I was drafted at 23. I was curious to discover the famous French army which we had seen in Vietnam. I found it an interesting complement to a young man's education.

GT: That's also what happens to Minh in the story, do you reckon? He matures?

MT: War enables him to mix with people from other social classes. He befriends the two guys who escort him, and lots of other soldiers. Guys he would otherwise never have met.

Marcelino Truong
Graphic Novelist,
France
Giacomo Traina
The "Sapienza" University of Rome,
Italy,
University of Silesia in Katowice,
Poland

GT: One of my favorite moments in the novel is when he receives news of the Việt Minh victory, and he says, "*We* have won." Despite his forced enrollment and all. Another paradox.
MT: One day, my father called me and said, "You must come and have lunch with me and an old colleague of mine, he was a diplomat in Washington, he's called Nguyễn Phú Đức. When we knew him in Washington, he was a junior officer at the embassy. But in 1972–73 he became the RVN's Minister of Foreign Affairs. He was at the Paris peace talks with Kissinger representing South Vietnam." We went to lunch in a restaurant. This must have been in 1995. And we came to discuss the battle of Điện Biên Phủ. And so Nguyễn Phú Đức said, "When I learned about the victory at Điện Biên Phủ, I was already on the nationalist side, but I felt a sort of shiver of pride, because the Vietnamese had managed to defeat the French." Before the WWII defeat, the French army was considered the best in the world. In Indochina, the French expeditionary force tried to wash away the shame of the 1940 defeat, exactly as officers like Francis Garnier, who attacked Hanoi in 1873, had wanted to wash away the shame of the 1870 defeat against the Prussians. In French we say, *Redorer le blason des armes françaises*, "to regild the coat of arms of the French military."
GT: And do *you* feel the same too? I'm fascinated by this paradox.
MT: Yes, because Điện Biên Phủ Qestablished the Vietnamese soldiers' valor on the battlefield.

Fig. 6
Truong's father, diplomat Trương Bửu Khánh (1927–2012). The picture was taken in 1952 when Khánh served as a press officer in the High Commission of Vietnam in Paris. Photo courtesy of Marcelino Truong

GT: In the novel you put the spotlight of the State of Vietnam, which was a French-controlled entity with limited agency—an "associate state"—but formally, it was independent from Paris. Do you think it stood a chance?

MT: My viewpoint is much influenced by my father's. He had studied International Relations at Sciences Po. In 1951, someone offered him a job in Emperor Bảo Đại's cabinet in Paris, which would later become the *Haut Commissariat du Vietnam en France*. So, he seemed to have believed in the State of Vietnam, at least as a possibility. And he wasn't the only one. Many non-communist Vietnamese wanted to believe that the Associated State of Vietnam was a feasible option.

Now, it's difficult to build a state in the midst of a war. Especially with a neighbor as huge as China lurking next door. The State of Vietnam was far from being perfect. It was easy to criticize—its opponents didn't waste one second to say that this was a puppet state, or worse, a fascist regime. A constitutional monarchy, which could have evolved into a pluralistic democracy, that was what my father was dreaming of. That was his hope. He wasn't dreaming of a *fascist* state. He admired England's parliamentary system. I think that the nationalist option given by France may have been imperfect and very difficult to bring to life in a country at war, especially from 1949 onwards, with the birth of communist China. One can imagine that Mao wasn't eager to have a nationalist Vietnam at China's southern border.

The State of Vietnam (1949–55) and later the Republic of Vietnam (1955–1975) were both described by the progressive West as dictatorships. Perhaps, but the same could have been said of communist North Vietnam. Moreover, looking back on the post-war years, I can't help observing that many countries who started off with conservative right-wing regimes slowly drifted towards more democratic and pluralistic institutions. Take Spain, Greece, Japan, Chile, Taiwan, South Korea, etc. Meanwhile, no such change has taken place either in China, in North Korea, in Cuba, or in Vietnam.

GT: Did your father read your work?

MT: He died in June 2012; my first book came out that October. He had only read the first 150 pages in the form of a rough. I was trembling when he read it because he was a very learned man, and I was afraid of his judgment. But he made absolutely no comment about the content and only corrected my Vietnamese spelling mistakes and wanted to make sure that his career as a diplomat was accurately depicted. I remember him saying, "You show me attending cocktails in Washing-

Marcelino Truong
Graphic Novelist,
France
Giacomo Traina
The "Sapienza" University of Rome,
Italy,
University of Silesia in Katowice,
Poland

ton, it all sounds very frivolous, I didn't just do cocktails, I endeavored to get grants for Vietnamese students, I organized exhibitions, I had artifacts brought over, I wasn't only having drinks." But he didn't read the rest of the book because he died. I'm hoping that I have been saying things that he would have liked to say himself.

GT: While reading *40 Men*, I kept wondering *when* and *to whom* Minh is writing the story, as he speaks in a past tense.

MT: He's telling the story to French readers of today. To warn them against too much enthusiasm for high-flown ideas. Originally, however, I wanted the first few pages to show Minh in a reeducation camp after the French Indochina War, with cadres asking him to write his biography, because that's what they asked you to do in reeducation camps. So, the whole book was supposed to be his confession, steeped in self-criticism (*autocritique*). That was the original idea. First, it would have been a confession in a North Vietnamese prison camp. Then another option was that his voiceover was what he was explaining to a military officer of the South Vietnamese army in Saigon, who was working for the Southern security apparatus, filtering these guys coming from the North and settling down in Vietnam. Lots of spies must have come over to the South in those days.

GT: Last question. Will you ever write another memoir about your life experiences after the Vietnam War? About your life in the 1980s–1990s.

MT: I don't know. Perhaps if I have the time. I'd like to write more and draw less. I'm not saying it's not hard work. It's difficult, but it's clearly less work.

Abstract: This conversation with French illustrator, painter, and author Marcelino Truong retraces his decades-in-the-making artistic journey with a special focus on the historical research informing it. The son of a South Vietnamese diplomat and a French mother, Truong has devoted a trilogy of graphic novels to Vietnam's tumultuous recent past. The interview, conducted toward the end of 2023, specifically centers on his latest work, *40 Men and 12 Rifles*, which recounts the First Indochina War through the eyes of a forcibly enrolled war painter. Among other things, Truong discusses his creative process, the complexities of his mixed heritage, and his motivations for giving a human face to the "other side."

Keywords: Marcelino Truong, Vietnam War, Vietnam War narratives, First Indochina War, Assimilation, Memory, Identity, Trauma, Diasporic Experience, Cold War History, Global Cold War, Diasporic Vietnamese Literature, Vietnamese Diaspora

Bios: Marcelino Truong, painter, illustrator, and author, was born in 1957 in Manila, on the Calle San Marcelino—a street that lent him his name. The son of a Vietnamese father and a mother from Saint-Malo, he spent a peripatetic childhood in the Philippines, the United States, Saigon, and London. A self-

taught artist, Truong holds a degree from Sciences Po Paris and is an agrégé in English; he launched his artistic career in 1983. Known for his warm and luminous style, he has illustrated a wide range of adult and children's literature, both fictional and documentary. In 2002, he authored and illustrated *Fleur d'eau* (Éditions Gautier-Languereau), the first of four picture books portraying a bygone Vietnam. He continued exploring Vietnamese heritage through *La Carambole d'or*, a traditional tale adapted by Yveline Feray (Éditions Philippe Picquier Jeunesse). His later work, *Trois Samouraïs sans foi ni loi* (2008), evokes the world of masterless swordsmen in Edo-period Japan. Truong also designed the animation *Petit Wang* (dir. Henri Heidsieck), which won the Television Film Award at the 2006 Annecy Festival. A prolific book cover artist, he has collaborated with publishers such as Éditions de l'Aube, Le Dilettante, Actes Sud, Plon, Kaïlash, and Gallimard, and has illustrated works by Éric-Emmanuel Schmitt (Albin Michel). His drawings appear regularly in the French press (*Libération*, *Marianne*, *ELLE*, *XXI*). Returning to comics, he adapted James Lee Burke's *Prisonniers du ciel* for Casterman/Rivages/Noir (2010). His most significant recent work is the graphic memoir *Une si jolie petite guerre – Saigon 1961–63* (Denoël Graphic, 2012), a vivid recollection of his childhood during the early years of the American war in Vietnam.

Giacomo Traina is a Research Fellow at Sapienza University of Rome, and an Adjunct Professor of Anglo-American Literature at the University of Trieste. He 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.

WORKS CITED

Lacouture, Jean, and Simonne Lacouture. *Vietnam: voyage à travers une Victoire*. Seuil, 1976.

Marr, David G. *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power*. University of California Press.

Orwell, George. *Homage to Catalonia*. Mariner Books, 1969 [1938].

———. *Down and out in Paris and London*. Mariner Books, 1972 [1933].

Trương Bửu Lâm. *Patterns of Vietnamese Response to Foreign Intervention: 1858–1900*. Yale University Press, 1967.

Truong, Marcelino. *Such A Lovely Little War: Saigon 1961–63*. Translated by David Homel, Arsenal Pulp Press, Vancouver, 2015.

———. *Saigon Calling: London 1963–75,* Translated by David Homel, Arsenal Pulp Press, Vancouver, 2017.

———. *40 Men and 12 Rifles: Indochina 1954*, Translated by David Homel, Arsenal Pulp Press, Vancouver, 2023.

Zhai, Qiang. *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975*. University of North Carolina Press, 2000.

Marcelino Truong
Graphic Novelist,
France
Giacomo Traina
The "Sapienza" University of Rome,
Italy,
University of Silesia in Katowice,
Poland

Review of International American Studies
RIAS—Vol. 18, Fall-Winter, № 2/2025
ISSN 1991-2773
DOI: https://doi.org/10.31261/rias.18187

DECOLONIZING VIETNAMESE LITERATURE: VOICES FROM WITHIN

An Interview with Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai, Author of *Dust Child* (2023)

Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai
Independent writer
and
Mariya Doğan
Hacettepe University in Ankara, Türkiye
https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0314-5295
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7157-2434

Fig 1. Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai (Courtesy of the writer)

While serving in the American War in Việt Nam, thousands of American soldiers fathered children with Vietnamese women. Now in their seventies and eighties, some veterans, who have long struggled with the trauma of war and kept their past a secret from their families, are eager to reunite with the children they never knew. The topic has gained media attention[1] in recent years, following an increase in visits by American veterans to Việt Nam, where some of them sought to reconnect with their children and former partners, placing advertisements in the local press. In Western media, Amerasian children born to American fathers and Vietnamese mothers during and shortly after the war received the term "dust of life," which was popularized by the 1989 musical *Miss Saigon*. In tiếng Việt, however, the term *bụi đời* carries a broader and more general meaning, devoid of racial connotations. Unlike its Western adaptation, where it has been associated with Amerasian individuals, *bụi đời* refers to street children or wanderers—those who drift through life without a clear direction or purpose. The term evokes the image of individuals who, like dust, are an inseparable part of urban life. They may be abandoned and neglected, yet their presence is inevitable and omnipresent, highlighting the realities of marginalization within society.

1 See, for example, Jonathan Watts in *The Guardian* (May 2, 2005), David Lamb in *Smithsonian Magazine* (June 2009), Jeff Stein in *Newsweek* (December 2, 2013), and James Dao in *The New York Times* (September 15, 2013), among others.

The experiences of Amerasian children and the enduring impact of war trauma, explored within the framework of movement and transnational migration, are the main topics of Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai's novel *Dust Child*, published in 2023 by Algonquin Books. I had the opportunity to interview Quế Mai in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan—a foreign country to both of us, yet one rich in nomadic history that felt symbolically relevant to our conversation. This setting offered a fitting context to explore the themes of displacement, rootlessness, belonging, reconciliation, and personal connections.

Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai—a Vietnamese writer, translator, and activist— stands out as a distinctive voice to speak about themes of mobility, cultural exchange, and the construction of cultural identities. Her personal and professional life exemplifies a continuous crossing of geographical and linguistic boundaries, reflecting the fluidity of contemporary transnational experiences. Exploring Việt Nam's expanding ties with the United States and beyond, she brings a unique perspective on the interplay between individual and collective memory, and the shaping of cultural identities in a rapidly changing world.

Nguyễn describes herself as a global nomad, an epithet that reflects her life of constant mobility since childhood. Born in a small village in Northern Việt Nam in 1973, she moved with her family to the Mekong Delta at the age of six, where she spent much of her early years. In 1992, she was awarded a scholarship from the Australian government, which enabled her to travel outside Việt Nam for the first time. After four years of study in Melbourne, she graduated at the top of her class with a degree in Business Management and Business Administration from Monash University.

Returning to Việt Nam, Nguyễn dedicated herself to sustainable development through roles with international organizations, including various UN agencies. She also founded Chắp Cánh Ước Mơ, a voluntary group supporting children with cancer, and established two scholarship programs to help disadvantaged Vietnamese children continue their education. While she has spent most of her life in Việt Nam, her career has taken her to Australia, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Belgium, and Indonesia. Currently, she divides her time between Việt Nam and Kyrgyzstan.

In interviews, Nguyễn has frequently emphasized her lifelong passion for reading and writing, describing how she often found hope and solace in literature. Although dreaming of becoming a writer since childhood, she pursued various jobs before returning to her passion at the age of thirty-three. With the support of scholarships from Lancaster University in the UK, she began her Master's in Creative Writing

Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai
Independent writer
and
Mariya Doğan
Hacettepe University in Ankara, Türkiye

in 2012 and earned her PhD in Creative Writing in 2020. During these two programs, she completed two novel manuscripts, both of which became the foundation for her subsequent novels. Nguyễn is the author of thirteen books, including five in English and eight in Vietnamese. Her English-language works include the poetry collection *The Secret of Hoa Sen* (2014), the novels *The Mountains Sing* (2020) and *Dust Child* (2023), the children's book *Earth Cakes and Sky Cakes* (2023), and the forthcoming poetry and essay collection *The Color of Peace* (2025). Nguyễn's publications in Vietnamese span poetry, short fiction, and non-fiction. In addition, she has translated eight books between tiếng Việt and English. As Nguyễn expressed in a social media post, writing in both languages provides her with fulfillment and when faced with challenges in one language she frequently finds inspiration in the other: "I love writing in Vietnamese and English. If I get stuck in one language, I switch to another one."[2]

Nguyễn's primary area of research focuses on the enduring effects of war. Her debut novel *The Mountains Sing* is a family saga that explores the devastating impact of war across generations. Set against the backdrop of twentieth-century Việt Nam, the novel spans several decades, beginning with the French colonization, the Japanese occupation during World War II, moving through the First Indochina War, the land reforms under Communist rule in the 1950s, the American War in Việt Nam, and the war's aftermath. The story is told from the perspectives of three generations of women: Diệu Lan, the grandmother, endures the hardships brought on by the First Indochina War and the early years of communist rule, while her daughter, Ngọc, faces the societal challenges of the land reforms and government policies; Hương, the granddaughter, seeks to make sense of her family's past amidst the lingering trauma of war. This generational perspective allows the author to address the broader scope of Việt Nam's historical struggles, from the colonization and war to the shifting social and political landscapes that followed.

Nguyễn's second novel, *Dust Child,* further showcases the author's interest in depicting the emotional complexity of historical trauma. The novel unfolds through a non-linear structure, alternating between the late 1960s and contemporary Việt Nam. The story follows several interconnected characters, each navigating their trauma and searching for redemption. The plotline centers on the lives of two sisters—Trang

2 Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai [@nguyenphanquemai], *Instagram*, 5 Aug. 2019, https://www.instagram.com/p/DCtqJwRAsBi/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA%3D%3D.

and Quỳnh, who leave their rural village in 1969 to work in Sài Gòn, where they find themselves in a new, complex world of bar girls catering to American soldiers. The narrative also shifts to the contemporary period, where the consequences of the war still resonate in the lives of the characters: Dan, the American veteran, returns to Việt Nam in search of his war-time lover and their child; Phong, abandoned as a child and labeled a "dust of life" because of his mixed race, seeks to uncover the identities of his parents and find a better future in the United States. Nguyễn's novel sheds light on the complex history of the American War in Việt Nam and its lingering effects on both individual and society, bringing attention to voices and stories that are often overlooked.

Fig. 2 and 3. Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai and Mariya Doğan (from Mariya Doğan's private collections)

Mariya Doğan: You have spent a significant amount of time living outside of Việt Nam in recent years, and your most successful works have been written in English and published internationally. If you were to classify your literary identity, would you consider yourself a diasporic writer, an immigrant writer, or a Vietnamese writer? Or would you suggest that your identity fits into another category altogether?
Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai: My nationality is Vietnamese, and my only passport is Vietnamese. I spend a significant portion of my year in Việt Nam too—at least a third of it. However, I believe nationality should not be the sole factor in determining literary identity. I consider Vietnamese literature to encompass the voices of diasporic writers as well. It is not limited to works written within Việt Nam's borders. Writers from the Vietnamese diaspora, such as Ocean Vương, Viet Thanh

Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai
Independent writer
and
Mariya Doğan
Hacettepe University in Ankara, Türkiye

Nguyen, and Thích Nhất Hạnh, contribute richly to this tradition, carrying the Vietnamese heritage with them wherever they are. That, to me, defines us as Vietnamese authors.

MD: You hold a degree in Business Management and Business Administration, have worked with international organizations and contributed to impactful charitable projects in Việt Nam and abroad. Given this background in international work, what inspired you to pursue a career in writing instead? How did this transition come about, and what drew you to focus on literature as your primary pursuit?

NQM: I always dreamed of becoming a writer. As a child, I kept a diary where I would write poems, though it was just something personal, for myself. At the age of ten, I secretly entered a writing competition in Hà Nội and won a prize. But when the letter arrived informing my parents that I had won, they were shocked. Given the challenging history of writers in Việt Nam, they didn't want me to become a writer. Even though writing was always my passion, life took me in other directions. My family encouraged me to pursue a stable career, so I ended up studying business instead. Much later, after I got married, my husband and I moved to Bangladesh. While there, I worked in a library, and that experience completely changed my perspective on life. I spent a lot of time reading and loved being surrounded by books. When we returned to Hà Nội, I decided to reconnect with my dream of writing and began composing poetry again.

MD: In your interviews, you often speak of your deep connection with books and the written word, noting that books were your only friends during several years of your childhood. You also mention that your school years were shaped by poverty, and you had to work as a rice farmer and a street vendor to support your family. Could you elaborate on how, as a young girl selling cigarettes on the street and vegetables at the town's market, you cultivated this bond with literature?

NQM: Books have always played a crucial role in my life, providing comfort and support during difficult times. My parents' love and appreciation for books inspired me to be a writer. They bought me books even though we didn't have enough to eat. In the 1980s, when Việt Nam transitioned to a market economy, my parents ventured into business but ultimately lost everything. We were deeply in debt, and creditors came to our house, taking everything, including my bicycle and the cassette recorder I used to study English. The only possessions we had left were books, as the creditors didn't think they were worth anything. I clung to those books, reading them for comfort and inspiration. They helped me feel less alone and less afraid, especially when I read about characters overcoming challenges. That's

when I became fascinated by the power of books to transform lives. In both of my novels, I explore this theme, highlighting how writers can create real, positive change through their work.

MD: Your social activism has been recognized through numerous awards, including the Australian Alumni Award for Sustainable Social Development in 20083 and the Female Vision Award in 2010.4 Is social engagement typical for writers in Việt Nam? Is there an expectation for writers to take on socially active roles?

NQM: In Việt Nam, many people aspire to be writers, and there is a large number of poets, but not all of them engage in social activism. For me, however, my involvement in social issues stems from my personal experiences. Having worked with the UN, founded charity organizations, and grown up in poverty, I've witnessed firsthand the impact of giving back. In other words, this decision was deeply personal because I understand the value of receiving and giving to others. I believe that for a writer to truly make an impact, they need to consider society as a whole, not just their own individual experience. That's why I gravitate towards writers who address social issues, explore the future, and offer ways to improve society collectively.

MD: In your essay "Climbing Many Mountains," you describe your work as a response to Western narratives that "continue to see [Việt Nam] only as a place of war and the Vietnamese as people who don't need to speak."

NQM: This is why one of my writing missions is to decolonize literature about Việt Nam, to showcase my homeland as a country of over four thousand years of history and culture. Việt Nam is a nation shaped by its past, but not defined by it. It is filled with dynamic, forward-thinking people who are creating its future. This vision of Việt Nam goes beyond the war narrative, emphasizing its resilience and limitless potential. Over the past fifty years, my country has undergone remarkable transformation. Every time I return, I'm amazed by the speed of its development. Growing up, I witnessed the scars of war—people missing limbs, shattered buildings, environmental damage; I used to travel from North to South by train and saw many bomb craters alongside the tracks.

Now, Việt Nam is a thriving country, full of hardworking, positive individuals. It's a place that never sleeps, always striving for the future.

3 Awarded by the Australian Consulate in Vietnam, the Vietnamese Graduates from Australian Club, and the Australian Agency for International Development.

4 Awarded by the Hanoi International Women's Club, an award given to a female leader who has made outstanding contributions to sustainable development.

Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai
Independent writer
and
Mariya Doğan
Hacettepe University in Ankara, Türkiye

Of course, we still face challenges such as unsustainable development, environmental problems, climate change, and social inequality. But I hope that as we continue to enjoy peace, we can rebuild the country and overcome the scars of the past. Through my novels, I want to present a Việt Nam rich in culture, history, and vibrant traditions, as well as a place with immense potential for growth and innovation.

MD: Do you feel that writing offers you a means of contributing to societal change?

NQM: As a writer, my aim is to bring greater visibility to Vietnamese culture and inspire social change through my work. In my novels, I intentionally weave in authentic Vietnamese proverbs, reflecting the richness and complexity of our heritage. I love playing with language, sound, and light while incorporating Vietnamese traditions into my work. I also preserve full diacritical marks in Vietnamese names and language—details that might appear unfamiliar to Western readers but are vital to our identity. This is my contribution to decolonizing literature about Việt Nam and to challenge Western readers to engage with our language—and, at the very least, to see our country beyond the context of war.

The power of literature to foster empathy and cultural recognition is unquestionable. For many years, I have volunteered my time to translate literary works, poetry, and essays, amplifying voices that often remain unheard. Having worked as a translator, I've read widely, corresponded with most writers in Việt Nam, and closely followed the work of both emerging and established authors. I used to facilitate exchanges and conferences between Vietnamese and international writers, aiming to create a bridge between cultures. I also facilitated visits by American veterans to Việt Nam, translating their deeply personal writings and organizing events to share their narratives with the public. Engaging with their stories was profoundly moving—it allowed me to see beyond childhood perceptions of them as enemies and understand their humanity and enduring trauma.

MD: Could you explain how you define the decolonization of English-language literature about Việt Nam and share how you have contributed to this process?

NQM: Colonization takes many forms. Eliminating or distorting aspects of a nation's culture or customs for the convenience of a dominant society is one of them. As a writer, I believe language is power, which is why I have used Vietnamese as a subversive tool, subtly woven into English text. I often leave Vietnamese words untranslated, providing enough context for the readers to infer their meaning, inviting them to embrace Vietnamese culture, learn new words, and appreciate

the richness, color, texture, and rhythm of our language. My hope is for them to arrive in Việt Nam not just with their minds, but also with their hearts.

I believe it was colonization that stripped away Vietnamese of its diacritical marks, catering to the eyes and ears of Western readers. In *The Mountains Sing*, *Dust Child* and *The Color of Peace*, the Vietnamese language stands proudly with its diacritics, unlike most English-language books about Việt Nam, where my mother tongue is stripped down of them. For that reason, I made sure that my name, Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai, and the names of twenty-three major and minor Vietnamese characters in *The Mountains Sing* appear with full diacritics. I was rejecting the norms of the English publishing industry, possibly sacrificing the commercial success and popularity of my novel in the process. Yet, removing the diacritics would have been a profound disrespect to my language, as they are integral to the meaning of each word. For example, a part of my name, Quế, means "cinnamon," but without the diacritical mark, it becomes Que, meaning "a stick."

In 2023, I was invited to write for *The New York Times* as part of their series "Read Your Way Around the World." When my essay "Read Your Way Through Hanoi" was published, all of the diacritical marks in the Vietnamese words and names were removed. At the suggestion of my wonderful editor, I managed to insert the following note at the end of the essay: "The Vietnamese words in the original version of this essay used diacritical marks. To comply with *The New York Times* style, the marks were removed before publication. Unfortunately, this practice alters the meaning of the words. In the case of Hỏa Lò Prison, for example, 'hỏa' means 'fire,' and 'lò' means 'furnace': the Burning Furnace Prison. Without the marks, 'hoa' means 'flowers,' and 'lo' means 'worry,' rendering the term 'Hoa Lo' meaningless. I look forward to the day when *The Times* and other Western publications celebrate the richness and complexity of Vietnamese, and of all other languages, by showcasing them in their original formats." You can still read this note on the *The New York Times*' website.

Decolonization takes one step at a time, and I hope for gradual but long-lasting changes to take place.

MD: In *Dust Child*, your American character, Dan, stands as an example of how an appreciation of language and culture can shift a person's ideological perspective. Initially blinded by propaganda and seeing the Vietnamese as faceless enemies, he later recognizes humanity of the people he once fought. Can you elaborate on this character's transformation?

Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai
Independent writer
and
Mariya Doğan
Hacettepe University in Ankara, Türkiye

NQM: In the novel, Dan tried to understand the humanity of his former Vietnamese enemy by reading books about them. This is his reflection: "When he told his vet friends, they were surprised he chose books written by people who had once tried to kill them. Whom they had once tried to kill. But he needed to understand the people he'd dehumanized during the war. In searching for their humanity, he was trying to regain his own." Reconciliation and forgiveness require acknowledging and understanding all perspectives, seeing each individual as complex and valuable. As a writer, I strive to shed light on those often marginalized—bar girls, mixed-race individuals, or someone like Dan, who participated in atrocities. Delving into his character was key to revealing his inner conflict and growth.

In modern warfare, the distance created by technology often removes the personal connection to those affected. For example, people can now sit in a faraway, comfortable place and use drones to drop bombs onto others, hence they don't really see the impact first-hand. It's vital to remember the individuality of everyone involved, irrespective of their choices or ideologies. Sometimes, these behaviors are shaped by propaganda or cultural influences. I hope for a world where compassion bridges divides, fostering understanding across differences. With greater empathy, we might move closer to fewer conflicts and more enduring peace.

MD: You went further than merely humanizing the American veteran, you present part of the tragic story through his narrative voice. How difficult was it for you to look at the process of reconciliation from the point of view of an American veteran?

NQM: *Dust Child* includes the voices of mixed-race people born and abandoned during the war, as well as their parents'. This includes Phong, a black American Vietnamese man, two Vietnamese mothers, Trang and Quỳnh, and an American father, Dan. Writing in the voice of Dan—a traumatized American veteran—was immensely challenging. I'm a Vietnamese woman writing in English as my second language, so stepping into Dan's world meant bridging such a significant gap. It required deep empathy, extensive research, and a willingness to imagine a life so different from my own. Tackling the perspective of a man who was once considered an enemy of Việt Nam was a deliberate choice. I was inspired by my work with American veterans, accompanying them to former battlefields and witnessing their interactions with those they once fought. I felt compelled to include the voices of the fathers of mixed-race children, to explore why they left and what drives some of them to return seeking their children. To bring authenticity to this narrative, I conducted interviews with many

veterans and drew upon extensive research—memoirs, films, and other materials about the American experience in Việt Nam. This process wasn't easy, but it was essential to capture the complexity of these individuals and provide them with a voice in the story.

MD: As part of your research for *Dust Child*, you examined the stories of Amerasian children born during the war. Could you share more about their lives? In particular, what challenges did they face in both Vietnamese and American societies, and how did you approach portraying their personal experiences in your writing?

NQM: We don't have exact statistics on how many Amerasian children were born during the war, and that's a sad reality. But, in my view, the numbers aren't as important as the human stories behind them. Each child is an individual with their own unique struggles. Their trauma often goes unrecognized, brushed aside by both Vietnamese and American societies. The effects of war are long-lasting and can affect generations. While we typically focus on the children born in Việt Nam, similar children were born in the Philippines, Japan, and other countries, often facing harsh treatment as the children of war. What I wanted to do was focus on their humanity, rather than the statistics.

MD: In your novel, you mention the free DNA tests offered to Amerasian children who want to reunite with their American fathers. Could you elaborate on this program? Are these DNA tests still being offered in Việt Nam, and are there other support initiatives for those affected by the war?

NQM: DNA tests are not readily available in Việt Nam. There is no DNA bank to help match people looking for relatives, which is why support from the US is crucial for Amerasians. Typically, the tests are sent to labs in the US, and the results are added to their system for matching. I hope that Việt Nam will one day have its own DNA bank, especially since many people, not just Amerasians, are still missing from the war. Hundreds of thousands of people remain unaccounted for, many of whom were soldiers who never returned, their families still waiting for them. Even today, mass graves are being discovered, but identification is often difficult unless personal items are found with the bodies. It's a deeply heartbreaking reality.

MD: Do you believe your book helped raise awareness about the current situation of the Amerasian community? Have you received any feedback from Amerasian individuals about their personal stories, and how do you think your work resonated with them?

NQM: In Việt Nam, there are still many Amerasians searching for their family members. Some hope for better opportunities through their American relatives, while others just want to uncover their personal

Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai
Independent writer
and
Mariya Doğan
Hacettepe University in Ankara, Türkiye

histories. I became involved in some of these real-life searches, carried out by people looking for each other after more than forty years of separation. Through this, I learned that for many Amerasians born in Việt Nam and abandoned by their fathers, life was very difficult; they couldn't get education and employment, and often felt excluded from society.

For those Amerasians who moved to the US, some have found success through hard work and determination. However, many still face considerable discrimination. There are Amerasians who struggle with unemployment, and some are homeless. The search for their fathers and the trauma they carry is deep and ongoing. I stay in contact with some of these people, and I also have the opportunity to host events with them. Some have contacted me after reading the novel. For example, Trần Văn Kirk, a film director, reached out to me after reading *Dust Child*. He attended one of my events in Washington, DC, and shared that reading the book helped him understand his past. That was a deeply moving moment for me. In addition, I've been contacted by American veterans and their families, who shared that my book helped them confront and reconcile with their trauma.

MD: The topic of the war seems to hold a deeply personal resonance for you. Was your family directly affected by the war, or did any of your relatives take part in it?

NQM: My uncle went to war, traveling through the Trường Sơn Mountain along the Hồ Chí Minh Trail. Sadly, he passed away before I became a writer, and I have always regretted not having the chance to speak with him or ask him about his experiences. After his death, I became deeply curious about what he might have endured. This led me to interview many people, and those conversations inspired the chapter "The Journey South" in my first novel, *The Mountains Sing*.

So, both of my novels draw on autobiographical elements. When I was a teenager, long before I even considered becoming a writer, I began visiting my parents' villages to talk with older relatives and family friends. I wanted to understand what life had been like for my grandparents, who either died or were killed before I was born. At the time, I didn't realize it, but I had already begun gathering material for my novels. Later, I interviewed many more people and also fictionalized some of my own experiences, as well as those of my family. For example, *The Mountains Sing* was my way of honoring my grandmothers and reconnecting with their stories. My grandmother died during the Great Famine of 1945 in a cornfield, and this event inspired the scene in the novel where Diệu Lan, the grandmother of the main character Hương, dies in a similar way. The poem "The Poem I Can't

Yet Name" from my collection *The Secret of Hoa Sen* also reflects my connection to my grandmother.

MD: Have you ever considered writing a memoir?

NQM: I don't think I will be able to. My story involves many painful and traumatic experiences so I would not want to relive them. With fiction, you can hide behind your characters' voices, and I use that as a way to tell the story of my family and myself. The truth is still there—I just present it in a different way. Interestingly, I think poetry is also an incredibly honest way to convey the truth. With poetry, you have to bare your soul; there's no room to hide. I love weaving poetry into everything I write. At events, I often joke that I trick readers into reading my poetry by sprinkling it throughout my novels.

MD: Talking about censorship: In all your novels you address topics that are controversial for Việt Nam. How have your books been received by the readers in your country?

NQM: In Việt Nam, as in many other countries, censorship is a reality. Some books are denied publication altogether, while others must be edited to comply with regulations. This is one of the reasons I chose to write in English—so my work, particularly historical fiction, wouldn't be subject to such restrictions. Now the rights to both of my novels have been purchased by a Vietnamese publishing company, which is currently working on translating them. I try not to think too much about how they might be censored; once a book is finished, I consider it to have its own life. I focus instead on creating the next story.

That said, I've been fortunate to receive a lot of positive feedback from Vietnamese readers, which makes me happy. Additionally, there's an international team based in Việt Nam working on a screenplay adaptation of *Dust Child*. Of course, moving from scriptwriting to the actual film will take time, so we'll see how it unfolds. Writing, for me, is about giving voice to stories and characters, and once a book is out in the world, it will have its own, independent life.

Abstract: This interview features 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 conversation delves into Nguyễn's literary journey and her dedication to decolonizing narratives about Việt Nam. 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. This discussion provides an insight into her creative process and the enduring relevance of her work.

Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai
Independent writer
and
Mariya Doğan
Hacettepe University in Ankara, Türkiye

Keywords: Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai, Vietnamese literature, *The Mountains Sing*, *Dust Child*, postcolonial literature, Vietnam War narratives, Amerasian experiences, historical fiction, multi-generational storytelling, war and memory

Bios: Dr. Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai is the author of thirteen books in Vietnamese and English, most recently the internationally bestselling novels *The Mountains Sing* and *Dust Child*. Her book of poetry, *The Color of Peace,* is forthcoming in the United States in June 2025. Her writing in Vietnamese has received some of the top literary awards in Vietnam including the Poetry of the Year 2010 from the Hanoi Writers Association. Her writing in English has received numerous international awards including Runner-up for the Dayton Literary Peace Prize, the PEN Oakland/Josephine Miles Literary Award, the International Book Awards, the BookBrowse Best Debut Award, and the Lannan Literary Fellowship in Fiction. Quế Mai's books have been translated into more than twenty-five languages and has appeared in major publications including *The New York Times*. She is an advocate for Vietnamese literature and is the translator of eight books. She was named by Forbes Vietnam as one of 20 inspiring women of 2021. She has a PhD in Creative Writing with the U.K.'s Lancaster University. More information: www.nguyenphanquemai.com.

Mariya Doğan is a PhD candidate at the Department of American Culture and Literature at Hacettepe University in Ankara, Türkiye. She has received Master's diplomas from Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv (Ukraine) and Hacettepe University in Ankara. She is a member of International Organization of Folk Art (IOV), Association of American Studies of Turkey (ASAT), and International American Studies Association (IASA). Her interests lie primarily in the area of contemporary American fiction and focus on representations of ethnic identity and memory. Her recent publications include "East-European Brides in the West: a Study of Cross-Border Marriages in the United States," "Aleksandr Ptushko's *Noviy Gulliver* [The New Gulliver] (1935): The World's First Full-Length Animated Film and Pragmatics of Ideological Adaptation," and "Forward to the Past: Narratives of Violence and Trauma in Jonathan Safran Foer's Novels."

Review of International American Studies
RIAS—Vol. 18, Fall-Winter, Nº 2/2025
ISSN 1991-2773
DOI: https://doi.org/10.31261/rias.18343

GRATITUDE, RESISTANCE, AND MOBILE MEMORY IN THUONG VUONG-RIDDICK'S *THE EVERGREEN COUNTRY: A MEMOIR OF VIETNAM*

Mattia Arioli
University of Bologna
Italy
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4981-6396

THE VIETNAM WAR: A PLURICENTRIC MEMORY

The representation of the Vietnam War as a conflict that escapes any framing within a unitarian narrative has become a recurring trope in the existing literature on the subject (see, among others, Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz; Turner; Sturken; V. T. Nguyen; Dittmar and Michaud). Scholars have not only questioned how this conflict should be understood, depicted, remembered, and learned from, but they have also observed that the different communities involved in the hostilities created their own memories of the event and commemorative practices (see V. T. Nguyen; Eyerman et al.). The contentiousness of this conflict is evident if we consider the way in which the event, its participants, and its outcomes are named. While Americans refer to the conflict as the Vietnam War, most people in present-day Vietnam would call it either the American War or the War of National Independence (cf. Eyerman et al.; Schwenkel). The term Second Indochina War is, instead, used to stress that the war resumed old hostilities after 1945, when Ho Chi Minh and the Communist Party declared independence from French colonial rule in Hanoi. Similarly, April 30, 1975, is remembered differently among the communities involved in the conflict. As Thi Bui recalls in her graphic memoir *The Best We Could Do*, "There is no single story of that day, April 30, 1975. In Việt Nam today, among the victors, it's called LIBERATION DAY. Overseas, among expats like my parents, it is remembered as THE DAY WE LOST OUR COUNTRY" (211). In contrast, some American revisionists claim that the "Fall of Saigon" marks the loss of a "noble cause," using a phrase popularized by President Reagan at the annual meeting of the Veterans of Foreign Wars in 1980. On this

occasion, he indeed urged the nation to overcome the so-called Vietnam Syndrome by reminding American citizens of the sacrifices made by the many young Americans who fought and died selflessly: "We dishonor the memory of 50,000 young Americans who died in that cause when we give way to feelings of guilt" (Reagan n.p.). Reagan used this event to promote a new reading of the recent past and the lessons one should learn from that military debacle. Thus, the United States should have devoted more resources to the armed forces instead of restraining the use of military power, as Carter did in the aftermath of the conflict. Reagan's predecessor limited the resources allocated to the army because he knew that the war in Vietnam, and the images it generated, tore public opinion apart (Schulzinger 338).

The presence of conflicting narratives may be attributed to each (national) group's need to commemorate the dead, the living (their traumas, achievements, and losses), and the war itself. As in previous wars, each nation feels the urge to honor those who served the country, finding meaning in their deaths. However, the creation of a unitarian narrative is hindered by the presence of several tensions that lie at the heart of the conflict. For instance, the US's problematic interventionist policies undermined its claims to uphold the ideals of "freedom," "democracy," and "human rights," leading to the formation of anti-war movements. Yet, in the aftermath of the conflict, the US government used the bodies of injured veterans and the supposed presence of MIAs and POWs in Indochina to reconcile a fractured nation (see Franklin), despite the presence of dissenting voices.

To better understand not only the existence of fractured memories but also their persistence in the present, we must discuss the role that dominant narratives and "carrier groups" play in the formation of collective traumas. As the American sociologist Jeffrey Charles Alexander observed, "cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identities in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (1). Therefore, cultural trauma not only shapes personal memories, but it also informs the development of individual and collective identities. Yet, it is worth noting that a tragic event is not intrinsically traumatic from the beginning. Rather, its definition as "traumatic" is attributed subsequently through a process of meaning-making and is linked to "the social processes that lead to its representation and acceptance" (Eyerman 3). Indeed, as sociologist Neil Joseph Smelser argued, traumas are "made, not born" (37). Given that trauma is constructed by society, it needs what sociologists

Mattia Arioli
University of Bologna
Italy

have termed "carrier groups" (cf. Weber; Alexander) and "cultural agents" (cf. Eyerman et al.). In other words, trauma requires groups of people with common interests and cultural producers (e.g., painters, novelists, poets, journalists, filmmakers, intellectuals, etc.), who can express their interpretation of an event in the public sphere.

The constructed nature of memory emerges more clearly if we divert our attention from the communities involved in the hostilities to Canada, a country that did not participate actively in the conflict but nonetheless co-opted its memory. This co-optation aimed at fostering its image as a haven. It is worth noting that the 1960s and 1970s were not only the years of the Vietnam War. It was precisely in this period that Canada began to define its identity through both nationalist political discourses and literary works, giving rise to the so-called Canadian Renaissance (Gebbia 27). Therefore, against this backdrop, it becomes important to understand how Canada appropriated the memory of the Vietnam War for nationalist purposes, and how Vietnamese Canadians have complicated these claims over time. In this article, I will focus on Thuong Vuong-Riddick's *The Evergreen Country: A Memoir of Vietnam* (2007), a book that has received limited scholarly attention. Robert McGill does not mention it in *War Is Here: The Vietnam War and Canadian Literature* (2017), one of the few monographs dedicated to the literary memory of the Vietnam War in Canada, and Mai Truong rapidly dismisses the text as "compliant" with dominant narratives. However, as Vinh Nguyen argued in his essay on Kim Thúy's semi-autobiographical book *Ru* (2009), the performance of gratitude toward the host country should not be confused with compliance or a lack of criticism. Moreover, it is interesting to note that—despite the similarities—Thúy's books (written in French and later translated into English) received more attention from both the general public and scholars than Vuong-Riddick's memoir.

THE MYTH OF CANADA AS A SAFE HAVEN

Although Canada did not send troops as the US did, and it did not suffer military losses, it is difficult to consider the country's position in the war as truly neutral. In fact, Canada was the main arms dealer for the US and manufactured many of the weapons (traditional and chemical) responsible for the killing of millions of civilians during the war. Victor Levant estimates that "Canada furnished some $2.47 billion worth of war material to the US between 1965 and 1973" (55). The scholar also recalls that Canada benefited not only from the selling of ammunitions, weapons, chemicals, radio equipment, and the iconic green

beret, but also from the selling of raw materials, petroleum, copper, and nickel (Levant 51–62).

Ironically, Canada continues to depict Phan Thị Kim Phúc—the "Napalm Girl" immortalized in Nick Ut's famous photograph—as a symbol of Canada's benevolence, having granted her political asylum. While her story is generally celebrated for putting an end to the conflict, becoming a symbol of healing and reconciliation, Canada avoids taking accountability for its involvement in the war and the scars on her body (cf. V. Nguyen "Vietnamese Canadian Refugee Aesthetics"). Indeed, even though it was an American plane that dropped the napalm on her, many of the chemical weapons used against civilians had been manufactured in Canadian factories (cf. Levant; V. Nguyen "Vietnamese Canadian Refugee Aesthetics").

Over time, Canada's "quiet complicity" (cf. Levant) has been overshadowed by nationalist discourses aimed to emphasize the progressiveness of the state. In particular, the Vietnam War provided Canadian nationalists with an opportunity to define a Canadian identity that contrasted with the militarism and aggressiveness of the US, as Robert McGill observed:

> By introducing Vietnam to discussions of North America, nationalists could distinguish US imperialism and militarism from Canadian multilateralism and peacekeeping […] New nationalists saw America as oppressing Vietnam in ways that paralleled the US economic and cultural domination of Canada, and they suggested that the parallels might grow even more alarming if the United States ever decided Canadians were a security threat. (14)

The image of a liberal and peaceful Canada was also fostered by the fact that the country had no military draft. In the eyes of many Americans, "Canada" thus became synonymous with "freedom" (cf. Steward; Foley; Squires), just as it had been for many African Americans a century earlier when they fled the US to escape slavery after the War of Independence (cf. Nelson). The myth of Canada as a benevolent state committed to human rights was further entrenched by the Underground Railroad in the nineteenth century. Abolitionists' songs, such as those written by George W. Clark, often referred to Canada as a land of freedom: "I told him I had left the whips, and the baying of the hound,/ To find a place where man is man, if such there could be found/ That I had heard in Canada that all mankind were free,/ That I was going northward now in search of liberty" (Clark 296). However, this myth is a retroactive fabrication that erases British and French practices of slavery. Indeed, the enslaved fugitives who crossed the border before 1833 did not enter a free country at all (cf. Whitfield; Nelson). Moreover, even

Mattia Arioli
University of Bologna
Italy

after the abolition of slavery, Black refugees in Canada still faced racism in housing, education, and employment. These harsh conditions implicitly aimed at limiting black immigration and settlement. However, despite the hardships, the myth of Canada as a haven endured. As late as 1967, Martin Luther King Jr. stated in his CBC Massey Lectures: "Canada is not merely a neighbor of negroes. Deep in our history of struggle for freedom Canada was the North Star" (King 3).

The rhetoric that casts Canada as a safe haven welcoming those who seek refuge was strengthened by the Vietnam War. During the conflict, many American draft dodgers found a new home in Canada. Their immigration, as well as the securing of legal and permanent entry to Canada thanks to the acquisition of Landed Immigrant status, was eased by the 1967 Immigration Act. In particular, this law facilitated the entry of those immigrants deemed capable of assimilating into Canadian society. As Churchill remarked,

> [t]o qualify for Landed status an applicant needed only 50 out of a possible 100 points. For young, college-educated Americans, the point system was a boon. English-speaking, with high skill levels and a desire to move to communities such as Toronto with high demand for labour, most draft resisters had no trouble earning enough points. (5)

The presence of American draft dodgers popularized the perception of Canada as a liberal alternative to America. Canadian writers played a pivotal role in reinforcing this nationalist myth through their writings, which often featured draft dodgers. Think, for example, of Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride* (1993), Linda Spalding's *The Paper Wife* (1994), Mordecai Richler's *Barney's Version* (1997), and Alistair MacLeod's *No Great Mischief* (1999).

Although the figure of the draft dodger can still be encountered in contemporary narrative, McGill noticed a "veteran turn" in post-9/11 novels (32). According to him, these novels present American veterans currently living in Canada as both victims of PTSD and perpetrators of violent acts during the conflict, evoking two American clichés that have quickly become popular across various media: among others, Scorsese's 1976 movie *Taxi Driver* and Tim O'Brien's 1994 novel *In the Lake of the Woods*, respectively. These narratives inevitably cast Canada as a peaceful country that is "simultaneously hospitable to Americans and susceptible to their violence" (McGill 203). Whereas Canada is presented as a welcoming country, the US is portrayed as the aggressor. These narratives ultimately become cautionary tales, warning Canada about the potential threat posed by its neighbors, who do not hesitate to use violence to achieve their goals. A clear example of this trope

is David Bergen's *The Time in Between* (2005). The novel's protagonist, Charles Boatman, a Vietnam War veteran relocated to Canada after the war, is haunted by his shooting of a boy who he took for an enemy soldier. Clearly, the texts hitherto mentioned use the Vietnam War to draw a line between Canada and the US. This operation is not at all surprising; the Vietnam War happened in synchrony with Canada's (literary and political) coming of age, in turn leading to Canada's full independence in the 1980s. Thus, the US is a negative example that should not be followed.

However, the myth of Canada's hospitality is not limited to the presence of American expatriate characters. In particular, scholar Vinh Nguyen has noted the emergence of a "Vietnamese Canadian Refugee Aesthetics" in literary texts and other cultural products from both Anglophone and Francophone Canada.[1] These works shift the focus away from stories about white North Americans to present the perspectives of diasporic Vietnamese characters. This category can be further divided into two sub-categories, based on the ethnic identity of the "cultural agent" (cf. Eyerman et al.) who activates the war's memory. The first group comprises former Vietnamese refugees and second-generation immigrants, while the second one features non-ethnic Vietnamese authors.

REMEMBERING THE VIETNAMESE DIASPORA: TWO DIFFERENT CARRIER GROUPS

Diasporic Vietnamese Canadians document the personal experiences of their community by transcribing them as memoirs or reworking them in fictionalized form. They do so to bring forgotten histories into the public archive. These narratives often allow the reader to enter private experiences through a character that has a privileged point of view, capable of piercing through the complexity of Vietnam (as a war and a country). The centrality of this traumatic event for the members of the Vietnamese diaspora has been discussed by Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, who makes the following observation: "To view Vietnamese American texts only as refugee narratives restricts the full recognition of Vietnamese American experiences and identities. But to view Vietnamese American literature outside the framework of war, in reaction to dominant representations and expectations, is also limiting" (59). Pelaud warns about the risks of separating this group identity from

1 Although this aesthetics has its roots in the 1980s, when Nguyễn Ngọc Ngạn wrote *The Will of Heaven* (1983), it was not until the 2000s that these texts gained full visibility, as in the works of E. E. Richey.

Mattia Arioli
University of Bologna
Italy

the memory of a foregone war that still haunts the present, because doing so could create an ahistorical category. This statement can be generalized to all the texts produced by diasporic Vietnamese living in Anglophone countries,[2] as the commemoration of that war creates transnational bonds that somehow keep the community together. Indeed, as we have seen, trauma is also a social construct that often serves identity politics. Hence, one might speculate that one of the reasons behind the memory projects related to the war is the desire to protect the community and to avoid being completely assimilated into the Asian Canadian (or American) category.

The uninterrupted production of texts that narrate or at least reference the Vietnam War shows its cultural relevance, as the conflict continues to shape the identity of several ethnic groups and generations. For instance, Thuong Vuong-Riddick—the author of *The Evergreen Country: A Memoir of Vietnam* (2007)—belongs to the first generation; Kim Thúy, author of the celebrated novels *Ru* (2009), *Mãn* (2013), and *Em* (2020), belongs to the 1.5 generation; and Vincent Lam, the author of *The Headmaster's Wager* (2012), belongs to the second generation. The continuity of this literary production across different immigrant generations testifies to the need to process this traumatic event, a need felt by generations who experienced the conflict as eyewitnesses and those who inherited it in the form of what Marianne Hirsch defined as "postmemory" (82). This phenomenon of intergenerational transmission is obviously not limited to Canada; it occurs transnationally across the diaspora. In fact, some Vietnamese American texts, such as Andrew X Pham's *Catfish and Mandala* (1999) and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), reveal that the coming of age of refugee children is haunted by the past. Interestingly, whereas a first-generation author like Vuong-Riddick relies on autobiographical content to describe her migration from Vietnam to Canada in her memoir and poetry collection, Kim Thúy and Vincent Lam do not hesitate to recur to fictional elements. In particular, Lam uses fiction in *The Headmaster's Wager* (2012) to investigate Vietnam's history through the lens of an unsympathetic character of Chinese descent based in Saigon, who relocated to the US instead of Canada. In these cases, the use of fictional elements highlights that those memories are inhabited by projections.

2 The development of Vietnamese Anglophone literature in the US, Australia, and Canada is a result of the post-1975 diaspora. However, in France, which has the oldest Vietnamese community in the West, the emergence of Vietnamese Francophone literature dates back to the early twentieth century and the colonial period. In contrast, French-Vietnamese literature in Québec began developing after 1975.

The experiences of diasporic Vietnamese are particularly interesting because they raise many questions not only about the legacy of the war, but also about transnationalism, diaspora, globalization, and refugee rights, among other things. Indeed, it is worth noting that, after the Fall of Saigon, many of the refugees who migrated overseas became "stateless" when it came to their Southern Vietnamese identity. The US, Australia, Canada, and France were the main Western countries of resettlement for many Vietnamese refugees. As Nathalie Huỳnh Châu Nguyễn observed (8), the US has the largest number of Vietnamese (2.3 million), followed by Australia (334,785), France (between 300,000 and 350,000), and Canada (275,530). This diaspora has given form to a transnational memory that transcends borders and places, creating a complex network of memories as the experiences of Vietnamese Canadians resonate with those of other diaspora members relocated to other countries. The unofficial and unrecognized voices of many diasporic Vietnamese gradually started to emerge, offering a counternarrative to the memories of both the US and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. As Long T. Bui observed, a new focus on the South Vietnamese side might help "to truly 'Vietnamize' the legacy of war, exposing a critical perspective that had been repressed within Vietnam's communist national imagery and reprogrammed through the 'Americanization' of the war's memory in popular Hollywood films" (2). Their experiences of Vietnamese Canadians may also raise questions about the refugee policies enacted by Western countries in the aftermath of the exodus, such as the creation of "non-places" (Augé 79), where the immigrants have to wait to know whether they will be granted the status of refugee. After all, as Giorgio Agamben wrote, "[i]n the nation-state system, the so-called sacred and inalienable rights of man prove to be completely unprotected at the very moment it is no longer possible to characterize them as rights of the citizens of a state" (116). Moreover, the notion of refuge often conceals the challenges that newcomers face in their new environment.

In addition to the texts produced by diasporic Vietnamese, we can identify a second group, informed by writers who have no affiliation with the Vietnamese diaspora. They do not evoke the event to expose unknown aspects of the conflict or to give a name to some of the refugees who came to Canada. Rather, they activate this war memory to express opposition to the government by sharing the experience of marginalized groups. Hence, the Vietnam War has become part of a transnational and transethnic shared memory. Since the Vietnam War was used to foster the idea of a liberal, welcoming, and multicultural Canada, these authors feel the urge to revisit that history to dispute Canada's values.

Mattia Arioli
University of Bologna
Italy

A clear example of the possibility offered by fictional accounts is Dionne Brand's celebrated novel, *What We All Long For* (2005). The author, a Black Canadian writer and poet, recounts the lives of a close circle of second-generation twentysomethings living in downtown Toronto from the point of view of a Vietnamese narrator. Through her characters, Dionne imagines second generations as being capable of escaping the nostalgia in which the previous generations seem to indulge, while also rejecting the representation of Canada as a tolerant, colorblind, and multiracial society and proactively imagining a future based on cultural syncretism and hybridity (Goellnicht 200). Therefore, memory and narrative tropes are activated to create a counternarrative to national myths that exalt Canada's multiculturalism, exposing its contradictions and failures while advocating for cross-racial forms of solidarity. A similar drive can also be observed in Kathryn Kuitenbrouwer's *All the Broken Things* (2014), where the diaspora experience is reworked through the myth of Orpheus to make a general statement about humanity. Hence, Brand's and Kuitenbrouwer's novels not only enact a form of cultural appropriation, but they also demonstrate that memory is not fixed or linked to a geographic or temporal point of origin. In other words, it is constantly (re)claimed and moves across nations. Memory is not just the creation of a nostalgic look at the past; it responds to the demands of the present. For this reason, it is often subject to revision and contradicting forces, especially in the context of migration.

The two types of diasporic Vietnamese narratives hitherto described respond to two different types of relations. The narratives written by Vietnamese Canadians are informed by what Margalit defined as "thick relations" and are "grounded in attributes such as parent, friend, lover, fellow-countryman" (7). They are anchored in a shared past and respond to loyalty concerns. Thick relations allow communities to survive in virtue of a shared bond. In contrast, refugee narratives written by other ethnic groups are informed by "thin relations" that rely on a more volatile bond, based on the recognition of a shared human condition and the impulse to feel responsible for the pain of others.

NARRATING THE VIETNAMESE DIASPORA AND CANADA'S MULTICULTURALISM

Even though the refugees from the Vietnam War and their descendants have been actively engaged in the creation of their own "memory projects" (Leavy 14), the host countries have also sought to co-opt their narratives. As Yến Lê Espiritu demonstrated in *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)* (2014), American popular culture has

often portrayed the military as "good warriors" defending democracy in order to justify the US's self-appointed role as leader of the "free" world. To achieve this goal, the government often refashioned its history of imperialism into a celebratory tale of benevolence by highlighting good deeds capable of turning the debacle into a "lost cause" for democracy. The presence of refugees who fled after the conflict was seen as proof of the former enemy's wickedness, whereas images of soldiers assisting Vietnamese evacuees and Vietnamese showing gratitude toward their rescuers sought to redeem the military (see Espiritu), whose reputation was severely damaged by both the military loss—an emasculating experience (see Jeffords)—and the images of violence that circulated during the war. This narrative not only tried to overcome the Vietnam Syndrome, but it also conveniently avoided recalling that many Americans did not welcome these refugees and that many Vietnamese encountered difficulties once they arrived in the New World.

Instead, these narratives tended to praise those immigrants who, thanks to their hard work, managed to fit into the new society and become successful. They thus renewed faith in the myth and promises of the American Dream and legitimately embodied the "model minority" stereotype (cf. Osajima 2000; Lee 1999), a construction that emerged during the Cold War. As Robert G. Lee highlighted, this contested myth portrays Asian Americans as the "paragon of ethnic virtue," as their economic and social success is considered the result of stoic patience and political obedience (145–179). In his seminal book, *Oriental: Asian Americans in Pop Culture* (1999), he further maintained that "[t]he successful transformation of the Oriental from the exotic to the acceptable was a narrative of Americanization, a sort of latter-day *Pilgrim's Progress*, through which America's anxieties about communism, race-mixing, and transgressive sexuality might be contained and eventually tamed" (Lee 145). Therefore, this myth had two rhetorical dimensions. First, it presented the US as a liberal democracy where people of different ethnic backgrounds could benefit from equal rights and upward mobility, building upon the old myth that cast America as a melting pot. Second, it sent the message to ethnic minorities that assimilation was welcomed, whereas militancy was (and still is) considered a threat.

The US is not the only nation to have co-opted Vietnamese refugees and the notion of refuge to project a certain image of itself. In fact, Vietnamese refugee narratives involuntarily became a signifier and proof of the success of Canada's multiculturalist ideology and immigration policies. It is worth noting that the government's espousal of multi-

Mattia Arioli
University of Bologna
Italy

culturalism coincided with the Vietnam War and the exodus of many people from Vietnam and Southeast Asia. To solve the political tensions between the Francophone and Anglophone communities, in 1971, the Pierre Trudeau administration announced a policy of multiculturalism that institutionalized the Canadian Mosaic. In Canada, the key minority is geographically and linguistically defined, and this condition has forced the state to accommodate Francophone and Anglophone divisions through a multicultural policy within a dual linguistic structure, which was subsequently applied to other minority and immigrant groups in Canada (Peach). In particular, the Multiculturalism Act of 1988 grants all Canadians the right to celebrate their ethnic heritage, values, and beliefs, recognizing these elements as contributing to the nation's diversity, provided they do not conflict with the existing laws and the constitution. Furthermore, the claim to accommodate the diversity that shapes the nation has allowed the Canadian government to rewrite April 30 as a National Day of Commemoration. Whereas many diasporic Vietnamese (mainly refugees from South Vietnam) mourn their exile and exodus, Canada celebrates its benevolence, recognizing the fundamental role that Canadians played in rescuing and welcoming thousands of refugees after the Vietnam War. This different interpretation of the historical meaning of the Fall of Saigon is also testified by expressions used to refer to April 30. Indeed, while diasporic Vietnamese call it "Black April Day," to indicate the moment their misfortunes began, the Canadian government labels it as the "Journey to Freedom Day" (Ngo 64). As a result of this semantic shift, the focus is no longer on the refugees' suffering, but on the acceptance of Vietnamese refugees in Canada, the gratitude of the Vietnamese to the Canadians, and the contribution of the people of Vietnamese descent to the country. Vietnamese Canadians are constructed as part of a nation-building project that de facto removes the history of Vietnam and wishfully forgets the violence that triggered their displacement. This erasure is not accidental, as it removes Canada's complicity in the war and portrays the nation as a refugee haven.

Finally, it is difficult to separate the Vietnamese diaspora in Canada from the one in the US. This does not mean that the diaspora in Canada lacks distinct characteristics. Rather, "it reveals how Vietnamese scattered across the globe continue to remain connected to America through both a backward- and forward- looking gaze" (V. Nguyen "Refugee gratitude" 17). Indeed, as Vinh Nguyen pointed out, the main character of Kim Thúy's *Ru* (a semi-autobiographical novel written in French) uses the expression "American Dream" as a blanket phrase to indicate

upward mobility (V. Nguyen "Refugee gratitude" 21). The presence of this expression in a French novel about Vietnamese refugees in Québec—a territory marked by separatist feelings—is revealing. It signifies the pervasiveness of the "American Way," which is an unsurprising aspect given that the US military presence in Southeast Asia lasted twenty years and American cultural products (and lifestyles) have become transnationally adopted because of globalization.

MEMORY IN FLUX: THUONG VUONG-RIDDICK'S RECOLLECTION OF VIETNAM IN *THE EVERGREEN COUNTRY: A MEMOIR OF VIETNAM*

The final part of this article will explore how Thuong Vuong-Riddick's memoir *The Evergreen Country: A Memoir of Vietnam* (2005) complicates Canada's memory of the conflict. I have chosen this text for a variety of reasons, including the fact that it is one of the first memoirs written by a Vietnamese Canadian, which began to challenge the prevailing understanding of the diaspora, at the same time enforcing and resisting dominant narratives that cast the Vietnamese as emblematic victims and/or successful immigrants, as well as grateful beneficiaries of liberal freedom, democracy, and wealth. The text seeks to educate the Canadian readers about the complexities of the war while introducing them to an exotic land. A similar attempt and intention can also be observed in many memoirs published in the US by authors of the Vietnamese diaspora in the 1970s. As Michele Janette observed in her introduction to the anthology *My Viet: Vietnamese American Literature in English, 1962-present*,

> most of the memoirists of the 1970s and '80s wrote because they felt American audiences needed to hear their stories. Their narrative contains hopeful, generous explanations of why they are sharing their stories, such as the desire to promote healing and reconciliation among veterans or the proffering of their lives as examples to other immigrants. (xvii)

It is probably the awareness of being one of the first Vietnamese Canadians to remember the war and her belonging to the first generation that compels Thuong Vuong-Riddick to express gratitude to the host country (Canada) in her memoir. However, I argue that this gratitude never translates into forms of oblivion toward Canada's complicated (racial) history. Rather, the text evokes historical events that undermine the myth of Canada's multiculturalism. At the same time, the author tries to resist voyeuristic and orientalist gazes by using vignettes. Finally, like Vincent Lam's *The Headmaster's Wager*, the memoir emphasizes the demographic diversity of Vietnam, an aspect that is often ignored in Western narratives.

Mattia Arioli
University of Bologna
Italy

VIGNETTES FROM VIETNAM

The style of the memoir reveals that, while the narrative may serve as a guide to Otherness for a Western readership, the dry style acts as a form of resistance. Each chapter functions as a sort of vignette focusing on a particular place or time, while all the other elements are blurred. The lack of adjectives and the essential nature of the narrative leave many details in the background, making it the reader's responsibility to reconstruct the full scene. Hence, these chapters resemble photographic images, displaying a "punctum" (Barthes 1981): a partial object that is powerful enough to provoke a response from the observer. This photographic rendering is not at all surprising, given that the Vietnam War was one of the first conflicts to be fully televised, and the presence of compact cameras—including the famous Leica—together with news cameras allowed data to become easily portable and rapidly transferable. This created a de facto semiotic space that ended up shaping the collective memory of the conflict (see Hallin; Sontag). Yet, in this case, the evoked images do not belong to the public archive but to the family album. Hence, it is no coincidence that the text also includes family pictures to validate its veracity, exploiting the indexical value of photography.

Moreover, the decision to leave many details in the background could be seen as an attempt to abide by what Edouard Glissant called "the right to opacity" (209), indirectly implying the right to exist beyond the Western gaze. In fact, the narrator seems aware of the Western tendency to look at Vietnam with patronizing eyes. In the last chapters, she describes her return as a tourist in 1995—after the "normalization of relations" with Vietnam—to the places of her childhood. Interestingly, she is accompanied by two Canadian friends, and when one of them solicits the Vietnamese to speak French, she scolds him, saying: "The French stayed one century and did not learn Vietnamese" (167). The text here seems to mediate between the need to express gratitude to the new country and inform readers, who must be introduced to the history of the author's homeland, and the desire to prevent her personal story from being co-opted into nationalist narratives or viewed through an orientalist lens. The decision to use personal vignettes allows the author to allude to violence without describing it in graphic terms, avoiding a pornographic rendering of the war and the enactment of what Chong termed the "Oriental obscene" (10–12).

AN ETHNIC CHINESE PERSPECTIVE

As the title suggests, *The Evergreen Country: A Memoir of Vietnam* (2007) is a biographical account that recalls salient moments in the life of its author, Thuong Vuong-Riddick, a Vietnamese Canadian with Chinese ancestry who migrated to France, and later to Canada because of the Vietnam War. At the very beginning of the memoir, the author reveals that her family name is a transliteration of the Chinese surname Wang (Vuong-Riddick 10). By recalling her ancestry, she makes the Western reader aware of the polysemous expression "boat people." In the Western world, the term is often used generically to refer to the humanitarian crisis that led many Vietnamese people to leave their country between 1975 and 1995, but Vuong-Riddick reclaims the term to show how her family's migration preceded the so-called Vietnam War:

> My family's story begins with the first flow of "boat people" at the end of the 19th century. My grandparents and great-grand-parents came to Vietnam from mainland China — from Fukien, now called Fujian […] At the end of the 19th century, the Portuguese, Dutch, Spanish, British, and French controlled Southeast Asia. Thousands of Chinese peasants fled the wars of empire and resistance in sampans. The Vietnamese called these people nguoi tau, which means "boat people." Chinese migrants populated cities, covering the streets with a latticework of small businesses. (Vuong-Riddick 6)

Through this biographical note, the author teaches Western readers about the complex history of this geographical area. At the same time, she complicates the understanding of Vietnamese identity, showing the existence of different ethnic groups, and colonial stratifications. The narrative outlines some cultural differences between Chinese and Vietnamese cultures (food, astrology, etc.) and the historical tensions that characterized the relations between these two countries, while highlighting some core similarities, as both cultures shared Confucian values. However, the memoir never turns into an uncritical celebration of hybridity, as the text makes the reader aware of the cultural clash and how the prolonged contact with (neo)colonial agents created new outcasts: the Métis, mixed-race orphans who were left behind by French (and later American) soldiers when they returned to their (respective) homelands. The memoir also portrays several attempts to assimilate the Chinese minority by both the government of Saigon and communist Vietnam.

Mattia Arioli
University of Bologna
Italy

CULTURAL MEDIATION BETWEEN RESISTANCE AND COMPLIANCE

In the memoir, the author-narrator is both an ethnographer and a cultural mediator who gives the reader insight into Vietnamese and Chinese cultures by drawing parallels or highlighting the differences with Western culture. For instance, in some passages, she recalls the texts she read while attending Sainte-Marie Catholic school during the colonial years to explain how the Vietnamese and Chinese parenting model diverged from the French (and Western) one: "The French education I was getting made me look at my mother and my relationship with her through foreign eyes" (Vuong-Riddick 57). While French mothers were present and affectionate, her own mother never showed any form of physical affection, despite caring for her children.

The memoir not only stresses the different parenting models, but also different "values dimensions" (cf. Hofstede et al.) based on identity (collectivism vs. individualism), hierarchy (large power distance vs. small power distance), gender, caring, and obligations. For instance, the author explains the gendered and hierarchical structure that governed Vietnamese and Chinese families while stressing how and to what extent her family diverged from that model, but also how French colonialism partially transformed family relations, providing imaginary alternatives and models for comparison:

> The French had introduced the notion of individuality to Vietnam, and they had also brought the concept of personal happiness. In *Spring Uncompleted*, the heroine is against the practice of concubinages, because it contradicts and undermines both notions. "Better to be a peasant's wife than to be a king's concubine." (Vuong-Riddick 40)

As the author recalls, French books started to circulate and foster the idea of romantic love in a country where marriages were transactions between families and individual consent was not necessary. These new ideas contrasted with the established values transmitted across generations through oral stories and traditional Vietnamese literature. In many Vietnamese traditional narratives, the main heroine often sacrifices herself because of filial piety, as in the famous early nineteenth-century poem *Truyện Kiều* [The Tale of Kiều], written by Nguyễn Du.

The text makes it clear that individual desires and aspirations were often sacrificed in the name of the community's well-being:

> I also began to realize that my father was not the free man defined in the French world. On the contrary, he was indebted by a thousand links to many people

> in every aspect of his life. He had not chosen his wife, his profession (he had wanted to be a scholar), or the place where he lived. He was entangled in his family relations. (Vuong-Riddick 58)

While describing the cultural difference separating the Vietnamese from the Chinese, and these two groups from Western countries such as France and Canada, the narrator avoids making qualitative judgments and favoring one or the other model. Rather, she ponders how those cultural notions shaped her understanding of the world and history while trying to trace the moment she came into contact with certain values, manifesting a hybrid upbringing. The themes of hybridity and porous borders pervade the narrative on several occasions, as many of the characters must display multicultural savvy and mediation skills in order to survive and adapt to different circumstances. For instance, her father uses his limited knowledge of the French language to beg colonial soldiers to spare his shop—the family's main source of income—from destruction, whereas her sister skillfully uses her knowledge of English to do business with the Americans in Saigon. As for the author, French schools made her education possible, allowing her to defer the obligation to marry at a young age, while her French language skills enabled her to escape Vietnam thanks to a scholarship and subsequently provided her with an income to support her family in Canada. Furthermore, the memoir acknowledges the role that French books played in her formation, alongside Chinese and Vietnamese tales.

The narrator's role as a cultural guide to an exotic land that must be unveiled and explained to a Western readership allows the author to delve into the cultural differences between North and South Vietnam before the country was politically partitioned. It also complicates the attempt to conflate the diasporic Vietnamese experience with the history and exodus generated by the Fall of Saigon. Indeed, although she belongs to the Vietnamese diaspora, she grew up in Hanoi, moving to Saigon with her family after the Geneva Conference because of her father's business relations with former French colonials. Once she arrived in Saigon and encountered other children, they pointed out her otherness: she wore different clothes, had a different accent, and manifested different manners. While stressing these differences, the memoir also explains that this division does not do justice to the cultural diversity of Vietnam. For this reason, she mentions Vietnamese people with different faiths (e.g., Catholics and Buddhists) and from different ethnic backgrounds (the Khmer, the Cham, the Jarai, Bru, and Rade, among others). The acknowledgment of the presence

Mattia Arioli
University of Bologna
Italy

of several minorities allows the author to present (South and North) Vietnam as both a victim and a perpetrator, that is, a colonized country and a colonizer throughout its history:

> More than two million ethnic people had been conquered and destroyed by the Vietnamese. Our guide emphasized the cruelty of the Nugent lords at the end of the 17th century, who had decreed that for every Cham man and woman arrested together, the man would be beheaded and the woman would be forced to marry a Vietnamese. (Vuong-Riddick 167)

Interestingly, this duplicity is also evident in the depiction of other nationals. For instance, the memoir presents French colonials as both offenders and victims of the Viet Minh's ruthlessness. Furthermore, it acknowledges that the Vietnamese diaspora did not start with the war and reminds the reader that many Vietnamese living in the Tonkin area were forced by French colonials to immigrate to New Caledonia.

QUESTIONING CANADA'S MULTICULTURALISM WHILE PERFORMING GRATITUDE

Vuong-Riddick's attempt to engage with an ethical form of remembering, acknowledging the suffering inflicted and endured by each side, allows a critical stance toward Canada to emerge. To explain certain historical events to a Western (if not Canadian) readership, the memoir draws an uncanny parallel to Canada's history, which ends up undermining the myth of Canada as a safe haven. Indeed, while explaining how the deterioration of the relations between China and Vietnam in 1975 led the Vietnamese government to take repressive measures against the Chinese minority, forcing the latter to either leave the country or go to work camps euphemistically labeled "New Economic Zones," the memoir mentions the incarceration of many Japanese Canadians during World War II. Interestingly, the year the Canadian Multiculturalism Act was established (1988) coincides with the year redress was given to Japanese Canadians who were relocated and imprisoned from 1941 to 1949. This reference challenges the portrayal of Canada as a tolerant and multicultural society, because it reflects a resurgence of repressed issues that compel the nation to reconsider its approach to ethnicity.

Similarly, Vuong-Riddick acknowledges contemporary Vietnam's attempts to "Vietnamize" the Indigenous Mountaineers culturally, linguistically, socially, and ideologically. To explain this coercive form of assimilation, the text recalls and draws parallels to the experiences of many Indigenous peoples in Canada, whose children were abducted

by government agencies in order to promote their assimilation into mainstream culture. Beginning in the 1880s and continuing until the second half of the twentieth century (the last federally run residential school closed in 1996), Indigenous children were regularly removed from their homes, families, and cultures in order to be assimilated into the Canadian way of life and converted to Christianity (see Castellano et al.). By reminding the reader of this event, the memoir shows how the gift of freedom that Canada offers to the refugees is built upon the deterritorialization of another community. As the Yellowknives Dene scholar Glen Coulthard remarked, Canada "has been structured into a relatively secure or sedimented set of hierarchical social relations that continue to facilitate the dispossession of Indigenous peoples of their land and self-determining authority" (42). Therefore, even though Vuong-Riddick expresses gratitude toward Canada in the memoir, which follows a rather traditional trajectory in which the war disrupts the comfort and tranquility of middle-class life and forces the Vuong family to migrate and resettle in different countries, the narrative is not oblivious to the shadows cast by Canada's benevolence. Given the above, the memoir's closing lines should not be interpreted as an attempt to align with a nationalist, multicultural, and assimilationist agenda: "In Canada, as another immigrant wrote, 'I can be like a newborn and begin a new life,' in this tender green from the beginning of the world." Instead, they show that the feeling of gratitude does not impede the formulation of a critical stance. Rather, expressing gratitude is a way to recognize one's own good fortune. Although Vuong-Riddick managed to escape Vietnam before the war reached its most dramatic moment, she acknowledges that many other Vietnamese were not so lucky. The stories that she shares at the end of the memoir not only seem to constitute a testimonial archive of what happened in the country after the war, but they also function as "what ifs," reminding her of what might have happened had she not received a government scholarship to go to France.

Abstract: This article discusses how Canada has appropriated the narrative of the Vietnam War to present itself as a progressive country. Specifically, it analyzes how the Land of Maple Leaf co-opted diasporic Vietnamese narratives to promote a nation-building project that exalted the country's multicultural ideology and fostered its image as a peaceful kingdom. The article also examines how one of the first memoirs written by a Vietnamese Canadian, Thuong Vuong-Riddick's *The Evergreen Country: A Memoir of Vietnam* (2007), complicates our understanding of the diaspora by both enforcing and resisting dominant narratives that portray Vietnamese Canadians as emblematic victims and/or successful immigrants who are grateful beneficiaries of liberal freedom, democracy, and wealth.

Keywords: Canada, Vietnam War, diaspora, memory, Thuong Vuong-Riddick, mobile memory, resistance, gratitude

Bio: Mattia Arioli is Adjunct Professor at the University of Bologna. He holds a PhD degree in Modern Languages, Literatures, and Culture from the University of Bologna. His doctoral project focused on how the Vietnam War is remembered in graphic narratives. His main research interests include Cultural Memory Studies, Comics Studies, Asian American Studies, Indigenous Studies, and Visual Culture. He has written several essays on War Comics and the relationship between Comics and Cultural Trauma. In 2022, his doctoral dissertation received an Agostino Lombardo Award Honorable Mention. His project "Clement Baloup's Memoires de Viet Kieu: Exploring the Legacy and History of the Vietnamese Diaspora(s)" received a 2023 John A. Lent Award Honorable Mention.

Mattia Arioli
University of Bologna
Italy

WORKS CITED

Agamben, Giorgio. "We Refugees." *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures.* vol. 49, no. 2, 1995, pp. 114–119.

Alexander, Jeffrey C. "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma." *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka, University of California Press, pp. 1–30.

Atwood, Margaret. *The Robber Bride*. McClelland, 1993.

Augé, Marc. *Non–places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity.* Translated by John Howe. Verso, 1995.

Barthes, Roland. 1981. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography.* Translated by Richard Howard. Hill and Wang, 1981.

Bergen, David. *The Time in Between*. Random House, 2005.

Brand, Dionne. *What We All Long For.* Knopf, 2005.

Bui, Long T. *Returns of War: South Vietnam and the Price of Refugee Memory.* NYU Press, 2018.

Bui, Thi. *The Best We Could Do: An Illustrated Memoir.* Harry N. Abrams, 2017.

Castellano, Marlene Brant, Archibald, Linda, and DeGagne, Mike. *From Truth to Reconciliation: Transforming the Legacy of Residential Schools*, Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2008.

Chong, Sylvia Shin Huey. *The Oriental Obscene: Violence and Racial Fantasies in the Vietnam Era.* Duke University Press, 2012.

Churchill, David S. "An Ambiguous Welcome: American Expatriates, National Needs and Cold War Containment." *Histoire sociale / Social History* vol. 38, no. 73, 2004, pp. 1–25.

Coulthard, Glen Sean. *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition.* University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

Dittmar, Linda and Gene Michaud, editors. *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*. 1990. Rutgers University Press, 2000.

Dorland, Gil. *Legacy of Discord: Voices of the Vietnam Era*. Potomac Books, 2002.

Espiritu, Yến Lê. *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)*. University of California Press, 2014.

Eyerman, Ron. *Memory, Trauma, and Identity*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Eyerman, Ron, Todd Madigan, and Magnus Ring. *Vietnam: A War, not a Country*. Amsterdam University Press, 2023.

Franklin, H. Bruce. *M.I.A. or Mythmaking in America*. Rutgers University Press, 1993.

Foley, Michael S. *Confronting the War Machine: Draft Resistance during the Vietnam War*. University of North Carolina Press, 2003.

Gebbia, Alessandro. "La letteratura Anglocanadese," *Le Orme di Prospero. Le Nuove letterature di lingua inglese: Africa, Carabi, Canada*, edited by Lombardo Agostino, La Nuova Italia Scientifica, 1995, pp. 141–219.

Goellnicht, Donald. "Cross–Racial Refugee Fiction: Dionne Brand's What We All Long For." *Refugee States: Critical Refugee Studies in Canada,* edited by Vinh Nguyen and Thy Phu*,* University of Toronto Press, 2021, pp. 194–213.

Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing. The University of Michigan Press, 1997.

Hallin, Daniel C. *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam*. University of California Press, 1989.

Hirsch, Marianne. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*. Columbia University Press, 2012.

Hofstede, Geert, Gert Jan Hofstede, and Paul B. Pedersen. *Exploring culture: Exercises, Stories and Synthetic Cultures*. Hachette UK, 2002.

Janette, Michele, editor. *My Viet: Vietnamese American Literature in English, 1962–Present*. University of Hawaii Press, 2011.

Jeffords, Susan. *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War.* Indiana University Press, 1989.

King, Jr, Martin Luther. *The Trumpet of Conscience*. Beacon Press, 1967.

Kuitenbrouwer, Kathryn. *All the Broken Things*. Random House, 2014.

Lam, Vincent. *The Headmaster's Wager*. Doubleday, 2012.

Leavy, Patricia. *Iconic Events: Media, Politics, and Power in Retelling History.* Lexington Books, 2007.

Lee, Robert G. *Orientals: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*. Temple University Press, 1999.

Levant, Victor. *Quiet Complicity: Canadian Involvement in the Vietnam War.* Between the Lines, 1986.

Mattia Arioli
University of Bologna
Italy

Mai Truong, Mireille "13 Lieu humain / lieu personne chez deux écrivaines canado–vietnamiennes, Thuong Vuong–Riddick et Kim Thúy." *Cultural Mapping and the Digital Sphere: Place and Space*, edited by Ruth Panofsky, Kathleen Kellett, Susan Brown, and Mary–Jo Romaniuk, University of Alberta Press, 2015, pp. 249–262.

MacLeod, Alistair. *No Great Mischief*. McClelland, 1999.

Margalit, Avishai. *The Ethics of Memory*. Harvard University Press, 2002.

McGill, Robert. *War Is Here: The Vietnam War and Canadian Literature*. McGill–Queen's Press, 2017.

Nelson, Charmaine A. "The Canadian Fugitive Slave Archive and the Concept of Refuge." *ESC: English Studies in Canada*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2019, pp. 91–115.

Ngo, Anh. "Journey to Freedom Day Act." *Canadian Review of Social Policy,* vol. 75, 2016, pp 59–86.

Nguyễn, Du. *The Tale of Kieu: A Bilingual Edition of Nguyen Du's Truyen Kieu*. Translated by Huynh Sanh Thong. Yale University Press, 1987.

Nguyen, Viet Thanh. *Nothing Ever Dies*. Harvard University Press, 2016.

Nguyen, Vinh. "Refugee gratitude: Narrating success and intersubjectivity in Kim Thúy's Ru." *Canadian Literature*, no. 219, 2013, pp. 17–36.

———. "Vietnamese Canadian Refugee Aesthetics." *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Asian American Literature and Culture*, edited by Josephine Lee, Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 1–19.

O'Brien, Tim. *In the Lake of the Woods*. Mariner Books, 1994.

Osajima, Keith. "Asian Americans as the Model Minority: An Analysis of the Popular Press image in the 1960s and 1980s." *A Companion to Asian American Studies*, edited by Min Zhou and James Gatewood, New York University Press, 2005, pp. 215–225.

Peach, Ceri. "The Mosaic versus the Melting Pot: Canada and the USA". Scottish Geographical Journal, vol. 121, no. 1, 2005, pp. 3–27.

Pelaud, Isabelle Thuy. *This Is All I Choose to Tell: History and Hybridity in Vietnamese American Literature*. Temple University Press, 2011.

Pham, Andrew X. *Catfish and Mandala*. Picador, 1999.

Reagan, Ronald. "Peace: Restoring the Margin of Safety" 1980. https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/peace–restoring–margin–safety#:~:text=We%20dishonor%20the%20memory%20of,ever%20fought%20in%20any%20war.

Richler, Mordecai. *Barney's Version*. Knopf Canada, 1997.

Schulzinger, Robert D. "The Legacy of the Vietnam War." *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War*, edited by David L. Anderson, Columbia University Press, 2010, pp. 385–408.

Schwenkel, Christina. *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam: Transnational Remembrance and Representation*. Indiana University Press, 2009.

Scorsese, Martin. *Taxi Driver*. Columbia Pictures, 1976.

Smelser, Neil J. "Psychological and Cultural Trauma." *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka, University of California Press, pp. 31–59.

Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Penguin, 2004.

Spalding, Linda. *The Paper Wife*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 1994.

Squires, Jessica. *Building Sanctuary: The Movement to Support Vietnam War Resisters in Canada, 1965–73*. University of British Columbia Press, 2013.

Stewart, Luke. "'Hell, they're your problem, not ours': Draft Dodgers, Military Deserters and Canada–United States Relations in the Vietnam War Era." *Études canadiennes/Canadian Studies. Revue interdisciplinaire des études canadiennes en France,* no. 85, 2018, pp. 67–96.

Sturken, Marita. *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering*. University of California Press, 1997.

Turner, Fred. *Echoes of Combat: The Vietnam War in American Memory*. University of Minnesota, 2001.

Thúy, Kim. *Ru*. Livre expression, 2009.

–––. *Mãn*. Livre expression, 2013.

–––. *Em*. Livre expression, 2020.

Vuong, Ocean. *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. Jonathan Cape, 2019.

Vuong–Riddick, Thuong. *The Evergreen Country: A Memoir of Vietnam*. Hagios Press, 2007.

Wagner–Pacifici, Robin and Barry Schwartz. "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial: Commemorating a Difficult Past." *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 97, no. 2, 1991, pp. 376–420.

Weber, Max. *Economy and Society*. University of California Press, 1968.

Whitfield, Harvey Amani. "The African Diaspora in Atlantic Canada: History, Historians, and Historiography." *Acadiensis: Journal of the History of the Atlantic Region / Revue d'histoire de la region atlantique*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2017, pp. 213–232.

Review of International American Studies
RIAS—Vol. 18, Fall-Winter, № 2/2025
ISSN 1991-2773
DOI: https://doi.org/10.31261/rias.18025

COLLECTIVE TRAUMA AND SURVIVAL OF THE VIETNAMESE REFUGEES IN LAN CAO'S *MONKEY BRIDGE* AND T*HE LOTUS AND THE STORM*

Özgür Atmaca
Başkent University, Türkiye
and
Defne Ersin Tutan
Başkent University, Türkiye
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9863-3636
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9261-3987

Half a century after its end, the Vietnam War still maintains its important place in political and cultural discussions around the world. These discussions generally revolve around the American experience of the war which resulted in great catastrophes. The impact of the war has a lasting effect not only on American collective memory but also on other Western nations for whom the word "Vietnam" brings to mind the memories of the war rather than Vietnam as a country. Hoa Hong Pham expresses that "'Vietnam' is used as a one-word descriptor in American discourse to refer to military interventions overseas. It is also associated with the failure of such interventions" (2). However, despite the fact that the US is widely considered as the defeated side in the war, the discussions and representations of the war are dominated not by the Vietnamese but by the Americans. In order to express the ironic position of the US as the defeated party in the war, whose narrative has dominated its representations, Renny Christopher states that it is a general assumption that history is written by the victors and "the losers live with it," but in the case of the Vietnam War, the Americans, who are thought to have lost the war, are "writing the history of the war" (2). The attitude of ignorance has also been displayed towards the narratives by South Vietnamese individuals who were considered Americans' allies and, thus, the natural losers in the war (2). In that respect, the United States has paid no attention to any records of the war other than its own.

However, although the narratives of the Vietnamese people migrating to the US have not been located in popular fictional or non-fictional American productions, their voice and trauma can be traced in the works written by Vietnamese American writers. As Hidle notes, Vietnam-

ese American literature can be considered a response to "inquiries about the identity stemming from US-centric, myopic, and racialized narratives about the US-Viet Nam War" that serves just to alleviate the remaining American guilt (2). In that respect, it revolves around the memories of a marginalized group whose experiences were ignored or left to be forgotten by mainstream American cultural productions. As a 1.5 generation Vietnamese American and a war survivor, Lan Cao also concentrates on the issues of trauma, identity, and refugee experiences of the Vietnamese people in the US in her literary works. In both *Monkey Bridge* (1997) and *The Lotus and the Storm* (2014), the author focuses on the personal journeys of two different protagonists, both named Mai, while also highlighting the shared struggles of the Vietnamese community as they escape the war and try to adjust to the life in the United States.

This study examines the representations of Vietnam War trauma and the various paths taken by the Vietnamese Americans at the collective level to heal their wounds in Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* and *The Lotus and the Storm*. Through the analysis of these literary works, the study aims to contribute to the efforts in the field of trauma studies that lay emphasis on the experiences of war survivors who strive for safety in Western nations. In both of Cao's novels, although the trauma of the Vietnamese in the US is mostly related to their experiences of the war in their homeland, intolerance to the Vietnamese presence in the US, and thus, their marginalization by Americans, hinders the self-healing efforts of the Vietnamese. Despite the challenges they face in their homeland, on their journey to the US and in the US, the Vietnamese do not prefer a life of passivity; instead, they seek to heal their wounds in every possible way.

TRAUMA AS A COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCE

According to Jeffrey C. Alexander, collective trauma "occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness" (1). The social entity becomes traumatized in situations such as when a "leader dies, a regime falls or [...] when environment of an individual or collectivity suddenly shifts in an unforeseen or unwelcome manner" (2). Neil J. Smelser cites "American slavery, Holocaust, nuclear explosions" as examples of collective traumas, the effects of which continue to reverberate in the present (42). Kai Erikson argues that trauma shared at a collective level has two contradictory consequences; on the one hand it "damages the bonds attaching people together

Özgür Atmaca
Başkent University, Türkiye
and
Defne Ersin Tutan
Başkent University, Türkiye

and impairs the prevailing sense of communality" (160); on the other, it "serves as an instrument to bring people together, [with their] shared experiences mak[ing] the bond among them stronger" (161). In this respect, the experiences of Holocaust survivors or other collectively experienced traumas of violence or natural disasters both damage the social unity and bring the victims together around these shared experiences. Thus, trauma becomes a common culture and a collective memory for the social entity which continues to influence not only the ones distressed by it, but also the future generations. Kellerman likens collective trauma to a radioactive explosion, the large-scale physical and psychical impact on the community of which persists in future generations. As he states,

> this is the essence of collective trauma. Its profound after-effects are manifold and far-reaching. Like a nuclear bomb that disperses its radioactive fallout in distant places even a long time after the actual explosion, any major psychological trauma continues to contaminate those who were exposed to it in one way or another in the first, second, and subsequent generations. (33–34)

Hence, the collectively experienced traumatic situations continue to "contaminate" the children of the victims as there will always remain "traces of the blast imprinted upon the molested space of human consciousness" (33). Similar to Kellerman, Arthur G. Neal also emphasizes the indelibility of collectively experienced trauma on multiple generations as national trauma. From this perspective, it can be said that it is similar to memories of individual trauma which refuse to be buried and continue to haunt the individual. Neal argues that "just as the rape victim becomes permanently changed as a result of the trauma, the nation becomes permanently changed as a result of a trauma in the social realm" (4). However, for an event to be remembered as traumatic collectively, it does not necessarily have to be inherently traumatic in the first place, which means the group does not have to experience the event as traumatizing. As Alexander explains, "trauma is not result of group experiencing pain"; it is "the result of acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity," which is sustained through the representation of the event (10). Thus, the representations of the past in the present are important because, through these representations, meanings are attached to traumas as collective experiences. In that respect, the meaning-making agents in the society, which Alexander calls "collective actors" or "carrier groups," (10–12) such as political leaders, religious groups, media and state institutions, and intellectuals have an important effect on the representation and transmission

of experiences as collective traumas. These groups have a central role in articulating and representing the desire or voice of the troubled people.

According to Eyerman et al., the "agents of memory selectively draw from a reservoir of images and stories in a process of remembering and forgetting [...] collective memory is thus an active process of meaning making in which various social forces compete" (14). Therefore, the arena of collective memory can become a site of both consensus and conflict (15). The example of selective memories conflicting or competing with one another can be traced in the representations of the Vietnam War from different lenses. Hence, "in the United States, former activists in the antiwar movement, as well as dissenting veterans, represent and thus remember the Vietnam conflict differently from those found in official representations" (15). Besides, Vietnamese and Vietnamese American perspectives on the war differ from each other at the collective level. The national narratives and lessons of trauma are "objectified in monuments, museums and collective historical artifacts" (23), and displayed through ritual practices like holidays and commemorations (Eyerman et al. 15). These sites and cultural practices are aimed to bring the traumatized society together under a collective identity and are part of working-through processes. For example, Washington D.C.'s Vietnam Veteran Memorial is part of this collective remembrance and working-through process. However, it does not mention the Vietnamese who fought in the war alongside the Americans, which also reinforces their invisibility in the official discourse. Therefore, the commemoration of collective experiences of the South Vietnamese population in the US is actualized through alternative rituals and discursive practices. For instance, in the Vietnamese Americans' narrative, April 30, 1975 is remembered as the day of the beginning of their exile to the US and loss of homeland, and it is "commemorated as Black April Day or the Day of Mourning" (Eyerman at al. 25) with ceremonies attended by Vietnamese Americans from all around the US. The collective experiences of Vietnamese Americans are also conveyed through their literature. From this vantage point, Vietnamese American intellectuals and writers can be conceived as carrier groups for the expression of collectively experienced trauma of the war and its continuous imprint on the multiple Vietnamese generations in the US. As a 1.5 generation writer, Lan Cao, like many other Vietnamese American writers, focuses on the trauma and expresses that "many Vietnamese friends continue to reel from the events of April 1975 [...] it seems to loom perpetually in our hearts as something forever defining. We are here, but also still there, improbable survivors mauled always by 1975" (Cao

Özgür Atmaca
Başkent University, Türkiye
and
Defne Ersin Tutan
Başkent University, Türkiye

and Cao 37). In that respect, her novels *Monkey Bridge* and *The Lotus and the Storm* do not represent trauma only as an individual experience but place it into a larger context with references to historical realities and collective experiences of the war. As the individual trauma is not disconnected from the collective experience and meanings attached by the community in both novels, individual healing struggles are not isolated from the collective actions.

REPRESENTATION OF COLLECTIVE TRAUMA IN CAO'S NOVELS

Cao demonstrates the impacts of trauma on a collective level by fusing the experiences of the protagonists with those of other members of the community. According to Michelle Balaev, "the trick of trauma in fiction is that the individual protagonist functions to express a unique personal traumatic experience, yet the protagonist may also function to represent an event that was experienced by a group of people" (17). As such, although the trauma is presented through individual sufferings, these experiences are connected to collective experiences. In order to express how trauma fiction can present the protagonist as an "everyperson" figure who represents the collective experiences, Balaev states that

> significant purpose of the protagonist is often to reference a historical period in which a group of people or a particular culture, race, or gender have collectively experienced trauma. In this regard, the fictional figure magnifies a historical event in which thousands or millions of people have suffered a similar violence, such as slavery, war, torture, rape, natural disaster, or nuclear devastation. (17)

The historical event in both novels is the Vietnam War, and the individuals who go through the atrocities of the war are connected to each other through their private but similar stories. Similar to Kai Erikson's description of collective trauma which "damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality" (160), in both novels, the effects of the war on the collective level are portrayed as the disruption of the social bonds, dispersal of huge numbers of people, mass graves and deaths, while people are trying to save their lives.

Both novels give descriptions of the numbers of South Vietnamese people trying to escape the country of origin and their refugee experiences in the current country they have immigrated to where they expose stories about their traumas. The historical name for the survivors who escaped from Vietnam is "the boat people" which refers to the Vietnamese escaping in huge numbers by boats in the South

China Sea. In her book devoted to the subject, Sucheng Chan describes the chaotic situation of a huge number of people who were trying to escape by the American planes and boats for fear of being murdered by their enemies. During the day of the "fall of Saigon," "more than one hundred and thirty thousand Vietnamese managed to escape before North Vietnamese troops entered Saigon. Over seventy-three thousands of them did so by sea" (63). The movement of people after the fall does not stop and continues in high numbers in later years. According to Linda Hitchcox, between 1976 and 1979 the journey of refugees became more dangerous as the people who fled by boat at those times "faced a hazardous crossing in small and under-equipped craft, which were liable to attacks by pirates [...] It is estimated that between 40,000 and 150,000 people lost their lives at sea during this period" (72). Chan describes the situation in the following words: "Some boats with broken engines drifted for weeks as people on board died of thirst and hunger. Most of the women faced the possibility of being raped by pirates. This was the price they had to pay for freedom" (201). Thus, the traumatic experiences of the individuals are parts of an event that affects the whole community collectively.

In *The Lotus and the Storm*, Mai and her father Minh are among the crowds that are being evacuated by helicopters before Saigon is captured. Her narrative chapter is named "Exodus," associating the number of escaping people with the historical and collective traumas of Jewish people. Similar to the Jewish departure from their homeland Egypt, the Vietnamese people are leaving their country, the loss of which will be felt through melancholic and nostalgic memories in "Little Saigon" in the US. Mai describes their final escape with emphasis on the loss of homeland. She states: "The country has fallen. Peace has come but Saigon lost" (245). Mai continues to describe the people leaving Vietnam during the period between 1975 and 1978 to reach other countries.

> They are called the boat people. It is because they flee from Vietnam's coast by boat. Their very essence is aptly distilled by two simple, sorrow-filled words. It is 1978. The world is taking note of these people who willingly set their bodies upon the wide-open sea in the hope of reaching some distant, kindly shore [...] The Chinese are fleeing, along with Vietnamese of all stripes, including former soldiers, farmers, peasants, and traders, carrying nothing with them but hope and grievances [...] By 1978, more than half a million people have fled. (258– 260)

Thus, the people leaving Vietnam are not one single class or ethnicity, as the war affects all the people collectively, and their experiences are connected to one another. Their conditions as immigrants trying

Özgür Atmaca
Başkent University, Türkiye
and
Defne Ersin Tutan
Başkent University, Türkiye

to save their lives bond them together regardless of their diverse backgrounds. When Mai watches the news and sees the pictures showing the journey of "the boat people," she is both concerned and hopeful as she thinks that her mother who stayed in Vietnam might be among these survivors. Similar to Mai, nearly all the people in the "Little Saigon" community in the US anticipate the news about their relatives and loved ones. Mai states "that is why we wait. It is our community ritual. It is 1978 and everyone in Virginia's Little Saigon waits or knows someone who is waiting" (292). The victims who manage to arrive in the US bring news about the other people left behind and the traumatic experiences during their journey. For instance, a woman tells the story about the attack by pirates who raped the women on the boat and murdered some of the people (276). Later in the novel, Mai learns that her mother was also raped and murdered like the other thousands of people who died on their journey. Hence, her trauma becomes connected to other people's traumas through their stories which include similar experiences.

In *Monkey Bridge*, Mai, having arrived in the US just before South Vietnam falls, watches the news about the people escaping the country in 1975 and emphasizes the number of people leaving the country in despair. She states that

> [a] newscaster reporting for ABC News had declared with eerie matter of factness that this was "the largest single movement of people in the history of America itself." There was the South China Sea on April 30, 1975. There was the exodus by air [...] There was the exodus by sea, a lurching protuberance of South Vietnamese Navy vessels, barges, thug boats, junks, sampans, fishing boats. (167)

The description of the people in the news indicates that people are caught unprepared and try to escape by whatever means they could find. In that sense, "the fall" creates a collective shock on people, and the fear of being murdered contributes to the number of people escaping. Mai also emphasizes that this escape does not always end happily as "at least two hundred thousand had died at sea" (214). Similar to *The Lotus and the Storm*, Mai's narrative also includes a story of a person who narrates a tragic boat journey that resulted in the rape of his sister, his mother's death and father's loss at the South China Sea. Apparently, the similarity of the traumatic stories by different people in both novels is designed intentionally by Cao to highlight the nature of these events as parts of collective traumas experienced by South Vietnamese war survivors.

In *Monkey Bridge,* Cao also draws attention to the situation of the Vietnamese immigrants in the US who seem to be marginalized.

Although, for trauma scholars, it is important to voice the traumatic experiences in order to gain visibility and thus bind up the wounds (Herman 1), the Vietnamese refugees and their experiences are left to be forgotten. Mai wants to learn about similar experiences of the people and search for more information in the library in the US, but she does not find anything about these people. She feels that it is as if the world is trying to forget these unpleasant memories. She states that "it was only four years since the war ended, and there was nothing about Vietnam after April 30, 1975, and nothing about my current preoccupation, the boat people and their methods of escape" (216). Absence of information about the experiences of Vietnamese people demonstrates the policy of the US to erase historical events related to civilian sufferings in the war. Mai explains the ignorance by saying that "Americans hate losers, I wanted to say, they don't want to have anything to do with us. They are not trying to win the war; they're trying to forget it" (153). Besides, the historical facts and the novels indicate that the Vietnamese are not readily welcomed in the host country. According to Zia Rizvi, "[o]nce an individual, a human being, becomes a refugee, it is as though he had become a member of another race, some other sub-human group" (qtd. in Harrell-Bond and Kagan 193). Thus, refugees are not respected by the citizens of the host country and are faced with bad rumors stemming from the bias towards them.

In *Monkey Bridge* the demonization of the Vietnamese is demonstrated through tensions in a neighborhood and attacks on refugees as a result of the false news about "how a Vietnamese family had been suspected of eating an old neighbor's dog" (88). Rather than being considered victims and survivors of a war who need help to heal their wounds, the Vietnamese are considered "a ragtag accumulation of unwanted, and awkward reminder of a war the whole country was trying to forget" (*Monkey Bridge* 15). For all these reasons, their war trauma does not find resolution when they arrive in the US because discrimination and marginalization contribute to their precarious situation.

HEALING THE WOUNDS COLLECTIVELY

Along with individual struggles to find solace after traumatic events and loss of homeland, both of Cao's novels have examples of recovery attempts through connecting with other Vietnamese survivors in the US. Besides harming the ties and dividing the people, it is possible to say that traumas experienced collectively also bring people together. In Kai Erikson's words "trauma can create a com-

Özgür Atmaca
Başkent University, Türkiye
and
Defne Ersin Tutan
Başkent University, Türkiye

munity"; "it can happen that otherwise unconnected persons who share a traumatic experience seek one another out and develop a form of fellowship on the strength of that common tie" (185, 187). In that respect, bonding with the members of their communities and sharing their common experiences have the potential for a collective recovery from trauma. According to Yaacov Y. I. Vertzberger, gathering in a community helps people to overcome their trauma in three ways: first "by knowing of others' suffering, which provides reassurance that one is not alone," second "by actively developing an expressive sense and rituals of fellowship in anger, shame, helplessness, grief, and threat," and third "by emergence of collectively shared attribution of blame for the event" (864). As such, for traumatized individuals, community becomes an important coping mechanism.

Especially for refugees or immigrants who lose their homeland in a sudden way and have difficulties in adapting into their new lives in the host country, the communities they form enable them to eliminate their loneliness and to cope with traumas. In his work on immigrants, Dominique DeFreece states that "active social networks are often used as a tool to protect the migrants from thoughts of past violent experiences and bring them something to look forward to or have hope" (10). The social connections which are strengthened through rituals and festivals in the new country "bring happiness and nostalgia of the good old days into the lives of immigrants" (10). As such, for the above-mentioned reasons, the Vietnamese immigrants formed communities in different parts of the US in order to support members of the same ethnic background. Named Little Saigons, these areas became places where immigrants displayed solidarity with each other in the face of their collective traumas and helped one another. To underline the significance of these sites for the Vietnamese refugees, Karín Aguilar-San Juan states that

> Little Saigons across the United States served as racial safety zones, especially as anti-Asian hostility and violence peaked in the 1980s, being close to others provided needed comfort and validation. The need was heightened by the linguistic and cultural strangeness that the new Vietnamese population represented to "host" neighborhoods and regions. (xx)

Thus, yearning for the homeland, being a stranger to the culture of the host country, and vulnerable to attacks, Vietnamese immigrants construct their own neighborhoods to support each other. Naming these places after the ones in their homeland demonstrates a kind of nostalgic reconstruction of these sites where immigrants feel at home.

Both *Monkey Bridge* and *The Lotus and the Storm* present examples of interpersonal bonding and solidarity in the Little Saigon community. In *Monkey Bridge*, the example of communal support is demonstrated through gatherings in different houses where Vietnamese people come together to share their life stories and converse about their future lives. Carried out by an important woman figure named Mrs. Bay, these gatherings have a therapeutic effect on Mai's mother Thanh's and other individuals' psychology. Mai observes the meetings in their house:

> So, for the past few weeks, our apartment had become a busy site for evening feasts and weekend hangouts. My mother would be able to claim graciousness of host, although Mrs. Bay and others would do all the preparatory and clean-up work. It was an act of devotion on their part. (139)

Thus, instead of leaving a member of their community in isolation, Vietnamese people demonstrate an act of solidarity with Thanh in her recovery. Mai relates the importance of these gatherings for her mother in these words: "I could say with a certain degree of certainty that she was truly recuperating" (139). Not only Thanh but also other members of the community try to find solace in these gatherings. Together, Vietnamese people talk about their similar experiences and carry out rituals around the family altars in the houses, which enable them to mourn for their deceased loved ones. Forgotten by the public ceremonies of both the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the US, which revolve around their own war victories or defeats, the Vietnamese refugees carry out these commemorations and rituals at their houses to "establish a shared past and historically rooted collective memory which functions to create social solidarity in the present" (Eyerman 64). What is more, they also talk about the future from a more optimistic perspective which creates relief at the present time.

In these gatherings, the members of the Little Saigon community sometimes call fortune tellers to find out information about future events. These Vietnamese fortune tellers open a way for the refugees to feel optimistic as their predictions offer more positive scenarios for them. On one such occasion, the fortune teller states that "the communists will destroy each other soon enough, and in no more than two or three years we will be going back home" (*Monkey Bridge* 149). As these fortune tellers are believed to possess supernatural powers and are supported by the ancient Vietnamese saints, their prophecies have a therapeutic effect. Although Mai does not believe in these prophecies as she tries to adapt into modern American life, she cannot keep herself from thinking about their pleasing words,

Özgür Atmaca
Başkent University, Türkiye
and
Defne Ersin Tutan
Başkent University, Türkiye

either. She expresses: "I was not normally prone to astrological contemplations, but what harm could there be in a little bit of astrology? I could see why it might be comforting" (248). That is because through astrological predictions, fortune tellers convince them to believe that "if human enterprises could not alter the course of history, then humans could simply declare themselves free from brutishness of everyday endeavors" (248). Thus, fortune tellers provide them with what they desire, the desire to see the defeat of their enemies and the possibility to return to their homeland.

Although *The Lotus and the Storm* does not have as many examples of communal gatherings as *Monkey Bridge*, in which survivors come together to share their similar experiences and take part in ritualistic events, still the importance of Little Saigon is demonstrated through its soothing effect on the characters. It is a place where the Vietnamese people try to ease their pain and unburden themselves from the longing of the homeland. According to Ron Eyerman, "the way things are organized, whether the objects of routine, everyday experience, like the furniture in a room or the more consciously organized objects in a museum, evokes memory and a sense of the past, whether this is articulated through language or not" (68). Eyerman also states that cultural materials like food and music can evoke "strong emotional responses connected to the past and can be formative of individual and collective memory" (68). By reading the novel from that perspective, it can be said that Little Saigon is like an open-air museum for the Vietnamese where they can find objects evoking their prewar lives. Walking in the streets of Little Saigon Mai's father Minh refers to the healing effect of the place:

> Almost immediately I feel a sense of relief. Leaving behind the hooks and snares of life in this new country, we come here for the comfort of pho noodle soup and other aromas from home. I can almost feel its recuperative powers, the full-throated pleasures promised by the simulation of familiar sights and sounds [...] I hear Vietnamese music coming from the loudspeakers. A beguiling complexity of shops and restaurants lies before us, promising an abundance of nostalgia. Even the food in all its varieties of northern, central, and southern fares, is incidental. For it is nostalgia, the vehement singularity of nostalgia, more than anything else, that brings us here. (*The Lotus* 55)

His words demonstrate that the location built by the Vietnamese has a lot of objects reminding them of their homeland and these things have curative effects on the refugees.

In the novel, Little Saigon is also presented as a place where the Vietnamese come together to voice their problems as a community and take

political action against the human rights violations by the regime in Vietnam. Minh observes the solidarity among the Vietnamese with positive feelings and thinks that it will facilitate a more hopeful future. He expresses his feelings as follows:

> [They] have become unapologetically political. I do not know when this happened. It was not so when we arrived in 1975; we had worried more about how our children fared in school or whether we should relocate to warmer locales in California or Texas. The younger generation's interest in the political embattlements of Vietnam surprises me and sometimes fills me with hope. (57)

His observation demonstrates that besides evoking memories of the old days, Little Saigon functions as a place of political action and solidarity.

Like her father, Mai also observes and gives information about the Vietnamese community and the ways of their survival in the US. As Little Saigon grows, it is hinted that people who normally do not know each other, commemorate notable events in one another's houses and celebrate traditional Vietnamese festivals in groups. In her own words: "Weddings, births, Tet are all openings that the Vietnamese in America use to channel the ragged immensity of their longings for things past. It's all about reconstructing and reclaiming what is gone" (271–78). In that respect, unable to return to Vietnam, they create a replica of what they have lost to have the feeling of safety and familiarity.

Cao's novels also show people in Little Saigon forming associations in order to help the ones who are in a more disadvantaged situation and to bring their loved ones from Vietnam. The community supports its members by developing economic ties. One strategy the Vietnamese take to save money is to take part in the *hụi* practice. As the refugees are unable to take loans from American banks, they decide to form their own money-saving programs and give it to the ones in need in return for their monthly contribution. In that respect, *hụi* is "an informal rotating credit association" (60). The ones who take part in the *hụi* practice meet once a month and put some of their earnings in the pot; "everyone has a chance to draw from the *hui* pot once until the rotation is complete and a new hui rotation begins" (60, italics in the original). Through the money saved, people are able to navigate their way in the US. To emphasize its importance for the immigrants, Mai states that "it is the hui that allows people with no collateral or credit history to nurture their largest dreams and tenderest hopes, by leveraging the circuitry of friendship and social connections for financial purposes" (61). As such, the novel shows how the *hụi* practice becomes a Vietnamese refugee strategy in the host

Özgür Atmaca
Başkent University, Türkiye
and
Defne Ersin Tutan
Başkent University, Türkiye

nation to compensate for their disadvantaged position. Through this economic practice, the members of the community demonstrate an economic solidarity for a better life in the new country as they are well aware that, as an unwanted group that signifies the failures in the war to the Americans, the only way to recover is to strengthen their economic and social ties with one another.

CONCLUSION

Rather than portraying the Vietnamese as victims living in passivity and a continuous pathological state, through her novels, Lan Cao presents examples displaying the resilience and desire for recovery. In effect, the intentional use of the same name "Mai" for protagonists in both novels can be understood on two different levels; (1) difference and (2) similarity. First, though these characters have the same name, the fact that the two protagonists live through different kinds of traumatic experiences sheds light on the variety of emotional baggage of the war survivors since they come from different backgrounds, have different life stories, and go through different healing processes. Second, as a common female Vietnamese name, it can be an indicator of the sameness of the tragedy experienced by the Vietnamese people. By considering these every-person figures, it might be claimed that, though ways in which they deal with trauma are varied, the reason for their suffering is the same. Also, the meaning of the name, "a precious yellow flower that blooms during Tet, the Vietnamese lunar new year," is suggestive of rebirth, "hope and renewal" (Cao, "Reader's Guide"). Therefore, the use of the same name might be a strong signal for the reader and the Vietnamese community that it reflects the tragedy and recovery at the same time.

Cao's novels demonstrate that the arrival to the US does not mean an ending to the sufferings of the Vietnamese as a group saved from the atrocities of war. They become an unwelcome group since they remind Americans of US war failures. Hence, as escaping refugees, the Vietnamese find themselves collectively in an insecure situation and become marginalized in the US which further contributes to their trauma. Consequently, the novels show how the Vietnamese community becomes a supportive mechanism for the victims of trauma who are dispersed from their homelands. As Americans do not readily welcome the refugees into their country, Vietnamese people form their own neighborhoods where they help one another to heal their wounds. In *Monkey Bridge*, Mai emphasizes the importance of communal gatherings in multiple houses for her mother's and other members'

psychology. The stories about past experiences shared in these gatherings have therapeutic effects on the participants since these similar stories connect people and eliminate their loneliness in a country foreign to their culture. The communal rituals and ceremonies around family altars also enable the Vietnamese to mourn for the loss of loved ones collectively.

In *The Lotus and the Storm*, Little Saigon is described as a place where the refugees gather in order to feel like they are in their homeland. The restaurants and markets are designed in a way to remind the refugees of Saigon. The sound of the Vietnamese music and the smell of the food bring forth the positive memories of pre-war Vietnam and have curative effects on Vietnamese individuals. Besides, the novel also depicts Little Saigon as a space of political and economic solidarity. We see Vietnamese refugees organizing protests and meetings in order to voice their problems and take action against the human right violations of the Vietnamese government. They also form informal credit associations in order to help the members of their community have a better life in the US. As a result, Little Saigon becomes a place of solidarity among refugees to deal with multiple traumas and to navigate their new lives in America.

Abstract: This study examines the representations of Vietnam War trauma and the paths taken by the Vietnamese immigrants in the US at the collective level to heal their wounds in Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* and *The Lotus and the Storm*. Through the analysis of these literary works, the study intends to contribute to the efforts in the field of trauma studies that lay emphasis on the experiences of war survivors who seek refuge in Western nations. In both of Cao's novels, although the trauma of the Vietnamese in the US is mostly related to their experiences of the war in their homeland, intolerance to the Vietnamese presence in the US, and thus, their marginalization by Americans, impedes the self-healing efforts of the Vietnamese. Despite the challenges they face in their homeland, on their journey to the US and in the US, the Vietnamese do not prefer a life of passivity; instead, they seek to heal their wounds in every possible way.

Keywords: Vietnam War, collective trauma, Lan Cao, Vietnamese refugees, survival

Bios: Özgür Atmaca is an English Language lecturer at Başkent University, Türkiye. He graduated from the Department of English Language and Literature at Hacettepe University, Türkiye and received his MA degree in American Culture and Literature at Başkent University. He is currently a PhD student in the Department of American Culture and Literature at Hacettepe University. He is interested in the representation of class, racial, and ethnic conflicts in cultural, historical, and literary texts from nineteenth century onward.

Özgür Atmaca
Başkent University, Türkiye
and
Defne Ersin Tutan
Başkent University, Türkiye

Defne Ersin Tutan earned her BA degree on English Language and Literature and her MA and PhD degrees on British Cultural Studies from Hacettepe University, Türkiye. She is Assistant Professor at the Department of American Culture and Literature and Vice Dean of the Faculty of Science and Letters at Başkent University, Türkiye. She has worked extensively on the intersection of postmodern and postcolonial discourses, with a special interest in their impact on the representation of alternative histories. Her recent research has focused on historical adaptations and on history as adaptation, as well as biopics and films that foreground these issues.

WORKS CITED

Aguilar San-Juan, Karín. *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America.* University of Minnesota, 2009.

Alexander, Jeffrey C. "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma." *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander et al., U of California P, 2004, pp. 1–30.

Balaev, Michelle. *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels*. Northwestern UP, 2012.

Cao, Lan. *Monkey Bridge*. Penguin, 1997.

———. *The Lotus and the Storm*. Penguin, 2014.

———."The Lotus and The Storm Reader's Guide." Penguin Random House, https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/315631/the-lotus-and-the-storm-by-lan-cao/9780698147492/readers-guide/#.

Cao, Lan, and Harlan Margaret Van Cao. *Family in Six Tones: A Refugee Mother and an American Daughter.* Viking, 2020.

Chan, Sucheng. *Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation: Stories of War, Revolution, Flight, and New Beginnings*. Temple UP, 2006.

Christopher, Renny. *The Vietnam War/The American War: Images and Representations in Euro-American and Vietnamese Exile Narratives.* U of Massachusetts P, 1995.

DeFreece, Dominique. "Dealing With Migratory Trauma: Mental Health Stressors and Coping Mechanisms Among Sub- Saharan Migrants in Rabat, Morocco." *SIT Digital Collections*, 2016, https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/2480. Erikson, Kai. "Notes on Trauma and Community." *Trauma Explorations in Memory,* edited by Cathy Caruth, Johns Hopkins UP, 1995, pp. 183–199.

Eyerman, Ron. "Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity." *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander et al., U of California P, 2004, pp. 60–111.

Eyerman, Ron, et al. "Cultural Trauma, Collective Memory and the Vietnam War." *Croatian Political Science Review*, vol. 54, no. 1–2, 2017, pp. 11–31. https://www.academia.edu/33940251/Cultural_Trauma_Collective_Memory_and_the_Vietnam_War.

Harrell-Bond, Barbara and Mike Kagan. "Protecting the Rights of Refugees in Africa: Beginning with the UN Gatekeeper." *African Voices on Development and Social Justice*, edited by Patrick Burnett and Firoze Manji, Mkuki na Nyota Publishers, 2004, pp. 193–214.

Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror.* Basic Books, 1992.

Hidle, Jade Tiffany. *Bound by Water: Inquiry, Trauma, and Genre in Vietnamese American Literature.* 2014. U of California, PhD thesis. eScholarship, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/07x414wf.

Hitchcox, Linda. *Vietnamese Refugees in Southeast Asian Camps*. Macmillan, 1990.

Kellerman, Peter Felix. *Sociodrama and Collective Trauma*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2007.

Neal, Arthur G. *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Major Events in the American Century.* Routledge, 1998.

Pham, Hoa Hong. *Lingering Phantoms: Haunted Literature and Counter Memories from the Vietnam/American War.* 2016. U of Western Sydney, PhD thesis. ResearchDierctLibrary, https://researchdirect.westernsydney.edu.au/islandora/object/uws:37331. Smelser, Neil J. "Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma." *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander et al., U of California P, 2004, pp. 31–59.

Vertzberger, Yaacoov Y. I. "The Antinomies of Collective Political Trauma: A Pre-Theory." *Political Psychology*, vol. 18, no. 4, Dec. 1997, pp. 863–876. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3792214.

Review of International American Studies
RIAS—Vol. 18, Fall-Winter, № 2/2025
ISSN 1991-2773
DOI: https://doi.org/10.31261/rias.18020

THE PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE OF INTERBEING IN THICH NHAT HANH'S WRITING

When people talk about war
I vow with all beings
to raise my voice in the chorus
and speak of original peace
[Robert Aitken 58]

INTRODUCTION

Monika Kocot
Department
of British Literature and Culture
University of Łódź, Poland
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8111-4998

The Vietnam War, or the American War, as it is usually referred to in Vietnam, was over 50 years ago, but its impact on both Vietnamese and American societies continues. This essay looks at the teaching of interbeing by the late Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist Zen master, poet, author, scholar, and activist for social change, also known as "a monk who taught the world mindfulness." Nhat Hanh worked for peace and social change ever since the war started. In the mid-1960s, he co-founded the School of Youth for Social Services (a grassroots relief organization of 10,000 volunteers based on the Buddhist principles of non-violence and compassionate action) and created the Order of Interbeing (a new order based on the traditional Buddhist Bodhisattva precepts) ("The Life Story of Thich Nhat Hanh"). In 1964, he came to the US to seek help for his countrymen, to promote the idea of communication, of reconciliation, of putting an end to the bloodshed. He came back to the US in 1966. At that time his teaching on mindfulness, meditation, and interbeing started taking root on the American ground. As a peace-promoter and equality-supporter, he found a loyal companion in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1967. In his nomination, King said, "I do not personally know of anyone more worthy of the Nobel Peace Prize than this gentle monk from Vietnam.

His ideas for peace, if applied, would build a monument to ecumenism, to world brotherhood, to humanity" (King, "Nomination of Thich Nhat Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize"). Ironically enough, because of his peaceful mission, opposition to the war, and his refusal to take sides, both North and South Vietnam denied him the right to return to Vietnam. His long exile lasted 39 years. Not being able to come back to his home country, he decided to move to Paris. Nhat Hanh established dozens of Plum Village meditation centres around the world, and he himself lived in the Plum Village monastery near Bordeaux (established in 1982), and served as a Dharma teacher in Europe, America, and Asia. Nhat Hanh is considered to be the father of Engaged Buddhism; he coined that term in his 1967 book entitled *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire*. In his view, Buddhist precepts must be practiced in the form of working for society, particularly in the context of promoting peace, and saving the environment (Kocot, "A Celebration of the Wild" 250–253). This article will look at Nhat Hanh's essays and books as well as poems (written during and after the Vietnam war) which discuss the philosophical and social aspects of interbeing, as practised by the Plum Village community till this day.

PEACEFUL REVOLUTION AND BUILDING A COMMUNITY

In his seminal book on the practice of fearlessness, Nhat Hanh writes:

> When I met Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1966, during the Vietnam War, one of the things we discussed was the importance of building community—or, as we call it in Buddhism, sangha. Dr. King knew that community building was vital. He was aware that without a community little could be accomplished. A solid sense of brotherhood and sisterhood gives us strength when we feel fear or despair and helps sustain our power of love and compassion. Brotherhood and sisterhood can heal and transform our lives. Dr. King spent much of his time building a community that he called "the beloved community." (*Fear* 115)

Nhat Hanh's emphasis on the need for communal practice is reflected in each of his books, as for him one of the most significant aspects of Buddhist spirituality is looking deeply into the nature of one's identity and noticing the interconnectedness of all creation. Once the idea of separation is removed, one becomes free to explore the process of transforming existing problems within a society. One should always begin with one's own transformation (Kocot, "Geopoetics and the Poetry of Consciousness" 200). The way out is in.[1] If one

1 For more on how "the way out is in" practice in the context of solving environmental problems and Engaged Buddhism, see Kocot, "The Only Way Out Is In" (2022).

Monika Kocot
Department
of British Literature and Culture
University of Łódź, Poland

is fortunate enough to be surrounded with people who also actively transform their attitudes and behaviours, change within a society is only a matter of time.

In his famous "I Have a Dream" speech delivered in 1963, King speaks openly about a continuous effort to work together for the benefit of the society seen as a whole, and applying peaceful means to change the existing conditions:

> We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again, we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force. The marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to a distrust of all white people, for many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny. And they have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom. We cannot walk alone. (King, "I Have a Dream")

The term "soul force" is reminiscent of Gandhi's *satyagraha*, firm insistence upon the truth, and acting out of compassion and a sense of interconnectedness of all (Gandhi 358–359). The message of oneness, clearly inspired by King's talks with Thich Nhat Hanh, becomes much more pronounced in King's speech "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence" delivered at Riverside Church, New York City, on April 4, 1967. The speech might have been inspired by Nhat Hanh's antiwar poetry, particularly by his poem written in 1964 in Vietnam entitled "Peace:"

> They woke me this morning
> to tell me my brother had been killed in battle.
> Yet in the garden
> a new rose, with moist petals uncurling,
> blooms on the bush.
> And I am alive,
> still breathing the fragrance of roses and dung,
> eating, praying, and sleeping.
> When can I break my long silence?
> When can I speak the unuttered words that are choking me?
> (*Call Me by My True Names* 27)

As Nhat Hanh emphasizes, at that time, to "pronounce the word 'peace' meant you were 'communist,' helping the communists, or just defeatist" (*Call Me* 27). In his speech, King speaks of a complex power struggle in Vietnam, and a revolution of values that is needed to end the war:

> A true revolution of values will lay hands on the world order and say of war, "This way of settling differences is not just." This business of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation's homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into the veins of peoples normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped and psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice, and love. A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.

He continues, by referring to a "Hindu-Muslim-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about ultimate reality," a universal law of love, which, when practiced, has the power of reversing the dynamic activated by the death drive:

> We still have a choice today: nonviolent coexistence or violent co-annihilation. We must move past indecision to action. We must find new ways to speak for peace in Vietnam and justice throughout the developing world, a world that borders on our doors. If we do not act, we shall surely be dragged down the long, dark, and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight.

Sadly, King's dream of living in a society unified by peaceful aspirations remained unfulfilled. He was assassinated one year later, on April 4, 1968. Nhat Hanh's work continued until his peaceful death on January 22, 2022, in his root temple in Hue, Vietnam. As I have already mentioned, he could not come back to his home country in the 1960s due to his involvement in peace talks; (he was the leader of the Buddhist delegation at the Paris Peace Talks in 1969) ("The Life Story of Thich Nhat Hanh"), so he continued to travel widely (in Europe and America), spreading the message of peace and brotherhood, lobbying Western leaders to end the Vietnam War. Nhat Hanh also continued to teach, lecture and write on the art of mindfulness and "living peace;" in the early 1970s, he was a lecturer and researcher in Buddhism at the University of Sorbonne, Paris. In 1975, he established the Sweet Potato community near Paris, and 1982 marks the beginning of The Plum Village community in the South West of France ("The Life Story of Thich Nhat Hanh").

On the website of the community, one can read that under Thich Nhat Hanh's spiritual leadership "Plum Village has grown from a small rural farmstead to what is now the West's largest and most active Buddhist monastery, with over 200 resident monastics and over 10,000 visitors every year who learn 'the art of mindful living'" ("The Life Story of Thich Nhat Hanh"). One can also learn that Nhat Hanh founded Wake Up, a worldwide movement of thousands of young people training in the practices

Monika Kocot
Department
of British Literature and Culture
University of Łódź, Poland

of mindful living, and he launched an international Wake Up Schools programme training teachers to teach mindfulness in schools in Europe, America and Asia. In the 21th century, Nhat Hanh opened new monasteries in Vietnam, Hong Kong, Thailand, Australia, in the US (in California, New York, and Mississippi), and in Europe (Paris). He also founded Europe's first Institute of Applied Buddhism in Germany ("The Life Story of Thich Nhat Hanh"). The importance of establishing communities and practising mindfulness and peaceful living is deeply rooted in Buddhist philosophy in general, and in Hua-yen Buddhism in particular.

THE WEB OF RELATIONSHIPS: THE NET OF INDRA

As a Mahayana Buddhist practitioner, Nhat Hanh sees the web of relationships between all phenomena as depicted in the metaphor of the Net of Indra, "a multidimensional net of all beings (including inanimate things), with each point, each knot, a jewel that perfectly reflects, and indeed contains, all other points" (Aitken xvii; see Cleary, *Entry into the Inconceivable* 37). This metaphor for the interconnectedness of all things (interdependent origination) appears prominently in *The Avataṃsaka Sūtra*, translated into Chinese as the *Hua Yen Sūtra*, one of the most influential Mahayana sūtras of East Asian Buddhism, rendered in English as *Flower Garland Sūtra*, *Flower Adornment Sūtra*, or *The Flower Ornament Scripture* (as translated by Thomas Cleary).

The multidimensional depth of the metaphor of Indra's Net has attracted many Western scholars. In his insightful article entitled "Relational Holism," David Barnhill dwells on the complexity of mirroring with regard to nondualistic vision of identity:

> In one sense each jewel is a single entity. But when we look at a jewel, we see the reflections of other jewels, each of which contains the reflections of other jewels, and so on in an endless system of mirroring. Thus in each jewel is the image of the entire net as whole. The jewels interpenetrate each other and, in Huayan's sense of the term, they share the same identity. Yet each one contains the others in its own unique way in its distinctive position, and so they are different. This type of identity does not imply being identical or involve merging into an undifferentiated One. (Barnhill 86–87)

Thomas Cleary, a scholar of Hua-yen philosophy, focuses on a slightly different aspect of the net:

> All things, being interdependent, [...] imply in their individual being the simultaneous being of all other things. Thus it is said that the existence of each element of the universe includes the existence of the whole universe and hence is as extensive as the universe itself. (*Entry into the Inconceivable* 7)

In his seminal *Entry into the Inconceivable*, Cleary discusses in detail the various aspects of the non interference of noumenon and phenomena in terms of the interdependence of things. He notes that "relative or conditional existence of things is not opposed to their absolute emptiness (or emptiness of their absoluteness)" (*Entry* 25). He adds that "relative existence and absolute emptiness are, to use a popular Ch'an metaphor, 'two faces of the same die'" (*Entry* 25). I mention the scriptural and philosophical link between interdependence and emptiness, because it plays a major role in Thich Nhat Hanh's teaching. He calls it interbeing, and I will explore how he perceives this dynamic, together with its psychological and social implications, in the next part of my article.

Cleary observes that Hua-yen Buddhism is "famed for its intriguing philosophy, but it is perhaps most useful to consider Hua-yen metaphysics primarily in terms of instrumental value" (*Entry* 1). In other words, the philosophy may be considered not only as a system of thought as such, but rather as "a set of practical exercises in perspective—new ways of looking at things from different points of view, of discovering harmony and complementarity underlying apparent disparity and contradiction" (*Entry* 1–2). In his opinion, the value behind such an approach is that we develop "a round, holistic perspective which, while discovering unity, does not ignore diversity but overcomes mental barriers that create fragmentation and bias" (*Entry* 1–2).

Similarly, Francis Cook notes that without the practice and realization of Zen, Hua Yen philosophy "remains mere intellectual fun, never a vibrant reality" (26). One of the ways of making it a vibrant reality is to acknowledge and affirm the interdependence of all the elements of the net, to see the other as a reflection of oneself (Kocot, "Geopoetics" 184; "'The Only Way Out Is In'" 263–265). Let me quote Cook again: "When in a rare moment I manage painfully to rise above a petty individualism by knowing my true nature, I perceive that I dwell in the wondrous net of Indra, in this incredible network of interdependence" (122). He also adds that it is not just that "we are all in it" together. "We all *are* it, rising or falling as one living body" (Cook 122). As I have argued elsewhere, "the message of Indra's net for us as individuals is that through our own self-realization and transformation, we affect everyone and everything on this planet, precisely because we inter-are" ("'The Only Way Out Is In'" 265).

Given the philosophical depth of the *Hua Yen Sūtra*, it might seem difficult to imagine how a Buddhist can make it personal. Interestingly, Nhat Hanh uses the so-called *gathas*, four-line verses which are found in the earliest Buddhist writings, and he applies them as tools

Monika Kocot
Department
of British Literature and Culture
University of Łódź, Poland

of establishing oneself in the present moment as well as of working with challenging situations and afflictive emotions. The *Hua Yen Sūtra* includes a chapter entitled "Purifying Practice," consisting of 139 *gatha*-vows. Each gatha is event-driven, contains a line of a vow of oneness with all beings, and two lines of the specific practice which connects the event with one's activity. Here is a *gatha* excerpted from the "Purifying Practice" chapter:

If they see a big river,
They should wish that all beings
Gain entry into the stream of truth
And enter the ocean of Buddha-knowledge.
(Cleary, *The Flower Ornament Scripture* 321)

In his *Zen Vows for Daily Life*, inspired by the poetic teaching of Thich Nhat Hanh, Robert Aitken notes that events presented in the *gathas* of the chapter followed the routine of T'ang period monks and nuns; each act such as sitting down for meditation, or putting on clothes received "its Dharma poem" (Aitken xxiii). But as we can see in the *gatha* above, oneness with nature played a crucial role in the purifying practice, and offered gateways into "the stream of truth." Aitken is very fond of the classical *gathas* on nature, but he openly admits that he misses *gathas* that would offer loving-kindness attitude in an emotionally challenging situation: "I find myself wanting *gathas* that show the way to practice and realize interbeing when I am angry with someone" (xxv). In the introduction to Aitken's book, Thich Nhat Hanh writes about his practice of working with *gathas* from the time he entered the monastery as a novice monk at the age of 16, the practice which continued till the end of his life. This is what he has to say about the importance of *gathas*-poems:

Practicing mindfulness with *gathas* helps us develop concentration. In Buddhism, meditation means looking deeply into the heart of reality, and concentration is the basic condition for this practice. In itself, concentration contains the seeds of the kind of insight that frees us from afflictions and reveals to us the nature of reality. (Nhat Hanh, "Foreword" xiii)

In Vietnamese Mahayana Buddhism, poetry is often used as a tool in meditation (Nhat Hanh, "Foreword" xi), and Nhat Hanh's *gathas* often become part of his poems, or the other way round, passages from his poems are turned into *gathas* for practicing mindfulness and peaceful living.

INTERBEING

Nhat Hanh has written extensively on the philosophy of interbeing. In his article "The Order of Interbeing," he introduces the core of his teaching which can be seen as a practical application of the *Heart Sūtra* and *Hua-Yen Sūtra*.

> To be in touch with the reality of the world means to be in touch with everything that is around us in the animal, vegetal, and mineral realms. If we want to be in touch, we have to get out of our shell and look clearly and deeply at the wonders of life—the snowflakes, the moonlight, the songs of the birds, the beautiful flowers—and also the suffering—hunger, disease, torture, and oppression. Overflowing with understanding and compassion, we can appreciate the wonders of life, and, at the same time, act with firm resolve to alleviate the suffering. Too many people distinguish between the inner world of our mind and the world outside, but these worlds are not separate. They belong to the same reality. (Nhat Hanh, "The Order of Interbeing" 205–206)

Tiep refers to "receiving," "being in touch with" and "continuing," while *hien* signifies "realizing" and "making it here and now" (Nhat Hanh, "The Order of Interbeing" 205). In order to "inter-be," to use one of Nhat Hanh's favourite verbs, we need to "bring and express our insights into real life" (206). And because only "the present moment is real and available to us" (206), understanding and compassion must be seen and touched in this very moment (Kocot, "A Celebration of the Wild" 109; "'The Only Way Out Is In'" 251).

As Robert Aitken aptly points out, Nhat Hanh's understanding of interbeing is activated when the other person, animal, plant, or thing is experienced as oneself (xvii). In the chapter on interbeing in *Fear, Essential Wisdom for Getting Through the Storm*, Nhat Hanh writes that as a monk, he does not just give lectures, but practices looking deeply every day: "I see me in my ancestors. I see my continuation everywhere in this moment [...] I see everyone in me, and me in everyone. That is the practice of looking deeply, the practice of concentration on emptiness, the practice of interbeing" (*Fear* 62–63).

Nhat Hanh stresses that "when we practice, we do not expect the practice to pay large rewards in the future, we do not expect to attain nirvana, the Pure Land, enlightenment, of Buddhahood. The secret of Buddhism is to be awake here and now" (*Interbeing* 7). He adds that [t]here is no way to peace; peace is the way. There is no way to enlightenment; enlightenment is the way. There is no way to liberation; liberation is the way" ("The Order of Interbeing" 207; Kocot, "Geopoetics" 109–111; Kocot, "'The Only Way Out Is In'" 251–253). It is essential to fully appreciate the (healing) potential of each moment of the practice.

Monika Kocot
Department
of British Literature and Culture
University of Łódź, Poland

This teaching is reflected in the *gatha* "Peace is this Moment" which highlights the importance of the present moment. It reminds us that peace can be found in the here and in the now, regardless of external circumstances. By being fully present and mindful, we can experience peace in each moment. An integral part of the process of awakening is dropping the ego-driven notion of a separate self: "If you are locked into the idea of a separate self, you have great fear. But if you look deeply and are capable of seeing 'you' everywhere, you lose that fear" (*Fear* 68). The insight and practice of embracing the other as "an extension" of oneself gains a much deeper meaning when we think of the time this philosophy was practised, the time of war, ongoing bloodshed, immense physical and mental suffering. When surrounded by brutal violence and while experiencing emotions of fear and hatred, entering the mode of fight, flight, or freeze seems "natural." To acknowledge the other in oneself becomes a challenging task.

One of the most often used *gathas* (both in teaching and in community practice) Nhat Hanh has created is an invitation to being present "in the here and now, our true home" (*Fear* 46):

I have arrived, I am home
In the here, and in the now
I am solid, I am free
In the ultimate I dwell
(*Fear* 46)

In the Plum Village community, it is usually recited (or spoken silently to oneself) while breathing in and out during a walking meditation, where each verse is linked with each step, or sometimes two steps, if one wants to make it a very slow walking meditation. When each verse is spoken and embodied by the sheer fact that one's feet touch the ground, when one comes back to the here and now, one's inner peace and stability become present, and one "can recognize the many conditions of happiness that already exist" (*Fear* 46).[2]

INTERBEING IN HISTORICAL AND ULTIMATE DIMENSION

The quote which opens *The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh* volume, entitled *Call Me By My True Names*, says:

If you touch deeply the historical dimension,
you find yourself in the ultimate dimension.
If you touch the ultimate dimension,
you have not left the historical dimension—
(*The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh* 2)

2 This *gatha* can be practiced even by people who suffer from CPTSD.

Even though it appears to be simple, it might actually be seen as a *koan*, a Zen riddle, which takes the reader far beyond dualistic thinking (with its ultimate dependence on reason) and into intuition right from the beginning of the book. Nhat Hanh arranges his poems in two sections, beginning with the historical dimension—poems written mostly during the Vietnam War—and proceeds to the ultimate dimension where the poems explore the fruits of the philosophy and practice of interbeing in times of peace.

As Nhat Hanh points out in his book *Fear, Essential Wisdom for Getting Through the Storm*, when one can establish him/herself in the present moment, one can see the two dimensions of reality, the historical and the ultimate. In order to elucidate the difference in meaning between the two dimensions, Nhat Hanh uses the image of a wave and water.[3] When one touches the historical dimension, one can notice various notions, or qualities of the wave: "birth and death, being and nonbeing, high and low, coming and going" (*Fear* 47), but when one touches the wave more deeply, one touches water. Obviously, the wave is made of water, hence water is wave's ultimate dimension, beyond birth and death, beyond being and nonbeing, beyond coming and going. "In the ultimate dimension, all these notions are removed," Nhat Hanh writes (*Fear* 48). But this is not the end of his teaching. "All of us are like that wave," he continues (*Fear* 48). We all get caught in the notions which come from our own conceptual minds, which is why "we have fear, we have jealousy, we have craving, we have all these conflicts and afflictions within us" (Nhat Hanh, *Fear* 49). Is there any way out? The answer is simple: "if we are capable of arriving, being more solid and free, it will be possible for us to touch our true nature, the ultimate dimension of ourselves" (Nhat Hanh, *Fear* 49). When the ultimate dimension is activated, we are "like a wave being in touch with its true nature of water" (*Fear* 49).

In Nhat Hanh's writing, the issue of historical and ultimate dimensions is often connected with one more image, namely that of a cloud. Being a cloud-lover himself, he often referred to the image of a cloud in order to teach about the impermanent nature of phenomena as well as interbeing: "You look up in the sky and don't see your beloved cloud anymore, and you cry, 'O my beloved cloud, you are no longer there. How can I survive without you?' and you weep" (*Fear* 53). Nhat Hanh argues that if one thinks that the cloud has passed from being into nonbeing, from existence into nonexistence, one is wrong.

3 The symbolism of the wave and water has been used by The Plum Village Band in the recently released album *A Cloud Never Dies*, particularly in the song "Thầy Ơi."

Monika Kocot
Department
of British Literature and Culture
University of Łódź, Poland

He says that it is "impossible for a cloud to die" (*Fear* 53); the truth is that because the cloud depends on conditions such as evaporation, condensation, accumulation, precipitation, changes in temperature, it simply becomes a new manifestation. By acknowledging the cloud's new form, we affirm the no-coming, no-going nature of everything. "You have to understand the true nature of dying to understand the true nature of living. If you don't understand death, you don't understand life," Nhat Hanh writes (*Fear* 68). By embracing the philosophy of no-coming and no-going, we become less fearful of death, and it is easier for us to accept the impermanent nature of things. Nhat Hanh writes:

> The teaching of the Buddha relieves us of suffering. The basis of suffering is ignorance about the true nature of self and of the world around you. When you don't understand, you are afraid, and your fear brings you much suffering. That is why the offering of non-fear is the best kind of gift you can give, to yourself and to anyone else. (*Fear* 68)

One of the shortest and most moving poems in the historical dimension section of *Call Me By My True Names* is entitled "The Witness Remains." Its minimalistic imagery and withheld emotionality speaks volumes on what it means to be living in fear:

> Flare bombs bloom on the dark sky.
> A child claps his hands and laughs.
> I hear the sound of guns,
> and the laughter dies.
> But the witness remains. (*The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh* 26)

In the note below the poem, Nhat Hanh writes: "Flare bombs are to detect the presence of enemies. When you are dominated by fear, anyone can be seen as an enemy, even a little child. The witness is you. And me" (*Call Me* 26). It could be argued that due to its subtle phrasing, Nhat Hanh's comment could stand as a poem of its own.

In the poem entitled "For Warmth,"[4] Nhat Hanh touches upon the issue of one's response in the face of violence. This time he does not focus on being a witness, but on one's practice of looking deeply and mindful work with strong afflictive emotions; such work becomes one more way of practicing interbeing:

> I hold my face in my two hands.
> No, I am not crying.
> I hold my face in my two hands

4 Betsy Rose set this poem to music in a song called "In My Two Hands."

to keep the loneliness warm—
two hands protecting,
two hands nourishing,
two hands preventing
my soul from leaving me
in anger.
(*Call Me* 15)

This poem was written after Nhat Hanh heard about the bombing of the South Vietnamese city of Ben Tre; on February 7, 1968, American bombs and rockets destroyed much of the city, killing between 500 and 1,000 civilians (Deis). The poem was triggered by the comment made by an American military man, "We had to destroy the town in order to save it" (Nhat Hanh, *Call Me* 15). The core of the Buddhist teaching on working with anger is looking deeply in order to transform it (Nhat Hanh, *Anger* 1–11), and this poem demonstrates how to do that using very simple imagery. The simplicity of the practice does not mean, however, that it is easy to do. It takes years of training.

It should be noted here that working with anger features prominently in Nhat Hanh's book entitled *Interbeing. The 14 Mindfulness Trainings of Engaged Buddhism*. The book was written for the Order of Interbeing, a community of monastics and lay people who have committed to living their lives in accord with the 14 Mindfulness Trainings, a distillation of the Bodhisattva teachings of Mahayana Buddhism ("What Is the Order of Interbeing"). The order was established by Nhat Hanh in Saigon in 1966 ("What Is the Order of Interbeing"); it initially consisted of six people. By 2006 the order included approximately 1000 lay practitioners and 250 monastic practitioners outside of Vietnam ("What Is the Order of Interbeing"), and its history continues even after Nhat Hanh's passing in 2022.

It is important to remember that the socially engaged aspect of interbeing in Nhat Hanh's writing is as important as philosophical inquiry and personal practice with one's mental states. In *Interbeing*, Nhat Hanh dwells on the sixth training "Taking Care of Anger" (47–53), but when one reads the commentaries on all trainings, it becomes clear that other trainings, such as "Openness," "Awareness of Suffering," "True Community and Communication" are interlinking with "Taking Care of Anger." Anger is also the main topic of the 2001 *Anger. Buddhist Wisdom for Cooling the Flames*, where Nhat Hanh elaborates on the seeds of anger, on embracing anger with mindfulness, on transforming anger which makes communication possible; the book ends with guided meditations on looking deeply and releasing anger.

Monika Kocot
Department
of British Literature and Culture
University of Łódź, Poland

Working with anger and hatred as ways of practicing interbeing is one of the main themes in Nhat Hanh's antiwar poetry. The poem entitled "Resolution" speaks of the mechanism of hatred pointed towards monks and nuns who refuse to be taking part in the war, and actively support peace actions:

You fight us
because we fight hatred,
while you feed on hatred and violence
for strength. […]
You condemn us
because you can't use our blood
in paying off your debts of greed;
because you can't budge us
from man's side,
where we stand to protect all life.
(*Call Me* 21)

In the poem "Condemnation," Nhat Hanh addresses the issue of real enemies as opposed to those mentioned by the war propaganda. The poem was written in 1964 and printed in the Buddhist weekly *Hai Triêu Am* (*The Sound of the Rising Tide*); as a result, Nhat Hanh earned the title "antiwar poet" and was denounced as a pro-communist propagandist (Nhat Hanh, *Call Me* 39). The poem opens with a brief narrative: "Listen to this: / yesterday six Vietcong came through my village, / and because of this, the village was bombed. / Every soul was killed" (Nhat Hanh, *Call Me* 39). "In the presence of the undisturbed stars" and "in the invisible presence of all people still alive on Earth," Hanh Hanh denounces the dreadful war and asks his listeners to look deeply at the mechanism of war hidden within themselves:

Whoever is listening, be my witness:
I cannot accept this war.
I never could. I never will.
I must say this a thousand times before I am killed.

I am like the bird who dies for the sake of its mate,
dripping blood from its broken beak and crying out,
"Beware! Turn around and face your real enemies—
ambition, violence, hatred, and greed."
(*Call Me* 39)

The seeds of anger and hatred are present within each individual, which is why the best way to fight with external enemies is to face one's own "real" enemies first. When one is capable of acknowledg-

ing one's dark / negative side, one becomes less prone to acting out of anger towards oneself and others, even if one is triggered by external circumstances. A similar message can be found in the poem "Recommendation," written for the young people in the School of Youth for Social Service[5] who were often attacked, tortured and killed during the war.

Promise me […]
Even as they strike you down
with a mountain of hatred and violence;
even as they step on you and crush you
like a worm,
even as they dismember you and disembowel you,
remember, brother,
remember:
man is not our enemy.

The only thing worthy of you is compassion—
invincible, limitless, unconditional.
(*Call Me* 18)

The poem speaks of compassion, the fruit of the practice of interbeing. Nhat Hanh adds a comment below the poem saying "If you die with compassion in mind, you are a torch lighting our path" (*Call Me* 19).

It could be argued that the poem which best encapsulates Nhat Hanh's teaching on interbeing and working with afflictive emotions is entitled "Those That Have Not Exploded." This long poem was written in 1966 after an attack on The School Of Youth for Social Service by a group of unknown men with grenades and guns (*Call Me* 22); in the poem Nhat Hanh expresses a whole gamut of feelings:

I don't know,
I just don't know
why
they hurl grenades
at these young people.

Why wish to kill
those boys with still innocent brows,
those girls with ink-stained hands?

5 The poem is recited by Sister Chan Khong—the first fully-ordained monastic disciple of Thich Nhat Hanh, and the director of his humanitarian projects since the 1960's—on *The Cloud Never Dies* album: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H5vQjV-L6eU

Monika Kocot
Department
of British Literature and Culture
University of Łódź, Poland

What was their crime?—
to hear the voice of compassion?
to come and live in a hamlet,
to help the villagers,
teach the children,
work in the rice paddies?
(*Call Me* 22)

And this is where his teaching really begins:

Those grenades have burst
and ripped apart the sky.
Those boys and girls are gone,
leaving a trail of blood.

But there are more grenades
than those that burst last night.
[…]
They remain
still
in the heart of man—
unknown, the time of their detonation;
unknown, when they will desecrate the land;
unknown, the time they will annihilate our people.
(*Call Me* 22–23)

The end of the poem is an invitation to work in unison, as one body, and transform the seeds of hatred in our hearts. Nhat Hanh's phrasing is clearly reminiscent of Dr. King's speeches I have already mentioned.

Come, hear me,
for time grows short
and danger is everywhere.
Let us take those grenades
out of our hearts,
our motherland,
humankind.
Let us stand.
Let us stand
side by side.
(*Call Me* 23)

In *Fear*, Nhat Hanh addresses the issue of "grenades in the heart" by using different imagery, namely that of a sharp knife hidden in the heart. Hidden, because one is often unaware/ignorant of the suffering one carries within, anger or hatred being just manifestations of the inner struggle. "When you take out the knife of anger and distrust

that is pointed to your heart, your heart becomes a bridge" (*Fear* 97). The practice of "making one's heart become a bridge" is to make people aware of the importance of the inner work without which embodied interbeing will never manifest. In the following quote, Nhat Hanh discusses the issue of removing the knife of hatred and fear, and clearly shows that since the war in Vietnam there have been other violent conflicts whose source have not been addressed:

> Since the so-called war on terror began, we have spent billions of dollars but have only created more violence, hate, and fear. We have not succeeded in removing fear, hatred, and resentment, either in their outward expressions such as terrorism or, most importantly, in the minds of the people. It's time to contemplate and find a better way to bring peace to ourselves and the world. Only with the practice of deep listening and gentle communication can we help remove wrong perceptions that are at the foundation of fear, hatred, and violence. You cannot remove wrong perceptions with a gun. (*Fear* 107)

CONCLUSION (A CLOUD NEVER DIES)

On October 11, 2024, in order to celebrate Thich Nhat Hanh's birthday, or his continuation day (nothing dies, nothing is born), The Plum Village Band released a musical album entitled *A Cloud Never Dies*. The title uses one of Nhat Hanh's most popular one-line *gathas*, the one he often referred to when discussing the notion of interbeing or the true nature of things, their no-birth no-death nature, or no-coming no-going nature:[6]

> So birth and death are paired notions, like coming and going, permanence and annihilation, self and other. The cloud appearing in the sky is a new manifestation. Before assuming the form of a cloud, the cloud was water vapor, produced from water in the ocean and the heat of sunlight. You can call it her previous life. So being a cloud is only a continuation. A cloud has not come from nothing. A cloud always comes from something. So there is no birth; there is only a continuation. That is the nature of everything: no-birth, no-death. (*Fear* 50–51)

In the song "Thầy Ơi" ("Dear Thay"), Plum Village Band uses the already explored symbolism of the wave and water, to emphasize the message of Nhat Hanh's continuation in other forms. The word *Thay* means Teacher, and the Plum Village sangha members have always used that title when referring to their Zen master. Thich Nhat Hanh has often taught on the no-birth and no-death aspect of inter-

6 This *gatha* was also used as a main message in Nhat Hanh's funeral processions in Vietnam, transmitted online worldwide in January 2022.

Monika Kocot
Department
of British Literature and Culture
University of Łódź, Poland

being, and in the following quote he refers to Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi—whose importance was emphasized at the beginning of this article—whose work, just like Nhat Hanh's work, still continues:

> There's a tendency for people to think that they can eliminate what they don't want: they can burn down a village, they can kill a person. But destroying someone doesn't reduce that person to nothing. They killed Mahatma Gandhi. They shot Martin Luther King Jr. But these people are still among us today. They continue to exist in many forms. Their spirit goes on. Therefore, when we look deeply into our self—into our body, our feelings, and our perceptions—when we look into the mountains, the rivers, or another person, we have to be able to see and touch the nature of no-birth and no-death in them. This is one of the most important practices in the Buddhist tradition. (*Fear* 52)

The "Ultimate Dimension" section of *Call Me by My Names* contains two poems which affirm the liberating aspect of acknowledging and practicing interbeing in times of relative peace. Interestingly, the first one, entitled "Interrelationship," was written in 1989, during a retreat for psychotherapists held in Colorado in response to Fritz Perls' statement, "You are you, and I am me, and if by chance we meet, that's wonderful. If not, it couldn't be helped" (*Call Me* 154). One could argue that the poem deconstructs the premise of Perls' argument by transcending the implied duality of one's relationship with others, which still informs Western psychology:

> You are me, and I am you.
> Isn't it obvious that we "inter-are"?
> You cultivate the flower in yourself,
> so that I will be beautiful.
> I transform the garbage in myself,
> so that you will not have to suffer.
>
> I support you;
> you support me.
> I am in this world to offer you peace;
> you are in this world to bring me joy.
> (*Call Me* 154)

The second poem, entitled "Interbeing," speaks of Indra's Net, the philosophy of no-coming and no-going. The sun, the cloud, the river—the three natural phenomena used by Nhat Hanh in his books on interbeing of all creation—are presented here as natural and metaphorical elements entering/penetrating the speaker, but at the same time always present within the speaker.

The sun has entered me.
The sun has entered me together with the cloud and the river.
I myself have entered the river,
and I have entered the sun
with the cloud and the river.
There has not been a moment when we do not interpenetrate.
But before the sun entered me,
the sun was in me—
also the cloud and the river.
Before I entered the river,
I was already in it.
There has not been a moment
when we have not *inter-been*.

Therefore you know
that as long as you continue to breathe,
I continue to be in you.
(*Call Me* 150)

It could be argued that the poem praises one great sangha (community) with all of its elements each in itself an interpenetrating jewel of Indra. It affirms the message of Nhat Hanh's love for his community and the importance of his *gatha* which still nourishes his sangha: a cloud never dies.

Abstract: The article looks at the philosophy and practice of interbeing in the writing of the Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh. Each section discusses a selected aspect of interbeing as taught by Nhat Hanh and practiced by the Plum Village community. "Peaceful Revolution and Building a Community" section introduces a historical look at a collaboration between Nhat Hanh and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the 1960s. "The Web of Relationships: The Net of Indra" explores the philosophical depth of the concept of interbeing and its roots in *The Avataṃsaka Sūtra*. "Interbeing" looks at how the term is applied in Engaged Buddhism. "Interbeing in Historical and Ultimate Dimension" develops some of the insights from previous sections and discusses the practical dimension of interbeing, with numerous references to Nhat Hanh's books as well as his poems written during and after the Vietnam War.

Keywords: Thich Nhat Hanh, interbeing, Engaged Buddhism, Vietnam War, Zen, Plum Village

Bio: Monika Kocot, PhD, is Assistant Professor in the Department of British Literature and Culture at the University of Lodz, Poland. She is the author of *Playing Games of Sense in Edwin Morgan's Writing* (2016) and co-editor of *Języki (pop)kultury w literaturze, mediach i filmie* (2015), *Nie tylko Ishiguro. Szkice o literaturze anglojęzycznej w Polsce* (2019), and *Moving Between Modes. Papers in Intersemiotic Translation. In Memoriam Professor Alina Kwiatkowska* (2020). She has published articles on contemporary Scottish poetry and prose, as well as Native American writing. Her latest research is on philosophy and spirituality in literature, with a particular emphasis on geopoetics

and comparative literature. She is a member of the Association for Cultural Studies, the Association for Scottish Literary Studies, Scottish Centre for Geopoetics, and Polish Cognitive Linguistics Association. She is the Vice President of The K. K. Baczyński Literary Society.

Monika Kocot
Department
of British Literature and Culture
University of Łódź, Poland

WORKS CITED

Aitken, Robert. *Zen Vows for Daily Life*. Foreword by Thich Nhat Hanh. Wisdom Publications, 2018.

Barnhill, David Landis. "Relational Holism." *Deep Ecology and World Religions. New Essays on Sacred Ground*, edited by David Landis Barnhill and Roger S. Gottlieb, State U of New York P, 2001, pp. 77–106.

Cleary, Thomas. *Entry into the Inconceivable: An Introduction to Hua-yen Buddhism*. University of Hawaii Press, 1983.

Cook, Francis H. *Hua-yen Buddhism. The Jewel Net of Indra*. Sri Satguru Publications, 1977.

Deis, Robert. "It became necessary to destroy the town to save it." *This Day in Quotes*, 7 Feb. 2015, https://www.thisdayinquotes.com/2015/02/it-became-necessary-to-destroy-the-town-to-save-it/?__cf_chl_tk=rZU6lEMxkTuuzIeRuBxttb2IpFcYyWPsrl4sFO.au5I-1733865083-1.0.1.1-W2IldnYYYP6V0iMHN9wHfeVyH3SXBY6zf0lxlUsGWO8. Accessed 10 Dec. 2024.

Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand. *An Autobiography Or The Story of My Experiments With Truth*. Navajivan Publishing House, 1968. https://www.mkgandhi.org/ebks/An-Autobiography.pdf. Accessed 11 Dec. 2024.

King, Martin Luther Jr. "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence." 4 Apr. 1967, Riverside Church, New York City. Speech. *American Rhetoric*, 1 Oct. 2024, https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkatimetobreaksilence.htm. Accessed 11 Oct. 2024.

———. "I Have a Dream." 28 Aug. 1963, The Lincoln Memorial, Washington D.C. Speech. *American Rhetoric*, 1 Oct. 2024, https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihaveadream.htm. Accessed 11 Oct. 2024.

———. "Nomination of Thich Nhat Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize." 25 Jan. 1967. Letter. *Hartford Web Publishing*, http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/025.html. Accessed 11 Oct. 2024.

Kocot, Monika. "A Celebration of the Wild. On Earth Democracy and the Ethics of Civil Disobedience in Gary Snyder's Writing." *Review of International American Studies*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2020, pp. 99–122.

———. "Geopoetics and the Poetry of Consciousness: A Transmodern Perspective." *Transmodern Perspectives on Contemporary Literatures in English*, edited by Jessica Aliaga-Lavrijsen and José María Yebra-Pertusa, Routledge, 2019, pp. 178–203.

———. "The Only Way Out Is In": Transcending Modernity and Embracing Interconnectedness in Gary Snyder and Kenneth White." *Text Matters:*

A Journal of Literature, Theory and Culture, No. 12, 2022, pp. 249–268. https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.12.15.

Nhat Hanh, Thich. *Anger. Buddhist Wisdom for Cooling the Flames*. Rider, 2001.

–––. *Call Me by My True Names. The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh*. Parallax Press, 1999.

–––. *Fear. Essential Wisdom for Getting Through a Storm*. Harper One, 2012.

–––. "Foreword." *Zen Vows for Daily Life*, by Robert Aitken. Wisdom Publications, 2018, pp. xi–xiii.

–––. *Interbeing. The 14 Mindfulness Trainings of Engaged Buddhism*. Parallax Press, 2020.

–––. "The Order of Interbeing." *Comparative Political Culture in the Age of Globalization: An Introductory Anthology*, edited by Hwa Yol Jung, Lexington Books, 2002, pp. 205–212.

Plum Village Band. "Thầy Ơi." *A Cloud Never Dies*, Pirate's Blend Records, 11 Oct. 2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5sxR_In9L1M. Accessed 13 Oct. 2024.

"The Life Story of Thich Nhat Hanh." *Plum Village*. https://plumvillage.org/about/thich-nhat-hanh/biography. Accessed 13 Oct. 2024.

"What Is the Order of Interbeing." *Order of Interbeing*, https://orderofinterbeing.org/about/our-history/. Accessed 11 Dec. 2024.

Review of International American Studies
RIAS—Vol. 18, Fall-Winter, № 2/2025
ISSN 1991-2773
DOI: https://doi.org/10.31261/rias.18343

NEITHER HERE NOR THERE
Liminal Spaces and the Vietnam War in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* and Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone*

> *The only guide to a man is his conscience; the only shield to his memory is the rectitude and sincerity of his actions. It is very imprudent to walk through life without this shield, because we are so often mocked by the failure of our hopes and the upsetting of your calculations; but with this shield, however the fates may play, we march always in the ranks of honor. (Berman vii)*

Małgorzata Jarmołowicz-Dziekońska
Department of Anglophone Literatures, University of Białystok, Poland
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0402-0319

War has never been an easy theme for discussion. Perhaps for this reason Larry Berman decided to begin his monograph with the above-mentioned reflection by Winston Churchill (1940)—as an epigraph to his study on the Vietnam War and its consequences. It will serve as a springboard for the following paper and analysis of two literary works, which present apparently twofold perspectives on the Vietnam War, but—in fact—are equally informative sources of dismal reverberations regarding both Vietnamese and American interpretations of the war events. Thus, they construct an unequivocal image of the war, which has turned out to be detrimental for both parties. In this paper, I investigate the liminal state of both protagonists to illustrate that the Vietnam War has proved destructive to either participating side. The conceptualization of liminality allows for studying the transition of each individual in order to locate their potential points of convergence and mark in-between spaces which elude conventional frames of analysis. According to Viljoen and Van der Merwe, this might help to unravel the true potential of a literary text, since it reveals hidden planes of reference within the text itself:

> The relevance of the idea of liminality for literature is not only that many texts describe and represent liminal states, persons and transformations, but also that the space of the text itself is a symbolically demarcated liminal zone where transformations are allowed to happen—imaginary transformations that model and possibly bring into being new ways of thinking and being. (11)

Laura Zander supports this view, claiming that literature, "commonly understood as an artistic and creative discourse" (11), offers a broad space for exploration in terms of liminality. Especially literary fiction can be analytically dissected in a number of ways due to its complex and, at the same time, ambivalent nature. Thus, as the critic argues, "[t]he liminality of literary fiction […] is valued as an expression of its generative and creative potential. Illusion and deception are significant instruments literary fiction operates with as well as generates, to render literature a productive space of possibility and permanent transgression" (11).

The authors of both works provide apparently dissimilar portrayals of the war circumstances and its ramifications. However, after a closer look, accounts which emerge from their narratives seem equally sinister and overwhelming. The main character of the novel *The Sympathizer* (2016) presents himself as an "aide-de-camp and junior officer of intelligence" (Nguyen 3), whereas Tim O'Brien in his memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (2003) positions himself as both an author and a protagonist, thus constructing the narrative as a manifesto against war. O'Brien's experience as a foot soldier has allowed him to adopt a unique empirical perspective of a witness and a judge at the same time, which undoubtedly facilitates exploring the ambiguities of the war. Hence, a war account of a fictitious character clashes with a report of an American citizen, a Vietnam War veteran, but in no way is of lesser importance within the scope of representation.

Nguyen's protagonist reveals himself as an anonymous hybrid character: "I am a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces. Perhaps not surprisingly, I am also a man of two minds. […] I am simply able to see any issue from both sides" (1). As a half-Vietnamese and half-French communist double agent, he becomes involved in an undercover mission which leads him to the United States after the fall of Saigon in 1975. His mixed descent transpires to be a facilitator in his occupational environment, with a clearly-cut role: "I was one of them, a sympathizer with the Left, a revolutionary fighting for peace, equality, democracy, freedom, and independence, all the noble things my people had died for and I had hid for" (81). For that matter, O'Brien defines himself with reference to his military function: "I'd never been much of a fighter, I was afraid of bullies" (31). The author employs a non-linear and fragmented narrative structure, which enables him to move back and forth throughout time. After graduating from college in 1968, O'Brien receives his draft notice. He opposes the Vietnam War on ethical grounds but he also considers himself too beholden to his community to disillusion it by rejecting his duty. From the very

Małgorzata Jarmołowicz-Dziekońska
Department of Anglophone Literatures, University of Białystok, Poland

beginning, he perceives his role as an ill-conceived assignment: "I did not want to be a soldier, not even an observer to war" (32). During basic training at Fort Lewis in Washington, O'Brien bonds with a fellow soldier, Erik, who also opposes the military. Their mutual disdain for the war stands in stark contrast to the views of their commanding officers, who—in a strongly nationalistic manner—define such a world view as cowardice and a form of mental disturbance. O'Brien's strong misalignment with his mission tosses him away into the abyss of non-reconciliation: "I was a confirmed liberal, not a pacifist; but I would have cast my ballot to end the Vietnam War immediately, I would have voted for Eugene McCarthy, hoping he would make peace. I was not soldier material, that was certain" (31). In fact, his opposition to war is clearly-stated and seeps through the whole narrative, which castigates its perpetrators and makes his witness testimony even more emphatic:

> I was persuaded then, and I remain persuaded now, that the war was wrong. And since it was wrong and since people were dying as a result of it, it was evil. Doubts, of course, hedged all this: I had neither the expertise nor the wisdom to synthesize answers; most of the facts were clouded, and there was no certainty as to the kind of government that would follow a North Vietnamese victory or, for that matter, an American victory, and the specifics of the conflict were hidden away—partly in men's minds, partly in the archives of government, and partly in buried, irretrievable history. The war, I thought, was wrongly conceived and poorly justified. (27)

This leads O'Brien to the decision of deserting the army and plotting an escape plan to Sweden, since this country does not extradite deserters back to the United States. However, with a ticket in his hand, he dissuades himself from this idea, as he is unwilling to face the ramifications of such flagrant disregard for his family and fellow recruits. After assignment to the general infantry, he joins Alpha Company in Central Vietnam and is sent to the frontline. Nevertheless, his reservations concerning the war do not wither towards the end of the memoir, but gain even a stronger force of persuasion, becoming his personal statement: "I would wish this book could take the form of a plea for everlasting peace, a plea from one who knows, from one who's been there and come back, an old soldier looking back at a dying war" (32). This statement might prompt the reader to explore certain spaces of representation with a focus on the liminal state of the protagonist in his transitional period, which may reveal the "in-between" character of his transformation.

The concept of liminality, employed as a tool to illustrate the mental state of each protagonist, enables us to capture their "in-betweenness" and allows for investigating their inner passage. Such an approach opens more possibilities for interpretation, since there are interstitial spaces that need to be examined in order to define the characters' transition. According to Homi Bhabha (*The Location of Culture* 2), "these 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself." Thus, the concept navigates us towards exploring "a difference 'within,' a subject that inhabits the rim of an 'in-between' reality" (13). What is more, Bhabha ("DissemiNation" 300) emphasizes another potential of liminality: it "provides a place from which to speak both of, and as, the minority, the exilic, the marginal, and the emergent." This proves especially useful for investigations of narratives which elude conventional frames of analysis.

O'Brien positions his "in-betweenness" within the locus of a middle man in terms of acts defining courage as a military person. A boundary between bravery and cowardice seems to be a very fine line, since life circumstances frequently prove inadequate for one unambiguous resolution. Thus, as the author argues, courage and cowardice constantly interweave our lives in a common manner and we tend to act either way depending on a turn of events. This appears especially pronounceable in life-and-death situations, when life instinct clashes with reason. In O'Brien's view, perhaps that is why it is impossible to judge oneself according to only one point of reference:

> Or the other cliché: a coward dies a thousand deaths but a brave man only once. That seems wrong, too. Is a man once and for always a coward? Once and for always a hero?
>
> It is more likely that men act cowardly and, at other times, act with courage, each in different measure, each with varying consistency. The men who do well on the average, perhaps with one moment of glory, those men are brave.
>
> And those who are neither cowards nor heroes, those men sweating beads of pearly fear, failing and whimpering and trying again—the mass of men in Alpha Company—even they may be redeemable. The easy aphorisms hold no hope for the middle man, the man who wants to try but has already died more than once, squirming under the bullets, going through the act of death and coming through embarrassingly alive. (146–147)

Thus, the protagonist finds himself constantly torn between his duty, which requires a courageous response in any circumstances, and his fallible human nature, which at times does not enable him to act accordingly. O'Brien hopes that he can survive the torments of uneasy

Małgorzata Jarmołowicz-Dziekońska
Department
of Anglophone Literatures,
University of Białystok, Poland

feelings, but they crumple under the weight of fright and unexpected twists of events. His unexplored tensions between bravery and cowardice seem to position him approximately in the middle of Bhabha's binary scale, in the interstitial spaces, somewhere "in-between" these two notions.

In turn, the "in-betweenness" of Nguyen's protagonist evinces itself in displacement. Shoved between two realities of "them" and "us," also in terms of his hybrid identity, he emphasizes the significance of time over a spatial distance for an immigrant: "We were displaced persons, but it was time more than space that defined us. While the distance to return to our lost country was far but finite, the number of years it would take to close that distance was potentially infinite" (259). The aforementioned statement implies that refugees suspended in space and time are simultaneously immobilized by insecurity. What is more, the clash of time ("the present and the past") and space ("the here and the there") seems to position all the displaced in a vicious circle, with no way out:

> Saigon time was fourteen hours off, although if one judged time by this clock, it was we who were fourteen hours off. Refugee, exile, immigrant—whatever species of displaced human we were, we did not simply live in two cultures, as celebrants of the great American melting pot imagined. Displaced people also lived in two time zones, the here and the there, the present and the past, being as we were reluctant time travelers. But while science fiction imagined time travelers as moving forward or backward in time, this timepiece demonstrated a different chronology. The open secret of the clock, naked for all to see, was that we were only going in circles. (260)

This constant suspension thrusts them into a limbo from which there seems to be no exit. Similarly, positioned on a binary scale—this time between the "East" and the "West"—they fall into neither category, since their hybrid properties act as mutual deterrents, preventing them from swaying towards either direction. This resonates with Bhabha's theorization of liminal spaces, which seems to provide an apparently one-dimensional outcome of the transition, namely passing the "threshold." Although the concept itself "marks the place, line or border at which a passage can be made from one space to another" (Chakraborty 145), in certain circumstances a full transition is unfeasible, since the prevailing conditions preclude any autonomous change and, what follows, development. This lends space to a prolonged existence in the interstitial environment within which individuals can negotiate their social status. However, Arup Ratan Chakraborty points out that the aforementioned standstill acts to their disadvantage and argues

that passing the "threshold" is not always possible due to the fact that there are "situations in the lives of people in which transitions from an old situation to a new one, one social position to another, are hampered or cannot be completed successfully" (146). This has detrimental consequences, as any attempt to break this deadlock is futile and eventually stalls the final transformation. Hence, according to Chakraborty, such a predicament leaves a mark also on those in transition, since "[i]ndividuals who are caught in between two stages of development […] feel marginal, excluded, without identity or influence" (146).

The exploration of actual tensions between the notions of courage and cowardice (as well as the East and the West) according to Bhabha's concept of liminality constitutes a point of departure for the further conceptualization of liminality developed by British anthropologist Victor Turner. As it has been illustrated, Bhabha's tool is insufficient for a thorough investigation of this aspect. It provides a bipolar scale where courage and cowardice or the West and the East are at the opposite ends of the scale. Although they are both relevant and indispensable to explore "in-between" spaces, they do not allow for locating certain transitions and transformations of the protagonists within the interstitial spaces.

Turner's concept, which partially inscribes into this theorization, appears indispensable for discerning certain shifts, translocations and transfigurations of the subject in a process of change. The concept of liminality[1] was first introduced in 1909 in the field of anthropology by Arnold van Gennep in the context of social rituals in order to distinguish three phases characteristic of rites of passage: separation, margin or limen, and reaggregation.[2] The theory initially referred to the initiation rites of young tribe members. It was further conceptualized by Turner, who in 1967, coined the phases of separation, transition and incorporation and opened a scholarly debate to a wider range of social and cultural factors determining the formation of identity. The concept itself also derives from his work on ritual society, although it was developed with a view to be applied to modern society. The first stage of transition, separation, is marked by a certain time of physical detachment from the previous community, while the second stage, a liminal one, manifests itself as a midpoint in the transition from one social status to another. According to Turner (*The Ritual Process* 95), its attributes "are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition

1 Derived from the Latin word *limen*, meaning threshold.

2 First published in the work *Les rites de passage* (1909).

Małgorzata Jarmołowicz-Dziekońska
Department of Anglophone Literatures, University of Białystok, Poland

and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space." The last stage in Turner's theory, incorporation, is characterized by a sense of return of the individual to a stable social state, after experiencing a transformation.

As the liminal state is of primary focus in this analysis, it needs to be conceptualized in more detail. According to Turner (*The Ritual Process* 167), liminality—as a state of threshold or transition in one's psychological and social reality—falls between the phases of separation and incorporation, in "a time and place of withdrawal from normal modes of social action." This stage plays a vital role in the whole process of transition. Turner defines liminal individuals as "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. […] Thus, liminality is frequently likened to […] being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness […], and to an eclipse of the sun or moon" (95). Also, Viljoen and Van der Merwe point out that individuals who undergo a phase of transition are thrust into another spatio-temporal zone which appears indefinable and enshrouded in darkness:

> They cross the limen, in other words, into a new transitional state where the social fabric they are used to is allowed to unravel. They enter a different space and time that is so radically different from the ordinary that it cannot be expressed in ordinary language, but has to be described in metaphors or states of the in-between, like death, going underground or under water, going into eclipse. (11)

Although this liminal stage is destined for supersession, it should be perceived not only as a transitional phase but as a state in itself, since there are individuals or groups, for which this potentially temporary period turns into a permanent condition. Turner (*Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* 261) emphasizes that there exists "a style of life that is permanently contained within liminality. […] Instead of the liminal being a passage, it seemed to be coming to be regarded as a state […]." Thus, if in certain circumstances the phase congeals into a fixed one, it may eventually become the final stage of transition. Pérez Firmat (confirms this view, stating that "Turner, in effect, supplements van Gennep's temporal, processual view of liminality with a spatial one. While for van Gennep the limen is always a threshold, it can also be a place of habitation" (xiv). Another significant variable pertains to the irreversibility of the process of transition once the liminal stage has been reached. In some cases, due to external circumstances, the phase of incorporation becomes unachievable, so in the words of Spariosu (38) "the liminal […] may not necessarily always lead

back to a center; on the contrary, it may, under certain conditions, lead away from it in a steady and irreversible fashion."

The motif of darkness in O'Brien's memoir manifests itself as an overt token of liminality. In *If I Die*, Darkness is inevitably conjoined with fear. Treading new ground in an enemy land breeds uncertainty and confusion, and a thought of detachment from the rest of the group seems to be bothering enough to nag the protagonist incessantly during a night mission: "One of the most persistent and appalling thoughts which lumbers through your mind as you walk through Vietnam at night is the fear of getting lost, of becoming detached from the others, of spending the night alone in that frightening and haunting countryside. It was dark" (92). Hence, darkness triggers fright, which envelops the protagonist and contributes to another interdependent variable: mental paralysis. Passing through landmines induces "self-defeating fear" that is especially hard to overcome. Diverse scenarios running through his head make O'Brien desperately cautious in order to avoid committing a fatal mistake:

> You hallucinate. You look ahead, a few paces and wonder what your legs will resemble if there is more to the earth in that spot than silicates and nitrogen. Will the pain be unbearable? Will you scream or fall silent? Will you be afraid to look at your own body, afraid of the sight of your own red flesh and white bone? You wonder if your friends will weep.
>
> It is not easy to fight this sort of self-defeating fear, but you try. You decide to be ultracareful—the hard-nosed, realistic approach. You try to second-guess the mine. Should you put your foot to that flat rock or the clump of weed to its rear? Paddy dike or water? You wish you were Tarzan, able to swing with the vines. You try to trace the footprints of the man to your front. You give it up when he curses you for following too closely; better one man dead than two.
>
> The moment-to-moment, step-by-step decision-making preys on your mind. The effect sometimes is paralysis. You are slow to rise from rest breaks. You walk like a wooden man, like a toy soldier out of Victor Herbert's *Babes in Toyland*. (126)

In light of Turner's theory, courage gains another vector of reference. It does not linger as an unreachable binary opposite but manifests itself as an indication of maturity. The state of fully-developed maturity harbingers the final stage of passage and thus makes the whole process of transition successful. This time courage also takes the foreground of O'Brien's narrative. Juxtaposed with fear, it is always a winner, if employed sensibly. Hence, acting wisely with perseverance and resilience will always turn out fruitful and give rise to bravery, which also enhances the chance for a successful transformation: "Courage is nothing to laugh at, not if it is proper courage and exercised by men who know

Małgorzata Jarmołowicz-Dziekońska
Department of Anglophone Literatures, University of Białystok, Poland

what they do is proper. Proper courage is wise courage. It's acting wisely, acting wisely when fear would have a man act otherwise. It is endurance of the soul in spite of fear—wisely" (137). The wisdom of action appears to support Turner's conceptualization and to lead the protagonist towards the third stage of the process—integration (evincing itself in stability), which can also be perceived as peace and the cessation of the war. This shifts our focus to another plane of reasoning, which invariably prompts the author to present further arguments against the war. His courage of conviction is strengthened by self-evident facts, which are so pronounced that they cannot be obscured even by "a cold-moon Vietnam night" (or, in Turner's wording, "an eclipse of the sun or moon") and entombed in the darkness of ignorance:

> There is the phrase: courage of conviction. Doubtless, I thought, conviction can be right or wrong. But I had reasons to oppose the war in Vietnam. The reason could be murmured like the Psalms on a cold-moon Vietnam night: kill and fight only for certain causes; certain causes somehow involve self-evident truths; Hitler's blitzkrieg, the attack on Pearl Harbor, these were somehow self-evident grounds for using force, just as bullyism will, in the end, call for force, but the war in Vietnam drifted in and out of human lives, taking them or sparing them or angering them like a headless, careless taxi hack, without evident cause, a war fought for uncertain reasons. (138–139)

The motif of courage echoes also in Nguyen's novel, inscribed in the slogan of the anticommunist refugee movement that the protagonist is entrusted to infiltrate: "Always resent, never relent. Perhaps that should be our motto" (181). In this case, in contrast to O'Brien's memoir, the final stage of the transformation process promises stability in the form of liberty. In the context of freedom, this gains an additional frame of reference. Those who want to win freedom need to be perseverant, as liberty always comes at a price and endurance seems to be an indispensable tool to achieve this goal. What is more, Nguyen's protagonist finds himself in a similar predicament concerning fright, which appears in alignment with Turner's reference to the womb, this time not only submerged in darkness but also imbued with fear. Being incinerated reveals oneself in incessantly dreadful images that threaten the character to come to fruition at any time. This might be viewed as a potential obstacle to reaching the final stage of transition. Nightmarish visions of being dismembered in the course of warfare actions generate a sequence of dark projections, which spill into his mind to reveal their ominous countenance:

> I feared nothing more than burning to death, nothing more than being pureed by a propeller, nothing more than being quartered by a Katyusha, which even

> sounded like the name of a demented Siberian scientist who had lost a few toes and a nose to frostbite. I had seen roasted remains before, in a desolate field outside of Hue, carbonized corpses fused into the metal of a downed Chinook, the fuel tanks having incinerated the three dozen occupants, their teeth exposed in a permanent, simian rictus; the flesh of their lips and faces burned off; the skin a finely charred obsidian, smooth and alien, all the hair converted to ash, no longer recognizable as my countrymen or as human beings. I did not want to die that way; I did not want to die in any way, least of all in a long-range bombardment from the artillery of my communist comrades, launched from the suburbs they had captured outside Saigon. (58)

Any countermeasures which might be employed in order to avoid this predicament seem non-existent. Thus, the suspension of his own somber thoughts in the darkness may be compared to a limbo that makes the protagonist exteriorize his fears.

Another question that needs to be posed with reference to liminality concerns a potential outcome of the characters' transformation: Do both protagonists reach the final stage of transition or are they suspended in an eternal limbo? This appears to be a complex issue, since both of them fluctuate between abnegation and self-reconciliation. O'Brien's constant perplexity about the justification of the war makes him linger in a state of suspension full of ambiguities and unresolved inner conflicts: "The war, I thought, was wrongly conceived and poorly justified. But perhaps I was mistaken, and who really knew, anyway?" (27). However, all the time his reflections lean towards the groundlessness of the war, a crusade with no merit: "It wasn't a matter of peace … but rather a matter of when and when not to join others in making war. And it wasn't a matter of listening to an ex-lieutenant colonel talk about serving in a right war, when the question was whether to serve in what seemed a wrong one" (30). The landscape of the war does not differ from any other war experiences and fear appears as an inherent derivative triggered by fighting against "enemy aliens": "Men are killed, dead human beings are heavy and awkward to carry, things smell different in Vietnam, soldiers are afraid and often brave, drill sergeants are boors" (32). Moreover, fright reveals itself as a factor which conditions certain decisions, this time in terms of manhood and cowardice, and what follows—fear of marginalization. This might also be perceived as a factor which keeps the protagonist suspended in a limbo of his own non-defiant acts, which seem to cocoon him in an apparent sense of security:

> Look into your own history. Here we are. Mama has been kissed good-bye, we've grabbed our rifles, we're ready for extinction. All this not because of conviction, not for ideology; rather, it's from fear of society's censure, just as Pound claims.

Małgorzata Jarmołowicz-Dziekońska
Department
of Anglophone Literatures,
University of Białystok, Poland

> Rather from fear of weakness, afraid that to avoid war is to avoid manhood. We come to Fort Lewis afraid to admit we are not Achilles, that we are not brave, not heroes. Here we are, thrust to the opposite and absurd antipode of what we think is good. (45)

The problem of marginalization is tightly interrelated with the concept of liminality. However, a strong line of demarcation needs to be drawn between the two conceptualizations, which—according to Sang Hyun Lee—define marginality. They should be inspected separately, since they constitute two separate components of marginality. The former term is defined as "the powerless and demoralizing space" into which the marginalized are thrown, whereas the latter one refers to "the positive, creative nature of the in-betweenness." As Lee explains:

> A person can enter into a liminal or in-between space without being marginalized, while marginalization (being pushed into the periphery) inevitably places a person in a liminal, peripheral, and in-between place. Liminality does not have to be marginality. But marginality includes a liminal aspect. (Lee 4–5)

Thus, O'Brien—expressing the fears of the drafted American soldiers—exposes their fear of marginalization, as well as being pushed to peripheral spaces and fringes of society on account of their reservations concerning their participation in the war. This time, again, they perfectly fit into the common characteristic of liminal people, who "fall in the interstices of social structure, are on its margins, or occupy its lowest rungs" (*The Ritual Process* 125). In consequence, the creative potential of liminality is thwarted and distorted, which—according to O'Brien's reasoning—derives from the lack of spirit: "We were not all cowards. But we were not committed, not resigned, to having to win a war" (172). Once again, the motif of paralysis penetrates his reflections and makes him ready for another confession: although fright functions as a shield against danger, it also doubles as a token of cowardice and inaction. That is why, as O'Brien argues, it needs to be hidden in order to save one's face:

> fear is paralysis, but it is better to be afraid than to move out to die, all limbs functioning and heart thumping and charging and having your chest torn open for all the work; you have to pick the times not to be afraid, but when you are afraid you must hide it to save respect and reputation. (202)

This countermeasure appears especially difficult to employ in circumstances which defy control and do not apply to the norms of non-war reality. Nevertheless, as Turner (*The Ritual Process* 167) observes, this opens a wider space for scholarly debate: "if liminality is regarded

as a time and place of withdrawal from normal modes of social action, it can be seen as potentially a period of scrutinization of the central values and axioms of the culture in which it occurs." According to O'Brien, what needs to be taken into account is the unexpected. The conditions of warfare are always uncompromising and it is frequently impossible to be composed in an unstable environment. Waiting for a rapid sequence of events makes one freeze in anticipation of the unavoidable:

> We started to go down. The worst part of the Combat Assault, the thing you think about on the way down, is how perfectly exposed you are. Nowhere to hide your head. You are in a fragile machine. No foxholes, no rocks, no gullies. But the CA is the army's potent offensive tactic of the war, a cousin to Hitler's blitzkrieg. The words are "agile," "hostile," and "mobile." One moment the world is serene, and in another moment the war is there. It is like the cloudburst, like lightning, like the dropping of the bomb on a sleeping Hiroshima, like the Nazis' rush through Belgium and Poland and Czechoslovakia.
>
> You sit in your helicopter, watching the earth come spinning up at you. (114)

This moment of passivity makes him suspended in a mental lockdown, temporarily isolated from the hard-hitting reality, which reveals another characteristic of liminality. Turner implicates that one of the most pronounced tokens of the liminal state is isolation, as liminality "may imply solitude rather than society, the voluntary or involuntary withdrawal of an individual from a social-structural matrix. It may imply alienation from rather than more authentic participation in social existence" (*Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* 52). O'Brien's short-term mental withdrawal before an attack enables him to collect all his mental resources in order to successfully perform his oncoming mission. His inertness might also be magnified by the seemingly fruitless outcome of the whole venture. American troops inch forward only to find themselves trapped or compelled to withdraw. On the whole, their endeavors are counterproductive and the futility of the war does not boost their morale:

> We walk through the mines, trying to catch the Viet Cong Forty-eighth Battalion like an inexperienced hunter after a hummingbird. But he finds us far more often than we do him. He is hidden among the mass of civilians or in tunnels or in jungles. So we walk to find him, stalking the mythical, phantomlike Forty-eighth Battalion from here to there to here to there. And each piece of ground left behind is his from the moment we are gone on our next hunt. It is not a war fought for territory, not for pieces of land that will be won and held. It is not a war fought to win the hearts of the Vietnamese nationals, not in the wake of contempt drawn on our faces and on theirs, not in the wake of a burning village, a trampled rice paddy, a battered detainee. (129–130)

Małgorzata Jarmołowicz-Dziekońska
Department of Anglophone Literatures, University of Białystok, Poland

In the case of Nguyen's novel, the discussion concerning the war also tilts towards the suppressed potential of liminality and wrongfulness of the war. War, the Commandant argues, seems to produce nothing but aridity and mutilation: "Compare that to how their American allies poisoned this place. No trees. Nothing grows. Unexploded mines and bombs killing and maiming innocents. This used to be beautiful countryside. Now it's just a wasteland" (410). Or, as Man/the commissar puts it, "They have tested their techniques, their weapons, and their ideas on our small country. We have been the subjects of that experiment they call, with a straight face, the Cold War. What a joke, given how hot the war has been for us!" (448). From a diachronic perspective, the Vietnamese (including the protagonist himself) seem to be in a transitional period "when the past has lost its grip and the future has not yet taken definite shape" (Myerhoff after Turner 117). Moreover, the chances are slim that their future will materialize in an auspicious manner. Their "neither here, nor there" manifests itself in an obscure vision of (non-)returned sovereignty with no clear-cut resolution. As one of the Vietnamese extras on *The Hamlet* set states, "Before the communists won, foreigners were victimizing and terrorizing and humiliating us. Now it's our own people victimizing and terrorizing and humiliating us" (199). Through his characters, Nguyen thus foregrounds the most excruciating consequence that emerges out of this conflict. The Vietnamese nation feels betrayed by both parties. According to the General, the leader of the exiled South Vietnamese, "The people cry out for freedom! The communists promise freedom and independence, but deliver only poverty and enslavement. They have betrayed the Vietnamese people, and revolutions don't betray the people" (287). As another anticommunist character, the admiral, argues, the American side forfeited their promises to the disadvantage of South Vietnam: "[T]he Americans had betrayed us before, and there was no hope of fighting again if I fled to them. The Americans were finished. Now that their white race had failed, they were leaving Asia to the yellow race" (381). As a result, the Vietnamese experience their "in-between-ness" living in a limbo from which they can neither reverse, nor advance, since they are permanently suspended. They exist in their liminal space without any opportunity to pass the threshold. Thus, they are beyond transition, and "the 'beyond' is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past" (*The Location of Culture* 1).

What becomes conspicuous instantaneously is the fact that the protagonists' conclusions about the Vietnam War are discernibly convergent. The war turned out to be detrimental for all parties—however, for different reasons. According to Nguyen, the consequences of trusting

Americans are disastrous for the Vietnamese. Having been promised "salvation from communism" (15), South Vietnam falls into a trap with no escape: "They started this war, and now that they're tired of it, they've sold us out," says the General. "But who is there to blame but ourselves? We were foolish enough to think they would keep their word" (15). A motif of gullibility recurs in Nguyen's novel with even greater force, with accusations being cast also in terms of the protagonist: "I'm a loser for believing in all the promises your America made to people like me. You came and said we were friends, but what we didn't know was that you could never trust us, much less respect us" (213). Thus, he realizes that he has never been treated by Americans on equal terms, as his country has been thrown into the war on their own conditions. Nguyen inches forward with his imputations of wrongdoing, aimed at the Americans: "For what reason had millions more died in our great war to unify our country and liberate ourselves, often through no choice of their own?" (490). The lingering question is followed by strikingly similar ones: "What do those who struggle against power do when they seize power? What does the revolutionary do when the revolution triumphs? Why do those who call for independence and freedom take away the independence and freedom of others?" (493–494). According to rites of passage, explicated by Turner, "the passage from lower to higher status is through a limbo of statuslessness" (*The Ritual Process* 97). In this case, stripped of his right to freedom, Nguyen's protagonist seems to be suspended in a two-tier reality. This stagnation period transforms in a stage where everything appears to fade into the distance, every objective seems unattainable, any transition unachievable. Liberty is not in view and the aforementioned questions remain unanswered. Perhaps for this reason, in Nguyen's words, "[t]he unseen is almost always underlined with the unsaid" (192). Apparently, Nguyen's protagonist does not pass the threshold, but instead, is pushed even further towards the marginal periphery of liminality.

The predicament of O'Brien, and hence his chance of passing the threshold, is constantly aggravated by his act of defiance against the legitimacy of the war. The author aptly juxtaposes doubtful justifications concerning the American involvement in the Vietnamese "affairs": one evil can never be used in vindication of another one, as it will always bear rotten fruit. For this reason, no victory is worth rejoicing at the expense of "the children napalmed" and lost lives:

> [T]here is little evidence that South Vietnam under the communists will be a worse place than a South Vietnam ruled by a Diem or Khanh. I mean, there

Małgorzata Jarmołowicz-Dziekońska
Department of Anglophone Literatures, University of Białystok, Poland

is no persuasive evidence, at least not persuasive to me, that all the lives being lost, the children napalmed and everything—there's no good evidence that all this horror is worth preventing a change from Thieu to Ho Chi Minh. You see? I look for the bulk of evidence. I see evil in the history of Ho's rule of the north, I see evil, from Fall's books, in the history of the string of rulers we've helped in the South. Evil on both sides. But the third evil, the death and pain, must also be counted in. And I am not persuaded that intensifying the third evil should be done so as to mitigate one of the other evils. (65–66)

In the end, one aspect seems to be blatantly obvious—the American government has not reached its goal: "Patent absurdity. The troops are going home, and the war has not been won, even with a quarter of the United States Army fighting it" (129). Nevertheless, O'Brien in his final reckoning does not appear to be an indigent neophyte, "symbolically represented as a kind of tabula rasa, pure undetermined possibility" (Myerhoff 117). His clear-cut statement about the wrongfulness of the war makes his voice firm and more resonant in his premise, which prompts the author to a final resolution:

I spent some time thinking about the things I would do after Vietnam and after the first sergeants and rifles were out of my life. I made a long list. I would write about the army. Expose the brutality and injustice and the stupidity and arrogance of wars and men who fight in them. […] I would crusade against this war, and if, when I was released, I would find other wars, I would work to discover whether they were just and necessary, and if I found they were not, I would have another crusade. (97)

On his final parting with Vietnam in 1970, O'Brien flies back home and moves from suspension in a war limbo to the retrieved control of his life as a civilian. Thus, the locus of his existence simultaneously places him in the last phase of his transition. Although "[t]here is no joy in leaving" and "nothing to savour with your eyes or heart" (200), his catharsis from the fire and brimstone of war grants him respite and alleviation of all tensions: "When the plane leaves the ground, you join everyone in a ritualistic shout, emptying your lungs inside the happy cave of winners, trying to squeeze whatever drama you can out of leaving Vietnam" (200). His process of transformation comes to an end when he lands in the United States, takes off his uniform and resumes his previous life. His final transition can be best explained, again, by Turner (*Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* 16), according to whom "yesterday's liminal becomes today's stabilized, today's peripheral becomes tomorrow's centered." O'Brien's regained composure facilitates his "new" stabilization and anchors him in a "new" reality. Hence, the protagonist's

journey draws to an end also in terms of his transition. Subsequent to this experience, he is able to continue his ordinary life, however with an altered balance point after lessons learned.

In respect of the Vietnam War, the final outcome of this military endeavor does not leave much space for praise. President Richard Nixon "replaced the term 'victorious peace' with winning an 'honorable peace' in Vietnam" (Berman 45), which—in fact—appears still far from the truth. Although "Vietnamization and negotiation were Nixon's twin pillars for achieving an honorable peace" (50), eventually none of these measures was deemed successful. In the face of such an outcome, both protagonists bear the consequences of their participation in the war. Nguyen's protagonist remains scarred for life and does not earn respect in recognition of his achievements. After getting into progressively hazardous situations, he finally finds himself in a Vietnamese re-education camp, where he is constrained to produce a written confession of everything he has done on his confidential mission. Thus, his period of transition is halted and he is thrown into a vicious circle of torture and accusations. With reference to Turner's theory, he is unable to pass the threshold and achieve a sense of stability as a result of incorporation and a final transition. Hence, he remains suspended in a stateless limbo without any prospects for change. For that matter, O'Brien succeeds in achieving a fruitful transformation, since he regains his status and stabilization, and eventually escapes the limbo of war atrocity, darkness and fright. The completed process of transformation facilitates his stage of incorporation and reuniting with American society. Each protagonist's experience positions him in a different locus of existence, which proves that liminal spaces constitute a fertile field for exploration within the transition paradigm.

Abstract: Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2016) and Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone* (2003) present apparently twofold perspectives on the Vietnam War, but—in fact—they are equally informative sources of dismal reverberations regarding both Vietnamese and American interpretations of the war events. Thus, they construct an unequivocal image of the war, which has turned out to be detrimental for both parties. In this paper, I investigate the liminal state of both protagonists in order to illustrate that the Vietnam War has proved destructive to either participating side. The authors of both novels provide apparently dissimilar portrayals of the war circumstances and its ramifications. However, after a closer examination, accounts which emerge from their narratives seem equally sinister and overwhelming. The concept of liminality, employed as a tool to illustrate the mental state of each protagonist, enables us to capture their "in-betweenness" and allows for investigating their inner passage. Such an approach opens more possibilities for interpretation, since there are interstitial spaces that need to be examined in order to define the characters' transition. The conceptualization of a British anthropologist,

Małgorzata Jarmołowicz-Dziekońska
Department
of Anglophone Literatures,
University of Białystok, Poland

Victor Turner, which inscribes into this theorization, appears indispensable for discerning certain shifts, translocations and transfigurations of the subject in a process of change.

Keywords: Vietnam War, liminality, Victor Turner, in-betweenness, interstitial spaces, Homi Bhabha

Bio: Małgorzata Jarmołowicz-Dziekońska (PhD, Department of Anglophone Literatures, Faculty of Philology, University of Białystok, Poland) dedicates her research work to the relationship of literature and culture by exploring their textual intersections and mapping their locus within the matrix of the contemporary literary criticism. Her major fields of academic interest comprise ecocriticism, postcolonial and cultural studies with a focus on ethnicity and identity formation in the context of immigrant narratives. In her monograph, *Japanese-American Literature through the Prism of Acculturation* (New York: Routledge, 2023), she engages in discourse on acculturation and acculturation strategies adopted by Japanese immigrants and their Japanese-American offspring, who struggle with their hybrid ethnic identities and resulting tensions between their American and Japanese selves.

WORKS CITED

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.

———. "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation." *Nation and Narration*, edited by Homi Bhabha. Routledge, 1991, pp. 291–322.

Berman, Larry. *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam*. Touchstone, 2002.

Chakraborty, Arup Ratan. "Liminality in Post-Colonial Theory: A Journey from Arnold van Gennep to Homi K. Bhabha." *Anudhyan: An International Journal of Social Sciences (AIJSS)*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 145–153.

Lee, Hyun Sang. *From a Liminal Place: An Asian American Theology*. Fortress Press, 2010.

Myerhoff, Barbara. "Rites of Passage: Process and Paradox." *Celebration. Studies in Festivity and Ritual*, edited by Victor Turner, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982, pp. 109–135.

Nguyen, Viet Thanh. *The Sympathizer*. Corsair, 2016.

O'Brien, Tim. *If I Die in a Combat Zone*. Flamingo Seventies Classic, 2003 [1973].

Pérez Firmat, Gustavo. *Literature and Liminality: Festive Readings in the Hispanic Tradition*. Duke University Press, 1986.

Spariosu, Mihai I. *The Wreath of Wild Olive: Play, Liminality and the Study of Literature*. State University of New York Press, 1997.

Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Aldine Publishing Company, 1977.

———. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Cornell University Press, 1974.

Viljoen, Hein, and Van der Merwe, C.N. "Introduction—A Poetics of Liminality and Hybridity." *Beyond the Threshold: Explorations of Liminality in Literature*, edited by Hein Viljoen and C. N. Van der Merwe, Peter Lang, 2007, pp. 1–26.

Zander, Laura. "Pleasures of Liminality." *Law & Literature*, vol. 37, 2025, pp. 623–651.

Review of International American Studies
RIAS—Vol. 18, Fall-Winter, № 2/2025
ISSN 1991-2773
DOI: https://doi.org/10.31261/rias.17977

DESIRING-MACHINES, COMMUNITY POLITICS AND THE THREAT OF REVOLUTIONARY DESIRE IN TONI MORRISON'S *PARADISE*

Athina Bekou
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece
https://orcid.org/0009-0008-6135-7528

In *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari offer a complex yet intriguing interpretation of capitalist and patriarchal structures. By affiliating the structure of community systems with the function of bodily organs, Deleuze and Guattari identify desire as the connective force of subject-subject relations (Coles 5). In that sense, socio-political structures react to the manifestations and shifts of the subjects' desires the same way a body does to the signals of its organs. Thus, community politics are understood as a direct product of the linear process of desiring-production (Deleuze and Guattari 14). Deleuze and Guattari acknowledge desire as the central piece in the mechanism of social production (296), subsequently rendering it both a facilitator and a threat (116) to the function of social formations. The linearity that connects desiring and social production is further highlighted in the examination of community narratives, where the infiltration of subject desire can either sustain or disrupt the life of the community body. In Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, community narratives compose a tale of hunger (Morrison 262)—of desire both repressed and unleashed—which causes connections and fragments equally. Morrison presents two opposing social formations, the strict all-black town of Ruby in Oklahoma, and the Convent, a sanctuary for wayward women. As the stories surrounding the two spaces unfold, Morrison's text paints a devastating yet realistic picture of community life by highlighting the complex, traumatic, fragile and transformative bonds of interpersonal and social relations that develop between these two communities. By creating the elective affinities between Deleuze and Guattari's theoretical analysis of the body of organs and Morrison's narrative of these two communities, this essay will explore the journey

of each respective community and how it becomes a straight line of either decay or evolution, following the linear processes of desiring and social production.

For Deleuze and Guattari, desire is inherently present in all social subjects and serves a connective purpose. This suggests that the desire of one subject connects to the desire of another, thus creating what Deleuze and Guattari call a "desiring-machine" (5). Deleuze and Guattari depict desire not as a static entity, but as a dynamic flow that is continuously produced and reproduced, and the subjects as the machines that constitute its agentic energy. The connective function and productive flow of desire are further displayed in the fact that desiring-machines connect to other desiring-machines, thus creating an entire body of desire-production, which acts as foundation for social-production (296). In that sense, when a current of desire flows through a number of desiring-machines—when desire is shared and reproduced by a group of individuals—the foundations for a community are being laid down.

To represent the manifestation of desire, Deleuze and Guattari establish the most ambiguous and, at the same time, theoretically enabling term of their entire theoretical approach: "the body without organs" (9). The term refers to an independent and shifting entity, not bound by any organic restrictions, that both attracts and repels the desiring-machines (9). The "body without organs" is the map of desire-production (11), whilst desiring-machines are the organs trying to attach themselves to it, sometimes successfully and, at other times, unsuccessfully. When the interaction between the body without organs and the desiring-machines is peaceful, the reproduction of the flow of desire is achieved. On the other hand, when the body without organs "repels the organs [the desiring-machines] and lays them aside" (329–30), the result is death. A cautious interpretation of the body without organs could frame it as the embodiment of the ideal, the collection of goals and principles towards which the members of a community strive. In a related statement, Deleuze and Guattari claim that "capital is […] the body without organs of the capitalist" (10), which both reproduces and expands itself through the process of desiring-production. In the framework of the capitalist system, then, the desiring-machines produced by the capitalist subjects attach themselves to the organless body of the capital and through the process of desire-production fuel, develop and perpetuate it (12). A network of disjunctions is established to sustain the flow of desire from the desiring-machines to the body without organs and vice versa,

Athina Bekou
National and Kapodistrian
University of Athens, Greece

but when the connection between organ-machines and the body without organs is unstable, the system is disturbed (12).

According to Deleuze and Guattari, in order to further understand how the body without organs participates in the process of desire-production, one must understand the notion of "the socius" (10). The socius—"the body of the earth, that of the tyrant, or capital" (10)—are also bodily formations, full bodies as termed by Deleuze and Guattari, just like the body without organs (281), and represent the element of anti-production whose existence completes the process of production (10). Whilst the body without organs functions as the map of desiring-production, the socius functions as the map of all production (10). The body without organs "haunts" (281) the socius, meaning that desire haunts the social structure because it represents its unattainable mission.

By applying Deleuze and Guattari's terms to Morrison's *Paradise*, I explore how the concept of desire functions as the main motive for social formation in the plot. My purpose is to highlight how Morrison's *Paradise* depicts the ways in which desire connects units into a whole, driving subjects into creating a community, while, at the same time, a community can be corrupted by the desire of its subjects. I aim thus to showcase how literature in general, and Morrison's text in particular, can reflect the inner workings of socio-political mechanisms. Before moving forward, it is important to relate the novel's intricate plot with Deleuze and Guattari's theory of desire. As mentioned above, the plot of Morrison's *Paradise* revolves around the formation of two respective communities: the town of Ruby and the Convent. In the nineteenth century, a group of nine families, led by Zechariah Morgan, founded an independent community called Haven, Ruby's predecessor, after being discriminated for their dark black skin color. By establishing a "community 'kitchen'" (Morrison 99) in the form of a public Oven, the town's men ensured that their women would not have to work in white households and thus would not be assaulted (99). As the nine families connect through their mutual desire for a secure, autonomous and prosperous community, they are rendered "desiring-machines" (Deleuze and Guattari 5) whose desire-production results in social-production (296) in the form of Haven. The Oven, as the physical symbol of their desire for community belonging (Morrison 15) and racial autonomy (99), becomes the map of their desire-production (Deleuze and Guattari 11) and the embodiment of their community goals. In that sense, it is read as a "body without organs" (Deleuze and Guattari 9) and the townspeople as the organs trying to attach themselves to the ideal it represents. As the events

of World War II lead Haven to collapse, the townspeople are forced into another migration. This time led by the descendants of Zechariah, Deacon and Steward Morgan, the former citizens of Haven seek to further isolate themselves from the ever present threat of racism. Deep in the Oklahoma desert, they found "New Haven" (Morrison 17), which is later renamed "Ruby" (17), after the Morgans' late sister. With the Morgans financing the town (Morrison 115) and a silent "blood rule" (196) keeping the all-black town racially pure, Ruby becomes an 8-rock patriarchy. As a social formation, Ruby might have started as the product of collective desire, but the body without organs and the desiring-machines are not interacting peacefully this time around, as indicated by the condition of the Oven. After being relocated, the Oven loses its utilitarian purpose (Morrison 103), becomes a fossilized shrine (103) and a point of conflict (85–7), reflecting the town's inner turmoil that will be further analyzed in the following passages.

Ruby's mirror image is the community of the Convent. The Convent is a former embezzler's mansion which Catholic nuns turned into a boarding school to convert Indian girls. After losing its funding, the school is slowly abandoned, until the only original inhabitant left behind is Consolata, also known as Connie, a woman the Convent's Mother Superior had abducted as a young child. As the Convent becomes desolate, women start seeking refuge in it to escape from problematic relationships of the past. These women—Mavis, Gigi, Seneca and Pallas—turn the Convent into their safe haven and start treating Consolata as a benevolent mother figure "who locked no doors and accepted each as she was" (Morrison 262). In spite of their differences, a common desire to no longer be "haunted" (Morrison 266) brings the Convent women together, putting down the foundations for the social formation of their own community. The Convent starts attracting people from Ruby into its orbit, providing a safe space from Ruby's intolerance. Nonetheless, the leaders of Ruby are threatened by this group of women that have no need for men and blame the Convent for their own community's disruption. In the end, nine of the town's male leaders attack the Convent with the intent of getting rid of the women. It is unclear whether the Convent women died or survived, as no bodies were recovered. Nonetheless, their presence haunts the narrative until the last page. Following Deleuze and Guattari's line of thought, I aim to analyze the communities of Ruby and the Convent as full bodies whose social trajectory is a direct reaction to the desires of their subjects—the organ-machines. As desire shifts, the process of desiring-production is affected and the connections between the organ-subjects and the body without organs of their respective

Athina Bekou
National and Kapodistrian
University of Athens, Greece

community become compromised. The way character subjects adapt to these new disjunctions determines whether the body without organs will regain stability or repel the organs completely, resulting in death.

An initial meeting point between Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* and Morrison's *Paradise* is what appears to be the problem of incest—metaphorically in the former, literally in the latter. In their work, Deleuze and Guattari employ the Freudian concept of the incestuous Oedipal triangle of "daddy-mommy-me" (51) to analyze the modes of social repression and the revolutionary function of desire (116). By utilizing the Oedipal triangle as a metaphor for social oppression, they depict how power structures deem desires deviant and worthy of repression when they threaten social form with revolutionary ruptures (116). In *Paradise*, the fictional town of Ruby is the victim of an incestuous genealogy, produced by a set of strict "blood rules" (Morrison 196) forbidding outsiders from entering the town's bloodlines. The town's 8-rock patriarchs enforced them as a means of ensuring the town's racial purity and moral superiority over those who have othered them—and whom they have othered in return. Yet, their obsession with "unadulterated and unadulteried 8-rock blood" (217) results in biological and ethical stagnation. Either as a political metaphor or as a product of black exceptionalism, the concept of incest serves an identical purpose in each text: to depict the harmful effects of repression in the body without organs of a community.

Deleuze and Guattari remove the concept of Oedipus from the psychoanalyst's couch and place it within the theoretical framework of desiring and social production in the late capitalist era. As Edward Thornton points out, Deleuze and Guattari view the Freudian model of the incestuous family as a product of despotism (5). Desire is inherently revolutionary and "capable of calling into question the established order of a society" (Deleuze and Guattari 116). Despotic power structures appropriate desiring-production and enact social repression via the system of social production to persevere the status quo. Finally, despotic power structures enact psychic repression through the control of the family unit, thus subjects learn to desire repression and the despotic system is perpetuated (119). In that sense, the Oedipus complex (119) does not represent a sexual desire for the mother or the father, but a manifestation of desire that has been stifled, repressed and rendered deviant in the mind of the subjects. The Oedipal family is revealed to be a mechanism for sustaining social stability (120). This repression of desire—whether it may be sexual, political or otherwise socially revolutionary—leads to a reproduction of sameness by desiring-machines, which renders the process of desiring-production

stagnant—since desire cannot "survive cut off from the outside, […] from its economic and social investments and counterinvestments" (357)—and eventually leads to a disturbance in the delicate connection between the body without organs and its organ-machines.

In the case of Ruby, the archetype of the Oedipal complex is perfectly exemplified in the 8-rock agenda of keeping the community pure. In an attempt to protect their community from the dangers of Out There (Morrison 16), the town's despotic 8-rock patriarchs establish repression and isolation as the principles of Ruby's social production. Found deep into the Oklahoma desert, far enough that not even buses pass through it (54), the geography of Ruby implies the desire for no physical outside forces to infiltrate its "fortress" (213). On a similar note, the 8-rock exceptionalist agenda does not allow any ideological outside influences to enter Ruby. According to Donald E. Pease, exceptionalism occurs when nations define themselves as exceptional compared to others (8) based on fantasies of ethical and ontological superiority (5). Such is the case of Ruby whose people are "free and protected" (Morrison 8) in their "peaceable kingdom" (276) and where nobody dies as long as pure 8-rock blood resides in the town (217). By rendering Ruby exceptional, any desire deviating from the 8-rock agenda of black exceptionalism is considered Oedipal—socially and morally reprehensible—and worthy of repression, ensuring a biological and ideological reproduction of sameness within the body of Ruby (Deleuze and Guattari 116).

The ideological and ethical stagnation that occurs due to the constant reproduction of sameness inevitably leads Ruby to incorporate familiar models of social formation. In Morrison's text, the Morgan brothers, as the town's main capital owners (115), have the "resources" (115) to manage both the town's finances and its principles, establishing a capitalist system identical to the one Ruby's citizens were trying to escape from in the first place. According to Deleuze and Guattari, "precapitalist social machines are inherent in desire" (139), indicating that all societies based on desiring-production may develop capitalist tendencies, especially since capitalism "liberates the flows of desire" (139). A static community like Ruby offers an ideal space for capitalist tradition to flourish as it is a "deterritorialized socius" whose subjects have no other choice but to "throw themselves into desiring-production" in order to preserve the body without organs (Deleuze and Guattari 140). In the case of Ruby, its citizens have no higher purpose than trying to attach themselves to the body without organs that is the ideal of 8-rock black exceptionalist patriarchy. Following Deleuze and Guattari's theory, Ruby's Utopia becomes problematic, a fact which

Athina Bekou
National and Kapodistrian
University of Athens, Greece

is in agreement with Morrison's text criticizing "modern and postmodern forms of Utopia" (Tabone 141). According to Tabone, *Paradise* confronts the limitations of existing within a Utopia by highlighting "its fatal shortcomings of paradigmatic isolation and exclusion" (141). Capitalism corrupts a society by mechanizing it and appropriating its desiring-production (Deleuze and Guattari 33), which eventually leads to its destruction. In Morrison's text, this phenomenon becomes evident in the fact that capitalism is one of the main motivations behind the slaughter of the Convent women that seals Ruby's fate (277). According to Dalsgård, the "exceptionalist belief in perfection" (245) perpetuated by Ruby's leaders and reinforced by a capitalist reproduction of sameness destroys their utopia instead of preserving it. By deconstructing Ruby's "exceptionalist tradition," Morrison's text exposes the "the mechanisms of violence and marginalization" that are also present in seemingly Utopian settings (Dalsgård 246).

According to Deleuze and Guattari, in a patriarchal and capitalist society "Oedipus is a sure thing" (174–5). "Patricia," which refers both to the chapter and the archive that the character is constructing, reveals the effects of Oedipus—the incestuous reproduction of sameness—in Ruby's social production. Patricia Best Cato is the town's self-proclaimed historiographer who attempts to create an archive of the town's family trees. She is treated with hostility and suspicion, though, when she pries for information. A woman examining the town's history goes against Ruby's patriarchal status quo. By challenging the will of Ruby's patriarchal figures, Patricia declares her insubordination to Ruby's despotic body, thus performing an act of revolutionary desire. In that sense, the shutting of "invisible doors" (Davidson 363) at her face exemplifies the despotic power structures enforcing social repression to sustain stability. Nonetheless, Pat manages to collect enough information to conclude that everyone in Ruby is related to each other by blood in some capacity. Furthermore, by mentioning the case of Menus Jury—who turned into the town's drunk after being forced to abandon the woman he loved (Morrison 195)—and the treatment her own father received after marrying a woman of lighter skin color (196), Pat reveals the frigidity of Ruby's "blood rules" (196). In a sense, marrying outside the community, let alone outside the 8-rock bloodlines, is considered an ethical violation against Ruby's male leaders and their oppressive politics of stability that renders the offender a pariah. The ones who break the blood rules and go against Ruby's politics of purity are eventually rejected and erased by the town's social production, as highlighted in the Christmas play scene, where the birth of Christ is paralleled with the journey of the original 8-rock

families. Pat recalls that all nine 8-rock families used to be depicted in the play yet they keep getting "fewer and fewer" (215), silently proving that families who have allowed either non-Rubians or lighter blacks to enter their bloodlines have been removed from the town's history altogether (Davidson 366). As Deleuze and Guattari argue, it is through the interpellation and regulation of the family unit that social and subsequently psychic repression is achieved. By dictating the couplings, the 8-rock despots ensure that Ruby's ethical and racial superiority is further propagated.

"Patricia" also serves as a recording of successful cases of psychic repression. When Pat confronts her father about the standard of skin color, he offers "a curt denial followed by a long silence" (Davidson 368), like the rest of the community when confronted with their elitism. Even Pat falls victim to psychic repression, as seen when she defends Ruby against the words of Richard Misner (Morrison 213) and when she burns her archive at the end of her chapter (217). Even though Patricia expresses revolutionary desire in her unveiling of the town's despotic structure (214), she realizes that if she opposes the narrative of the 8-rock patriarchs, she too will be stigmatized and exiled, like her daughter Billie Delia (Davidson 369). At the thought of having to live outside of Ruby, the revolutionary and liberating aspect of her desire is extinguished and she falls back in line (369). Pat acknowledges her desire as deviating from the ideal of the despotic body and experiences fear at the thought of being rejected by it, thus triggering the Oedipal complex and allowing psychic repression to take hold.

Deleuze and Guattari emphasize that the reproduction of sameness and the enclosure of desire lead to a stagnation in the production of desire, affecting social production in the process and eventually leading to a disturbance in the relationship between the full body of the socius and its organ-machines—meaning the community and its subjects. In Ruby, this disturbance to the body is manifested both biologically and socially, facilitated, as pointed out by Dalsgård, by their "own version of the exceptionalist narrative" (236). Not only has Ruby's incestuous genealogy resulted in reproductive sterility as indicated by the many instances of miscarriages (Morrison 96) and "defective" children being born (191), but the obsessive reproduction of sameness in ideology and narrative has also resulted in a rift between the Fathers and the young men of Ruby (86). The despotic practices of the 8-rock patriarchs prevent "new life" (Dalsgård 242) from entering Ruby both from the inside and the outside, thus creating a town where nobody dies but nobody truly lives either. According to Dalsgård, Ruby's agenda of black exceptionalism and the "insistence on maintaining

Athina Bekou
National and Kapodistrian
University of Athens, Greece

a morally superior master narrative" (233) are what inevitably cost Ruby its ideal of the "perfect paradise" (233). In an attempt to fix the sterile and stagnant body of Ruby, the despotic figures of the 8-rocks enact repression through violence, exemplifying "the inextricable connection between the exceptionalist striving for perfection and a repressive and ultimately violent isolationism" (Dalsgård 241). Thus, they instigate the total disconnection of the organ-machines from the body without organs and the eventual death of their community. As highlighted by Dalsgård, the critique of black exceptionalism in Morrison's text, serves "as a warning" about "the mechanisms of violence and marginalization" that are also employed "in counter-discursive national historical narratives" (246).

Deleuze and Guattari describe the fall of despotic systems as "the organs […] detaching themselves from the despotic body, the organs of the citizen risen up against the tyrant" (211). In Ruby, the patriarchal system enforced by the 8-rock Fathers is the despotic body, whilst the younger generation of Ruby subjects represents the organs who protest against it (211) and aim to detach themselves from its death-inducing control. Suddenly, the despotic body of the 8-rocks starts experiencing the problem of revolutionary desire as Billie Delia Cato decides to leave home (Morrison 153), K. D. Morgan becomes involved with an outsider (147), and the young people of Ruby start questioning the meaning of the town's motto (87). The despotic body is faced with the threat of insubordinate organs desiring to escape and become self-sufficient, private (Deleuze and Guattari 211). To prevent this mass detachment from happening, the despotic figures enact repression through the law of the Fathers—as in the case of K.D. (Morrison 148)—and through threats of violence—as shown when Steward Morgan vows to "blow the head off" of anyone who tries to alter the words written upon the mouth of the Oven (87). According to Deleuze and Guattari, despotic structures become self-destructive and enact war against their own body's organ-machines when threatened, as it is better "than for a single organ to flow outside […] the body of the despot" (213). The 8-rocks as despotic figures exemplify these self-destructive tendencies in the fact that they are willing to sacrifice their own next generation (Morrison 94) for their agenda to be perpetuated.

Yet the despotic body of 8-rock patriarchy identifies another "enemy" (Deleuze and Guattari 211) as the one worthy of elimination: the town's neighbor and "imperfect other" (Dalsgård 241), the Convent. The Convent becomes a refuge for women who are on the run, lost or escaping from abusive situations (both outsiders and insiders). Five women

end up living in the Convent: Mavis (a mother fleeing her former life after the accidental death of her children), Gigi (a woman carrying the burden of a child's death on her conscience and the one K.D. has an affair with), Seneca (a traumatized foster child prone to self-harm), Pallas (a pregnant teen abandoned by her lover and a survivor of rape), and Consolata. The Convent women originally reside in the chaotic space between conflict and peace (Morrison 168), each too engaged in her own narrative of longing and grief to fully acknowledge a common desire among them and come together through desire-production. With desiring-production, and subsequently social production, stifled by trauma, the Convent takes a while to create a full body and start resembling a proper community. Yet it is precisely that chaotic aspect of the Convent that threatens the 8-rocks' agenda of peace through sameness. The Convent is outside the town's limits and its residents are vagabonds; hence, they are completely separate from the community rules of Ruby. They are thus effectively rendered organs flowing outside the despotic body of 8-rock patriarchy, rising up "before" it in challenge and "against" it in defiance, and identified as the "enemy who brings death" through differentiation ("an eye with too steady a look, a mouth with too unfamiliar a smile" [Deleuze and Guattari 211]). With no influence over them, no way of controlling or interpellating their desires, no way of asserting the fear of the Oedipus and the power of repression over them, the 8-rock Fathers feel threatened by the presence of the women in the Convent and the destructive change they have come to represent in their minds. What follows resonates with what Deleuze and Guattari describe as the punishment-become-vengeance of the despotic body (212): the nine 8-rock Fathers invade the Convent and slaughter its residents so that no "rotting" influence can penetrate the body of their community again (Morrison 5).

It is, however, neither the organs of the body nor the outside desire creeping in that have caused the community of Ruby to become destabilized. It is the existence of dividing, binary, and revolutionary desire within the despotic body itself that has caused the rupture. The destruction of the despotic body from within is best represented in the relationship between the two Morgan brothers, Steward and Deacon. The Morgans are the economic, political and ethical leaders of Ruby, due to their pure 8-rock blood and their position as the town's bankers and major property owners. In the world of Deleuze and Guattari, the legacy of the 8-rock ancestors is the body without organs and the Morgan twins are the desiring-machine attached to it, due to their common goal to preserve and honor it. In the Oven debate (Morrison 85–7), the Morgans are keen on keeping things as they

Athina Bekou
National and Kapodistrian
University of Athens, Greece

have always been and not disturb the dream of the original 8-rock founders. Their economic and political privilege also raises the issue of the Morgans' superiority over the rest of Ruby (115). Thus, they are rendered the representatives and enforcing hands of both the body of capital and the despotic body—representing both the power of money and the power of repression. As Anna Flood states, the Morgans "act like they own" (115) the town and everyone in it; they thus represent themselves as the body of the tyrant and the subjects of Ruby as the organs whose desire has to be regulated, filtered and repressed. Even though they give the impression of a unified whole (116), the chasm between them is at first implied in the form of jealousy and petty differences (155) and eventually fully materialized in the revelation of Deek's relationship with Consolata. By engaging in an adulterous affair with a racial outsider and a Convent woman no less, Deacon momentarily breaks away from the body without organs of Ruby tradition (279), inevitably creating a rift between himself and his brother and ensuring that their desires shall never be in full agreement again. This way, their connection to the ideal of the Old Fathers and their legacy is compromised.

Deacon and Consolata temporarily embark on the creation of a new social body, the one shaped by the desiring-machine of two lovers, yet its full realization fails as Deacon experiences the fear of Oedipus and retreats back to the safety of familiar flows and bodies. Consolata inviting Deacon to join her in the wine cellar (237) signifies her desire to achieve a complete union with him—the creation of a full body—but her biting of his lip stifles his desire by triggering the Oedipal complex. Feeling threatened at the idea of being devoured and sucked out of life by her passion, Deacon realizes how much he has deviated from the ideal of his and his brother's "youthful memory" (279) and detaches himself from the body of lovers (Atieh 95–6). In the end, Consolata dying by Steward's hand, despite Deacon's effort to save her by stopping him, solidifies the disunity (Dalsgård 242) between the two despotic brothers as they now stand in opposition to one another (Morrison 291). In the aftermath of the Convent massacre, Deek is remorseful of their actions and seeks out Reverend Misner for guidance (300–1), a gesture that indicates a full disconnection between the two brothers ("the inside difference was too deep for anyone to miss" (299)) and a disembodiment of the despotic body, hinting at an unfixable crack in the very foundation of Ruby (Dalsgård 242–3).

In the words of Pat Cato, "everything that worries them must come from women" (Morrison 217), suggesting that Ruby's patriarchal despots are threatened by the revolutionary desire of women.

As Pease argues, exceptionalism demands that the nation considers itself an exception to the judgment it enacts on others (12). In Ruby's case, their exceptionalist ideology is best exemplified in the branding of the Convent women as the "enemy" (Deleuze and Guattari 211) to the health of Ruby's patriarchal despotic body. When the younger generation of Ruby subjects questions the town's motto, they are threatened with violence (Morrison 87), yet it is the Convent women who eventually receive a violent attack (3–18, 286). Reverend Misner is an outsider like the Convent women and an equally threatening presence. He invites newness to enter Ruby through liberal ideas (210) and even clashes with the Morgans and their fellow 8-rock Fathers on numerous occasions. Yet he is not the one getting chased out of town, not even when he sides with the younger generation during the Oven debate (86) or when he makes a spectacle during K.D. and Arnette's wedding (144). Instead, it is the presence of the Convent women at K.D. and Arnette's wedding that scandalizes the patriarchs (275–6). They are the ones being blamed for Billie Delia fighting with her mother (276) and the Poole boys fighting over her (277). They are accused of poisoning Sweetie Fleetwood and killing Arnette's baby (275), even held responsible for the death of sick infants (11). Yet, none of these events were the Convent women's fault. It was Pat Cato that assaulted her daughter, causing her to flee (203), whilst Arnette aborted her baby (250) and the dead infants were rendered defective by the town's incestuous genealogy. In the spirit of their exceptionalist ideology, the people of Ruby create an Other to blame for their self-destructive exceptionalism and "exempt" (Pease 9) themselves from any judgment. The 8-rock men conclude that the Convent "witches" (Morrison 276) are what threatens the life of their community (11).

The Convent women do pose a threat to Ruby's order, but not because they are witches. It is because they represent the Oedipal complex of the 8-rock patriarchs in the sense that they portray a deviation from the complex which they have enforced as necessary normality. Ruby is a community ruled by despotic men, but the Convent is a community without men and with no need for them either (276)—a terrifying deviance from the 8-rock agenda. The Convent represents the possibility of a desire opposite to the flow of desiring-production already established in Ruby, namely the desire for a community void of patriarchal control. Combined with the many times Ruby women have walked the road to the Convent (270) and the unlikely friendship (266) formed between women such as Soanne Morgan and Consolata, the despotic body can feel its organs detaching and the body without organs starts rejecting the desiring-machines.

Athina Bekou
National and Kapodistrian
University of Athens, Greece

On that note, perhaps the true threat the Convent women pose to the politics of Ruby, is the fact that the Convent represents Ruby's haunting failures. On the one hand, Ruby, as a full social body, represents the repression, enclosure and stifling of the flow of desire that results in stagnation and decay. Whereas, on the other hand, the Convent as a body without organs represents openness and inclusivity, a space where desire is not cut off from the outside, thus creating a proper map for desiring-production to be inscribed upon (Atieh 92). It is a self-revitalizing body that attracts desiring-machines to it, as indicated by the four women finding refuge in it. It is a space that awakens desire as loud as hunger, expressed by the women feeling their appetite for food renewed the first time they step foot into it (93). Nonetheless, the Convent starts off in too chaotic a state for desiring-machines to develop, as explained by Deleuze and Guattari. Even though its subjects are inter-connected by their common desire for healing and liberation from the ghosts of their pasts, their respective traumas keep their desires from meeting and developing desiring-machines. Thus desiring-production and, subsequently, social-production are delayed. It is only after Consolata takes over as the women's leader that they can remove the barrier between them (98–9). The key difference between Ruby's and the Convent's social production lies in the matter of repression. Consolata invites the other women to follow her in her journey of healing and even gives them the choice to leave if they want to. In the end, they all choose to stay and follow her instructions by their own free will and desire to free themselves (Morrison 262). This is the first instance of the women's desires meeting and connecting in the form of a desiring-machine, of a productive force aiming towards a common goal. When they are asked next to experience the loud dreaming (264–5) they do so again and again willing and conscious of the emotional toll it will take on them. Through it they experience the second instance of their desires coming together, when they bond over their bodily experiences drawn on the templates on the floor (Daemmrich 226). As the current of desiring-production flows, social production is achieved, not through repression as in Ruby but through consent. Consolata becomes the leader and guide of the Convent women, but not their despot. She does not force them to stay, does not try to regulate the flow of their desire, she lets them express themselves on their own terms. They thus manage to heal themselves and each other from the wounds of the past (Morrison 266), which constitutes the foundation of their community bond, the "lifting of the veil of exclusion and dichotomy that fixates Ruby's residents"

(Atieh 100). Finally, when they gather in the rain (Morrison 283), all walls between them have been demolished, their desires are in full bloom and in full accordance with each other. The full body of their community is healing and harmonious, because, unlike the body of Ruby, the desiring-machines of the women—their mutual desire for healing and feeling alive—is compatible with the body without organs of the Convent, a space where desire is housed but never trapped.

The Convent is successful in everything that Ruby fails to do, which, tragically, is the true reason behind its inevitable eradication. As an inviting, open and welcoming space of free desiring-production, the body without organs of the Convent attracts the women of Ruby too, as implied by the character of Lone (270). Lone establishes a connective link of desire between the Ruby women and the outsiders women who have all walked the same road towards the Convent (Christopher 90). It is a vitalizing link for the body of the Convent, as it enables the attachment of new desiring-machines in the form of the Ruby women. Yet, with this link comes the possibility for a detachment from the dismembering (Deleuze and Guattari 211) body of Ruby, something which the 8-rocks cannot abide by. Just like fathers prefer their wives to give birth in a place where "men are in charge" (Morrison 272), the 8-rocks prefer the Convent women not interfering (272) in their peaceable kingdom (276). What the men of Ruby do not realize is that they can destroy the women, but not the body of the Convent. The body without organs of the Convent will remain a beacon of desire, inviting those who wish to be free in (Daemmrich 226), and thus will continue to haunt the socius of Ruby with the reminder of its failed mission (Morrison 306–8). The processes mentioned above that infiltrate the two communities' narratives are mapped and inscribed upon micro-representations of bodies without organs in the form of the Oven and the Convent's cellar. Both spaces operate as manifestations of community desire, as maps on which the desiring-production of each full social body is represented and finally as depictions of each community's respective fate.

The Oven serves as a map of Ruby's journey of desiring-production throughout the different stages of its formation. Originally built in Haven, the Oven was both a space of nourishment and a monument for the men's achievements. As a place for baptisms, it brought the community together (Morrison 103), while its use as an outdoor kitchen by the women of Haven symbolized their freedom as black women (Evans 388). It came to symbolize both the bond of the community and the success of the men in protecting their women from

Athina Bekou
National and Kapodistrian
University of Athens, Greece

white men's abuse. As such, the Oven is transformed from a mere utility into an idea, the manifestation of Haven people's desire for a close and thriving community and a body without organs attracting the desiring-machines of the community's subjects. When they are forced to leave Haven, the decision to take the Oven apart and take it with them is what causes a disturbance in the relationship between the body without organs and the desiring-machines. According to Soane Morgan, the Oven was no longer useful as a utility in Ruby since technology had advanced and it was not worth the trouble of carrying it along (103). Nonetheless, the men had decided to take it apart and rebuilt it in their new home as a token of their 8-rock legacy. The women feeling resentment (103) when a former space of utility, a place of nourishment, care and affect, becomes a shrine indicates the body without organs of the Oven repelling the desiring-machines of the women subjects. It also constitutes the first instance of opposing desire manifested between the men and women of Ruby. The body of the Oven becomes the map of Ruby's social production as well, in particular its modes of social and psychic repression, as highlighted in the debate scene between the younger generation and the New Fathers of Ruby (85–7). When the younger generation of Ruby men attempts to offer their own interpretation of the town's motto that's inscribed upon the lip of the Oven, the New Fathers view it as a threat to their very existence (Evans 389). This not only means that the younger people are rejecting the ideals Ruby was built upon but also that they are determined to challenge the New Father's despotic power. To sustain the status quo, the narrative of the younger generation must either be suppressed or eradicated, as Steward Morgan argues (87). In this case, social repression only manages to drive even more desiring-machines away from the body without organs by separating the younger generation from Ruby's ideal (Dobbs 116). It is inevitably upon the body of the Oven that Ruby's eventual disconnection is inscribed, as the flow of the men's destructive desire manifests in the Oven cracking and shifting after they have slaughtered the Convent women (Morrison 287). The body without organs has repelled the machines and committed suicide (Deleuze and Guattari 329).

Unlike the Oven, the Convent's cellar is the body where desire is manifested, inscribed and perpetuated. Even though it starts off as a space of unfulfilled desire where Consolata banishes herself after being rejected by Deek (Morrison 237), the cellar becomes the space of healing for the five women in the Convent. It is on the cellar's floor where the loud dreaming takes place, the women's desire for healing

is expressed in full volume (264). Thus, their community that was formed on a sense of belonging out of unbelonging becomes solidified. It is on the cellar's floor that the women create the templates of their bodily experiences, thus exorcising their past trauma (264–5). Even after their slaughter, the current of their desire still flows through the templates on the floor and the memory on the walls of their loud dreaming (303). The embodiment of their desires remain in the form of their bodies' painted remains (303), thus keeping the desiring-machines attached to the body without organs of the cellar and sustaining desiring-production even after the end of the Convent women (Atieh 105–6). Social production, the process of creating a community through shared desires, is still viable in the Convent as indicated by the final chapter of the novel. Mavis, Gigi, Seneca and Pallas return in spectral form to revive the severed connections with their loved ones, thus establishing connective links of desiring-production (104) and expanding their community even beyond death, whilst Consolata watches in spirit as "another ship" ports in search of Paradise, indicating that the body of the Convent is still alive and continues to attract desiring-machines to it (Morrison 318).

The story of *Paradise* is a story about desire and its capability to both establish and eradicate social formation. The two communities, drawing from the theory of Deleuze and Guattari, depict linear processes of desiring and social production. Assembled by the connectiveness of the subjects' libidinal energies—meaning their collective actions towards a common goal—the communities of *Paradise* resemble full bodies, as described by the authors of *Anti-Oedipus*, whose different treatments of desire lead to either a life after death or a death in life. When faced with the possibility of change, brought by instances of revolutionary desire, the town of Ruby chooses repression and containment as the means of preserving their all-black exceptionalism, enacting the despotic model that Deleuze and Guattari analyze. Inevitably, the enclosure of desiring-production leads the flow of desire to drain and the body of the community to die. The Convent never faced the threat of revolutionary desire as a community, the same way Ruby did, because no desire was considered revolutionary to the point of destruction in the Convent. As a space free of repression and coercion, the model of the Oedipal complex—the fear of deviancy and social rejection—was never established within the Convent so no mode of desire was ever placed as the standard for deviance. Without the restriction of the Oedipal complex upon the body of the Convent, there are no repulsive desiring-machines and the reproductive flow of desire between the body and its organ-machines is uninterrupted.

Athina Bekou
National and Kapodistrian
University of Athens, Greece

In the end, these two texts establish an organic critique of contemporary power structures and the harmful effects of the oppressive reproduction of sameness in the context of the late capitalist and patriarchal colonial modernity.

Abstract: In their work *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari offer an analysis on the formation of political and economic structures in capitalist societies based on the interpellation of subjects via a system of controlling physical and psychological desires. Their analysis showcases how desire control produces effective labor in a capitalist system, creates psychological massification and achieves political hegemony in a community of interpellated subjects. For the machine of society to function properly, desire needs to be filtered and commodified, otherwise it threatens the system with revolutionary ruptures. In Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, the concept of community relates Ruby (a small all-black town cut off from the rest of the world) and the sign of its ontological other, the Convent (a house for wayward women), with the history of racial conflict and the politics of gender. Following Deleuze and Guattari's analysis of how desire politics affect community politics, I attempt to examine how both the interpellating and revolutionary functions of their respective "desiring-machines" lead the communities in Paradise either to decay or evolution. I propose a parallelism between the signs of Ruby and the Convent with the sign of the despotic body (as explained by Deleuze and Guattari) in an attempt to represent the distorting and unifying processes that transform the experiences of both communities. By exploring the restoring flow of desire represented in the dance of the Convent women, I draw attention to the revolutionary changes desire causes in both the physical bodies of the character subjects and the organless bodies of the two communities. As a final point, by applying Deleuze and Guattari's theory of the body without organs to the symbolic spaces of the Oven and the Convent's cellar, I highlight the linearity of the process of social-production via desire-production.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, Paradise, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, desiring-machines, "the body without organs," desiring-production, social production, the despotic body, 8-rock, patriarchy, repression, consent, community, gender, race

Bio: Athina Bekou is an emerging scholar specializing in Anglophone literature and culture. She earned her Bachelor's degree in English Language and Literature from the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens in 2022, graduating with distinction. In 2023, she began a Master's programme in "English Studies: Literature and Culture" at the same institution, focusing on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Anglophone literature. Ms. Bekou has participated in notable academic events, including the symposium *Active Citizenship in the Digital Age*, the CIVIS BIP course *Post-Racial Transmodernities*, and the 8th *Derrida Today* Conference. These engagements have enriched her interdisciplinary approach to literature and culture. Committed to advancing her academic career, she plans to pursue doctoral studies and contribute to the field as a researcher and educator. Her goal is to deepen the understanding of Anglophone literary traditions and inspire future scholars.

WORKS CITED

Atieh, Majda R. "The Revelation of the Veiled in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*: The Whirling Dervishes in the Harem of the Convent." *MELUS*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2011, pp. 89–107.

Christopher, Lindsay M. "The Geographical Imagination in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*." *Rocky Mountain Review*, vol. 63, no. 1, 2009, pp. 89–95.

Coles, Chris. "Against the Psychoanalytic Unconscious: Deleuze, Guattari, and Desire as a Heuristic for Self-Regulating Biopolitics." *Occam's Razor*, Western vol. 8, no 2., 2018, pp. 4–10.

Daemmrich, Ingrid G. "Paradise and Storytelling: Interconnecting Gender, Motif, and Narrative Structure." *Narrative*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2003, pp. 213–233.

Dalsgård, Katrine. "The One All-Black Town Worth the Pain: (African) American Exceptionalism, Historical Narration, and the Critique of Nationhood in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*." *African American Review*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2001, pp. 233–248.

Davidson, Rob. "Racial Stock and 8-Rocks: Communal Historiography in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*." *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2001, pp. 355–373.

Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari Felix. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane, University of Minnesota Press, 1983.

Dobbs, Cynthia. "Diasporic Designs of House, Home, and Haven in Toni Morrison's "Paradise"." *Toni Morrison: New Directions*, Oxford University Press on behalf of Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS), 36 (2), 2011, pp. 109–126.

Evans, Shari. "Programmed Space, Themed Space, and the Ethics of Home in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*." *African American Review*, vol. 46, no. 2/3, 2013, pp. 381–396.

Morrison, Toni. *Paradise.* Alfred A. Knopf Inc, 1998.

Pease, Donald E. "Introduction." *The New American Exceptionalism*. University of Minnesota Press, 2009, pp. 1–39.

Tabone, Mark A. "Rethinking *Paradise*: Toni Morrison and Utopia at the Millennium." *African American Review*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2016, pp. 129–144.

Thornton, Edward. "Deleuze and Guattari's Absent Analysis of Patriarchy." *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2019, pp. 348–368.

Review of International American Studies
RIAS—Vol. 18, Fall-Winter, № 2/2025
ISSN 1991-2773
DOI: https://doi.org/10.31261/rias.17986

ASYMMETRY OF FREEDOM
Dave Eggers' Critique of Neoliberalism's Abuse of the Discourse of Liberty

Mirosław Aleksander Miernik
Institute of English Studies, University of Warsaw, Poland
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6945-5586

This article focuses on the unequal distribution of freedom in the context of neoliberal capitalism in three novels by Dave Eggers: *A Hologram for the King, The Circle*, and *The Every*. Theorists of this economic system closely associated it with ideals of freedom, viewing neoliberalism as an inherent component of a free society. Although never without its critics, this school of economic thought gained prominence in the 1980s, and since the 1990s both Republican and Democratic politicians supported neoliberal reforms in the US. Even though the public support for neoliberal policies has faltered since the Great Recession, it has not led to any significant change in the economic system of the US, with many of its high-profile proponents, particularly in the tech industry, often stressing that their entrepreneurial activities will be liberating for their users.

A Hologram for the King, which scholars associated with the increasing precarity of the middle class in a world governed by the profits-at-any-cost logic of neoliberal capitalism (cf. Besser, Varsava, Miernik), tells the story of Alan Clay, a struggling businessman with a once illustrious career in a last-ditch effort to halt his dramatic economic decline by attempting to finalize the sale of a holographic communications technology to the Saudi government. Eggers uses the story to explore the deteriorating situation of the middle class, highlighting that the freedom promised to the masses by neoliberal theorists fails to arrive, at the same time granting large corporations the right to engage in cost-cutting activities that are detrimental both to Americans and the United States. The second novel is a dystopian story of a social network that uses its popularity to leverage increasingly more economic and political power while implementing mass digital

surveillance on an unprecedented scale that not only destroys any notions of privacy, but upends democracy by turning people into "digital citizens," where "'users' [identify] as subjects of 'Big Tech' corporations and their platforms more than as citizens of governments," leading to a situation in which "individuality itself is reinscribed in digital platforms and the underlying meaning of autonomy becomes subtly manipulated by platform design that conditions behavior" (McKenna 87–88; 96). The final book, a sequel to *The Circle*, sees the company rebranding as the Every after acquiring "an ecommerce behemoth named after a South American jungle" (Eggers, *The Every* 4), that is, Amazon. Despite its unprecedented monopolization of the market, it seeks to further reinforce its position by engaging in social engineering to limit the freedoms of Americans for its own economic needs.

Historically, the notion of freedom was used not only to empower and enfranchise the downtrodden, but also to defend slavery, suppress the rights of ethnic, religious, and racial minorities, as well as maintain systemic injustices. This has led some to consider the idea of liberalism to be a failure. Patrick J. Deneen, his political engagement notwithstanding, has provided criticism that can be encountered among critics of liberalism from both sides of the political spectrum, stating that liberalism, rather than "foster greater equity, defend a pluralist tapestry of different cultures and beliefs, protect human dignity, and, of course, expand liberty in practice generates titanic inequality, enforces uniformity and homogeneity, fosters material and spiritual degradation, and undermines freedom" (3).[1] Setting aside questions of whether the problem is inherent to liberalism as Deneen claims or whether the issue lies in its implementation and a vague understanding of what freedom should be, it cannot be denied that contemporary neoliberal capitalism draws heavily on the discourse associated with the term. However, it only does so in limited scope; as Rachel Greenwald Smith notes, neoliberalism only embraces liberalism's economic aspect, ignoring the political one (5). Furthermore, it diverges from the ideas of liberal philosophers. Adam Smith, for example, noted that "defence […] is of much more importance than opulence," stressing the need for protective regulation, along with publicly funded public works. Similarly, John Stuart Mill clearly placed more emphasis on personal liberty, which in his view could

1 Deneen has been associated with J.D. Vance, Donald Trump's vice-presidential candidate in the 2024 elections. For more information about Deneen, as well as criticisms of liberalism from both sides of the spectrum, see Beauchamp.

Mirosław Aleksander Miernik
Institute of English Studies,
University of Warsaw, Poland

only be limited by the freedom of another person, than on economic liberty, allowing for market regulation where and when it is needed.

Although such thinkers were more concerned with individual freedoms, including those associated with the market, they did not argue that capitalism or freedom of the market is the basis of such freedoms. Nonetheless, in the 20th century economists who argued that capitalism is essentially associated with freedom, most significantly Friedrich Hayek in his *Road to Serfdom* and Milton Friedman in his *Capitalism and Freedom*, gained prominence. The second book is particularly significant. Written against the backdrop of the Keynesian approach that was adopted on a wide scale during the Great Depression, Friedman famously claimed that capitalism was a tool of introducing new liberties, at the same time arguing for an extremely limited view of the social responsibility of business entities, which was to be constricted to providing profits to its shareholders (133). Simultaneously, ignoring the more nuanced aspects of Hayek's thought related to the role of government, neoliberal economists pushed for deregulation, claiming that such an implementation of a free market will benefit everyone, as companies striving for profits will provide goods of superior quality at competitive prices. Libertarian authors such as Murray Rothbard, Charles Murray, and David Friedman took this to its extreme in, respectively, *For a New Liberty*, *What it Means to Be a Libertarian*, and *Machinery of Freedom*, postulating an anarcho-capitalist stateless world, where laws would be enforced by private enterprises, which they claim will have a positive impact on society and allow for unprecedented personal freedom. There were multiple criticisms of this approach, which Tyler Cowen, himself a libertarian, succinctly summarized in his statement that "anarcho-capitalism would collapse into Thomas Hobbes's state of nature, with life nasty, short, and brutish" (292).

Ideals of an almost unrestricted freedom were seen as posing a threat to the social sphere, an issue that Alexis de Tocqueville already noted in his *Democracy in America*, emphasizing that such an understanding of freedom may lead to social atomization that entails a weak social structure. De Tocqueville's statements pertained, inter alia, to the lack of a social elite that would enforce social awareness, an issue echoed by later writers on the left, such as Zygmunt Bauman (64), who have raised similar concerns in terms of a lack of authorities. Even more importantly in the context of this essay, de Tocqueville warned that the discourse of freedom may lead to such problems as a tyranny of the majority or to the rise of industrialists and business owners to the position of a new aristocracy, a group that would be above

the law, which it could influence. This brings to mind not only Gilded Age monopolies, but also the heads of large technological companies such as Mark Zuckerberg, Elon Musk, Peter Thiel, Bill Gates, and Jeff Bezos, all of whom arguably have undue sway over American politics and even public opinion.

Owing to the role the tech industry plays in *The Circle* and *The Every*, it is crucial to note James Arnt Aune's observation that radical libertarian discourse has been particularly appealing to entrepreneurs associated with this field (115, 170). Further stressing this association is the fact that technological entrepreneurs have often attempted to portray themselves as champions of free speech, for example Elon Musk, who even refers to himself as a "free speech absolutist." However, the actions of such people put such statements in serious doubt, as illustrated by Musk's retaliation against former employees or his critics (Tangalakis-Lippert). Additionally, the ostensible care of such wealthy tech entrepreneurs for the good of society rings hollow in the context of the social media platforms they own knowingly engaging in dangerous and dishonest conduct (Ortutay and Klepper; Tangalakis-Lippert). It also has been noted that the absolute, unrestricted freedom of speech that such entrepreneurs support poses a threat to democracy (Thornhill). Finally, it is noteworthy that legislation granting privileges to large companies is often supported by argumentation that it is an extension of the constitutional freedoms of all Americans, suggesting that a different course of action would impede on their liberties. This is best illustrated by the 2010 Citizens United v. FEC Supreme Court decision that stated that the federal government cannot restrict independent expenditures on political campaigns, as they are protected by the first amendment to the US constitution, despite financial resources arguably being of a different nature than speech.

A Hologram for the King tackles this subject in the broader scope of the globalized economy after the 2007/2008 financial crisis and subsequent Great Recession, specifically focusing on the promises of neoliberalism that failed to arrive. The first issue is financial prosperity. The protagonist, Alan Clay, once a successful executive at Schwinn, a bicycle manufacturing company, followed the gospel of neoliberal deregulation. Using parallels with Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Eggers highlights that the promised wealth that was to trickle down to Americans as the rich got richer never arrives. The second issue pertains to freedom. As mentioned earlier, Milton Friedman claimed that deregulated, free-market capitalism would usher in more political and individual liberties (*Capitalism and Freedom* 7–21). Friedman even illustrated this with what has been dubbed the "Miracle

Mirosław Aleksander Miernik
Institute of English Studies,
University of Warsaw, Poland

of Chile," arguing that free-market policies were key in the change in that country's rule from a military junta to a liberal democracy ("Commanding Hights"; "Up for Debate"), but Eggers counters this by showcasing how Saudi Arabia and China, both countries with poor human rights records, thrive on unethical and exploitative tactics, which are illustrated by the treatment of Filipinos in the novel, as well as the cut-throat and arguably unethical competitive practices that account for Alan's failure to secure the sale of the holographic communications technology to the Saudi government. Yet neoliberal capitalism even fails on a smaller scale, such as in the claims that it will offer a wider array of consumer choice (Friedman 168, 186): as Alan notes, bicycles have become homogenized, and "it's a matter of putting different stickers on the same bikes" as "[t]hey're all built in the same handful of factories" (*A Hologram* 50).

Alan plays the role of an unwitting tool in the deterioration of the economic position of the US and the erosion of freedoms which it entails. His actions have contributed to what Besser and Dijk argue is the deterritorialization of labor (115), the removal of manufacturing abroad to cut costs. Engaging in such activity, Alan eventually rendered himself redundant, becoming an allegory for the disappearance of the American dream for the middle class as a result of neoliberal policies. Clay, like a majority of Americans, fell for the promise of a robust, highly competitive economy, which follows the logic of Jack Welch, the former CEO of General Electric, whose belief that "manufacturing should be on a perpetual barge, circling the globe for the cheapest conditions possible" is reiterated by in the novel (*A Hologram* 13). Alan's actions were also detrimental to his company, as he, along with his superiors, failed to take into account that well-paid, experienced workers will be better employees than cheap, inexperienced labor. He sees this brought to the next level in Saudi Arabia, where dangerous and repetitive tasks are handled by Filipinos trying to escape the extreme poverty of their own country only to get trapped in modern-day wage slavery, separated both from the Saudi elites as well as the westerners working there (Besser and Dijk 123; Miernik 125). The novel further highlights the abuses of deregulation and the use of predatory tactics that affect the situation of the hitherto prosperous middle class with such examples as the Banana Republic store card debacle destroys Alan's credit rating making it impossible for him to obtain funding for any entrepreneurial initiatives he has (*A Hologram* 137–138), the rising price of a higher education to a prohibitive degree (4), and the relocation removal of manufacturing that has led to a loss of national

pride and doubts as to the country's future, particularly in economic terms (13, 84, 129–131).

Words warning of the potential negative impact of neoliberalism, particularly in terms of consumers, workers, and welfare programs were already raised in the early 1980s (Isaacson; "From the Schools to the Sewers"; Alexander). In this context it would be easy to dismiss Alan as naïve. But Eggers' treatment of his protagonist, along with his flaws, can be read as a sincere comment on the significance of such values for Americans. Varsava argues he also can be seen as a Hemingwayesque character who "tries to live up to a largely masculinist personal code—courage, self-reliance, accountability, physical prowess" (779–780), stressing the association of these values with ideals of American exceptionalism (787–788), and associating it with the American understanding of freedom. This has primed Clay—and, by extension, the US public invested in such ideals—as easy pickings for the rich looking to increase their wealth who promote their position with references to ideals of liberty. However, in such discourse "freedom" becomes a hollow word meant to ramp up support for a narrow and already privileged group, disregarding the effects of precarization on the liberties of others.

The references to self-reliance, freedom, and prosperity, owing to their association with American national ideals, is an insidious tactic. Such rhetoric, which James Arnt Aune dubs "economic correctness" (4, 10), suggests that non-compliance with the principles of neoliberalism essentially is un-American, accounting for the widespread acceptance of neoliberal policies between the Reagan period and the Great Recession.[2] Ironically, it is the uncritical acceptance of this economic paradigm that erodes the values, and, as Varsava argues, leads the US to lose its exceptional status and lead to a "precarity of ambition" (785–789), the former of which is illustrated by the dismissive treatment Alan and his team receive in Saudi Arabia (*A Hologram* 55–57, 69–70, 77–79, 87–90, 191–195, 309–312). Still, although Alan attempts to remain optimistic (*Hologram* 14, 312), reminders of the state of the American economy anger him, as visible during several interactions (10–14, 48–51, 84–86, 136–137). His optimism transpires to be a flimsy pose with which he attempts

2 It is characteristic that such rhetoric has not disappeared after the recession, but its economic aspect has become downplayed and replaced by general platitudes pertaining to freedom, prosperity, and American exceptionalism, which was particularly often employed by populist politicians such as Donald Trump.

Mirosław Aleksander Miernik
Institute of English Studies,
University of Warsaw, Poland

to conceal the fact that he is a man defeated (177), aware that his situation is the result of the shortsightedness of such people as himself (50).

A Hologram for the King offers a look at the dissonance between the promise of the free market that was to extend more liberties throughout society and the reality of this economic paradigm. These promises transpire to be hollow, akin to the cheap marketing tactics Alan was taught as a salesman at the start of his career (*A Hologram* 79–80). Yet neither wealth nor freedom trickle down. However, with less resources, rising prices, and an increasingly unstable and unsustainable economy that is the result of neoliberalism's prioritization of profits, Eggers' characters are exhausted and lack both the energy and the financial resources to use their freedoms and pursue their goals.

The Circle and its sequel, *The Every*, take on a more specific perspective, focusing on how the titular company of the novels, similarly to real-life tech giants such as Facebook or Google, adopts the rhetoric of freedom, claiming that the technology it offers has liberating potential and guarantees the improvement of humankind. However, in reality it uses such discourse to engage in social engineering and digital surveillance that benefits it financially, while impeding the personal freedoms of its users. Eggers' primary concern in these novels is the right to privacy, freedom of choice, and free will. The books can be seen as a continuation of an idea he initially explored in *A Hologram for the King*: once the US economy no longer relies on manufacturing, it has to rely on virtual goods, predominantly information, communication, and convenience, as its chief products. In this context personal information becomes, as Roy Sommer puts it, "the gold and oil of the digital age" (53). Accordingly, *The Circle* has been widely discussed primarily in terms of surveillance and privacy (Bugno-Narecka; Gouck; Pignagnoli; McKenna; Selisker; Sommer; Wasihun). But the securing of its monopolistic position also entails the limiting of entrepreneurial and individual freedom. The company has such sway over the market that other tech companies often exist with the goal of being purchased by it (*The Every* 10, 16); in other words, not being part of the Every conglomerate has ceased being a viable economic option in the novel's reality. This surrendering of entrepreneurial independence runs parallel to the company's infringement on the freedoms of its users. On the most basic level, this refers to an often neglected transaction characteristic in the use of social media: giving up personal information for, as Randolph Lewis writes, "community, connection, and convenience," a phenomenon he calls the "funopticon" (5, 54–56, 81). This aspect has been normalized to such a degree that many users are unaware that such

a transaction takes place, and frequently view on-line social networks and similar websites as free, although the personal data that people surrender entails greater profits for such companies than they would make by introducing fees (van Dijck 170). Users also lack knowledge about the manner in which their data will be monetized, rarely reading license agreements that are long and often purposefully written in an obscure manner.

Regardless, the Circle promotes the surrendering of privacy as a means of improving society. Mae, the novel's protagonist, becomes the figurehead of this initiative, following a set of slogans that brings to mind Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

SECRETS ARE LIES
SHARING IS CARING
PRIVACY IS THEFT. (303)

The company rhetorically frames privacy as a violation of the freedom of others to access knowledge. However, this is one-sided and "promote[s] […] the company's right to collect data, which in turn benefits the company while exploiting the individual citizen the rhetoric claims to serve" (McKenna 87). Such acts echo real-life arguments made by executives of Facebook, including Mark Zuckerberg, who has stressed his "desire to 'make the world more transparent'" (van Dijck 14). As van Dijck notes, tech companies employ the ideal of transparency in a one-sided manner and are notoriously secretive about their use of such data (van Dijck 12, 17, 61).

Although it has been argued that *The Circle* creates "a system ruled by sousveillance" (Pignagnoli155), the information the company obtains is used solely for its own benefit rather than the public (Wasihun), which is manipulated by the corporation. This is the same reason for which the corporate regime in the novels is a rather unorthodox example of Deleuze's society of control, as the Three Wise Men—the heads of the company—continue to exercise disciplinary power, a practice the French philosopher postulated would be absent from such a society (Wasihun; Gouck; cf. Selisker 761–763, 770–772). Accordingly, the company's tactics represent a two-pronged strategy that is "driven by a mixture of benign utopianism and pseudofascist behavioral compliance" (*The Every* 9). This accounts for the Every's attempts to ensure support for its policies by rhetorically equating the non-endorsement of its products and strategies as opposition to social improvement.

Mirosław Aleksander Miernik
Institute of English Studies,
University of Warsaw, Poland

Employees of the company have fallen for such rhetoric of freedom and social improvement, blind to its flaws, resulting in an almost fanatical devotion to the Every. Simultaneously, they ignore how it encroaches on the freedom of others, an issue visible when they defend the Circle against accusations of breaking anti-trust laws by citing its efficiency as justification for its position (*The Circle* 173–174), neglecting the impact this has on the market, including freedom of competition and the freedom of consumer choice; they also use red herring tactics to deflect accusations of the Every being a monopoly, as illustrated by one employee's defense of the company: "who cares about monopolies when we're facing the death of the planet?" At the same time, she blames "untethered capitalism" for the ecological crisis (*The Every* 354–355), showcasing her uncritical approach to her employer: the very anti-trust legislation that she attacks is intended to tether capitalism and protect the public.

More importantly, the argumentation employees use in terms of the company support the view that the company should be above the law. Not only do they reject government oversight but demand the power to surveil the government, ostensibly in the name of democracy (*The Circle* 206–210, 383–386). Unsurprisingly, the company weaponizes the data it collects against the politicians who have attempted to regulate it producing "mountains of evidence made conveniently available to social media and attorneys general" which include "messages […] containing unpardonable beliefs, statements, photos, searches" (*The Every* 128). Simultaneously, the most important people in the company, apart from Mae, have not gone transparent, and operate in a clandestine manner and employ methods that in the case of *The Circle* have been described as totalitarian (McKenna 87–89; Selisker 765; Sommer 61; Wasihun). This totalitarian aspect is strengthened in *The Every*, in which those in power, including Mae, frequently engage in conspiracies and deception. This includes a drone attack on a residential building on the Every campus which kills four people, and which Delaney believes may have been an inside job (*The Every* 492–493). Although she dismisses this view later, the reader need not do so: not only is she drug-addled at that moment, but the narrative shows her judgment to be flawed several times, most visible during her interactions with Gabriel Chu, who heads the Every's attempts at curtailing freedom of choice (177–180, 447–460, 476–3).

The lack of transparency within the company in light of its utopian promise and its totalitarian inclinations creates an ominous atmosphere. There are moments when tension between those in power, including

Gabriel and Stenton, is visible (*The Circle* 479–486; *The Every* 111, 223–224, 276, 401). Two of the Three Wise Men disappear or die in mysterious circumstances: Ty Gospodinov, who had moral doubts as to the company's actions, already was forbidden from leaving the campus in *The Circle* (480), and has disappeared completely (or has been disappeared) in *The Every* (111, 131), while Eamon Bailey dies when a brain implant he is presenting malfunctions (147–153). There are surprisingly few viewers of his feed (148), which in the context of the power struggle may suggest that he was assassinated. Such uncertainties and dubious circumstances engage readers in the aesthetics of paranoia, which arguably reach their pinnacle with the aforementioned drone strike, which occurs after a character states that Stenton, the final of the Three Wise Men, will attempt to secure power with a "Reichstag moment" (401). However, this struggle for power may be a ruse covering up the fact that Mae, Gabriel, and Stenton are actually closely collaborating, as suggested by her statement that they are her "stalwart partners" (576). Following such an interpretation, this deception is meant to reveal any internal opposition to the Every's policies that Mae sees as "a small tumor" that "need(s) to be excised" (575), which, in the context of the ominous disappearances and mysterious deaths, can be interpreted as physically eliminating them. Such clandestine activity proves that the slogans about truth, honesty, and transparency that Mae often returns to are nothing but mere marketing. The Every's higher-ups do not embrace such openness, but actively deceive others, and even engage in immoral and illicit behavior, best illustrated by Mae killing of Delaney, the novel's protagonist. In the Every, like in a totalitarian state, freedom is reserved for those in power.

The company is also attempts to limit the freedom of the masses, particularly freedom of choice and free will. It supports this initiative claiming that freedom of choice is stressful, a phenomenon Steven Waldman, and later Barry Schwartz, called the tyranny of choice. Waldman associated the concept with inept consumption, political alienation, and erosion of the sense of self. He also argued that it is an inhibitor of commitment and social bonding (361–366). However, rather than maintaining an awareness of this issue and limiting the number of redundant products on the market or providing clear and honest information about them, all issues with which Waldman and Schwartz were concerned, the Every sees this as an opportunity to do away with personal freedom in general in a manner that would benefit it financially. As Mae tells Delaney: "It's not that [people] want fewer choices. It's that they want almost *no* choices at all" (*The Every* 555). People indoctrinated by the company support

Mirosław Aleksander Miernik
Institute of English Studies,
University of Warsaw, Poland

the idea of "less freedom" (503) and, despite seeing its negative aspects, argue for "the end of freedom and free will" that will "end the society of the self" and lead to "the birth of a more communitarian one" (470). Ultimately, personal freedom in the eyes of the company's ideology is, as one character says: "selfish. It's anarchic, really. It's anti-community. It's anti-social. It's anti-human" (467). Such rhetoric, bringing to mind Deneen's argumentation, vastly oversimplifies the problem, depicting individualism and communitarianism as unreconcilable, mutually exclusive opposites.

In order to achieve its goal of limiting the freedom of the masses, the Every engages in social engineering using its social platforms, facilitated by various aggregates and algorithms that effectively are black boxes that have been gamified to such a degree that they are uncritically accepted by the public. This is further buttressed by the weaponizing of social pressure that was already visible in *The Circle*, when Mae had enthusiasts of the company pursue her former boyfriend and tech hold-out, Mercer, driving him to suicide (452–461). The company rhetorically frames its actions by citing social justice or environmental protection, at the same time publicly shaming those who disagree with its strategies. Drawing on the utopian aspect of its rhetoric, Bailey argues that this is to facilitate human improvement, and should not be seen as shaming (288–289). However, this approach changes in the time lapse between *The Circle* and *The Every*, when the company openly embraces the practice: it introduces the idea of shams, "a bastard mash of Samaritan and shame," which exposed "swervy drivers, loud gym grunters, Louvre line-cutters, single-use-plastic-users, and blithe allowers of infants-crying-in-public." Shams are used in one's Shame Aggregate, a quotient representing the effective "morality" of one's conduct (*The Every* 9).

Such enforcement of company-sanctioned morality is conducted by driving hysterical reactions to any behavior that it frames as improper by employing the discourse of constant cataclysm to provoke strong emotional reactions that intensify social pressure but leave little room for discussion or criticism. In extreme cases, its methods lead to the adoption of a lynching mentality (*The Circle* 450–451). This strategy is used to implement milestones on the Every's road towards the "Consensual Economic Order" in which it is to become a "benevolent monopoly" (563) where all consumer decisions would be dictated by it (555–570). Such hysterical reactions are guided by the coddling morality it employs, claiming to protect the masses from anything it frames as dangerous or offensive. As a result, employees of the company are incapable of coping with reality, which is best exemplified

by a trip to the coast to observe elephant seals. Learning that most of the pups will not survive into adulthood, a number of complaints against Delaney, the trip's organizer, are filed citing emotional damage. These complaints do not only pertain to the survival rate of elephant seals, but also the means of transportation, park rangers, and even parking lots (*The Every* 251–254), all of which are shocking for the company's employees who live a sheltered life on the Every campus.

All three novels discussed in this article tackle the asymmetrical distribution of freedom one finds in contemporary neoliberal capitalism, highlighting the stark division between most US citizens and people in positions of power in large companies and corporations whose actions are carried out with the desire to increase profits, regardless of the costs. This leads to an unstable and unsustainable economy which shows little to no consideration for the national interest or the well-being of Americans. *A Hologram for a King*, which is a parable of the downfall of the American dream in a globalized, neoliberal economy, contradicts the association of neoliberalism with freedom by emphasizing not only how the system privileges the wealthy, but also how neoliberal practices actively limit one's freedom and hamper the ideal of equality of opportunity.

The duology of *The Circle* and *The Every* looks at the threat of the masses literally becoming enthralled by social media to the extent that they surrender their freedom and individuality for a digital implementation of Orwellian groupthink. This is accomplished through mass surveillance, social engineering, and weaponizing the masses against dissenters by using the rhetoric of social improvement, further facilitating the novels' dystopian and totalitarian aspects. Although the books, particularly *The Every*, are heavy-handed in their message, the reality which they describe is not that far removed from the practices of wealthy CEOs of technological companies such as Mark Zuckerberg or Elon Musk, who, despite paying lip-service to ideals of freedom, simultaneously limit liberties on the platforms they own and allow for the distribution of socially dangerous disinformation (see, for example, Ortutay and Klepper; Tangalakis-Lippert). However, Eggers neglects the growing incredulity towards social media, along with the progressive deterioration of the quality of the products in the name of increasing profits, an idea Cory Doctorow dubbed "enshittification" ("The 'Enshittification' of TikTok"; "Social Quitting"), which slowly drives people away from such platforms.

In these novels, Eggers inverts the idea propagated by neoliberal economists such as Milton Friedman, who claimed that the culling of state regulation will lead business to self-regulate in a manner that

promotes freedom and benefits all, an idea that has greatly appealed to tech entrepreneurs. However, this never happens, and Eggers shows the reverse to be true: the logic of neoliberal capitalism and its rhetoric of freedom and prosperity for all is actually used to restrict individual freedoms and manipulate people. However, I think it would be an overinterpretation to see Eggers' novels as opposed to capitalism in general; nowhere does he engage in a wide-ranging criticism of the system. At times, he even shows support for the idea of small businesses and New Deal policies, an issue best illustrated on Alan's discussions with his unionist father, the depiction of Mae's parents, or Mercer and his small business. By highlighting the abuses of neoliberal capitalism in terms of freedom, Eggers' novels argue that people's liberties need to be guaranteed by a balanced legal system that is uninfluenced by monied interests.

Mirosław Aleksander Miernik
Institute of English Studies,
University of Warsaw, Poland

Abstract: The article focuses on the discursive use of freedom in the context of neoliberal capitalism in Dave Eggers' *The Circle*, *A Hologram for the King* and *The Every*. Taking into account the importance of this concept in the context of the American history and national identity, it argues that despite claims that this form of capitalism promotes freedom, it actually privileges economic freedom over personal and political liberties, leading to the rise of inequalities already prophesized by Alexis de Tocqueville. In this context *A Hologram for the King* emphasizes the discord between the promise of neoliberalism and its practical implementation, which reveals that rather than promote freedom, this form of capitalism establishes structural barriers that obstruct social mobility. With regard to *The Circle* and *The Every*, the article analyzes how the eponymous company draws on ideals of freedom in order not only to increase their revenue and monopolize the market, but also establish a digital panopticon that infringes on personal freedoms and privacy, even though the companies themselves operate in secrecy.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, capitalism, privacy, Dave Eggers, *The Circle*, *The Every*, *A Hologram for the King*.

Bio: Mirosław Aleksander Miernik is an associate professor at the Institute of English Studies at the University of Warsaw. His professional interests include 20th and 21st century American literature, particularly the representation of economic issues in contemporary novel, along with the role consumption and finance play in them. He also carries out research in the field of cultural studies, with focus on consumer culture and subculture studies, as well as the impact of economic matters on American culture. Throughout his career he lectured at the Manchester Metropolitan University, the University of Goettingen, and the University of Saarland. His most recent book is *Rethinking Fiction after the 2007/8 Financial Crisis: Consumption, Economics and the American Dream*, which was published by Routledge.

WORKS CITED

Alexander, Charles P. "The New Economy." *Time*, 30 May, 1983, pp. 50–58.

Aune, James Arnt. *Selling Free Markets: The Rhetoric of Economic Correctness*. Guilford, 2001.

Beauchamp, Zack. "The Anti-liberal Movement." *Vox*. 9 Sept., 2019. Accessed 25 September 2024.

Bugno-Narecka, Dominika. "Między pronoją a paranoją – dystopijny panoptykon *Kręgu*." *Dave Eggers*, edited by Julia Nikiel, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2023.

Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid Modernity*. Polity, 2012.

Besser, Stephan and Yra Van Dijk. "Kafka on the Gulf: Male Identity, Space, and Globalization in Dave Eggers's 'A Hologram for the King' and Arnon Grunberg's 'The Man without Illness.'" *Comparative Literature*, vol. 69, no. 1, Mar. 2017, pp. 111–128.

Cowen, Tyler. "Rejoinder to David Friedman on the Economics of Anarchy." *Anarchy and the Law: The Political Economy of Choice*, edited by Edward P. Stringham, Routledge, 2017, pp. 292–294.

De Tocqueville, Alexis. *Democracy in America*. Vol. 1. J. & H.G. Langley, 1841. https://archive.org/details/democracyiname01tocq/page/n7/mode/2up. Accessed 11 July 2024.

De Tocqueville, Alexis. *Democracy in America*. Vol. 2. Sever and Francis, 1863. https://archive.org/details/democracyinamer05tocqgoog/page/n6/mode/2up. Accessed 11 July 2024.

Deneen, Patrick J. *Why Liberalism Failed*. Yale UP, 2018.

Doctorow, Cory. "Social Quitting." *Locus*. 2 Jan. 2023, https://locusmag.com/2023/01/commentary-cory-doctorow-social-quitting/. Accessed 30 July, 2024.

–––. "The 'Enshittification' of TikTok, or How, Exactly, Platforms Die." *Wired*, 23 Jan. 2023, https://www.wired.com/story/tiktok-platforms-cory-doctorow/. Accessed 30 July, 2024.

Eggers, Dave. *A Hologram for the King*. Penguin, 2015.

–––. *The Circle*. Penguin, 2014.

–––. *The Every*. Hamish Hamilton, 2021.

Friedman, Milton. *Capitalism and Freedom*. 40th anniversary edition. U of Chicago P, 2002.

"From the Schools to the Sewers." *Time*, 2 Mar. 1981, pp. 30–32.

Gouck, Jennifer. "The Viewer Society: 'New Panopticism,' Surveillance, and the Body in Dave Eggers' *The Circle*." *Irish Journal for American Studies*, no. 7, 2018. http://ijas.iaas.ie/issue-7-jennifer-gouck/. Accessed 24 July 2024.

Isaacson, Walter. "Let the Buyers Beware." *Time*, September 21tht, 1981, pp. 32–33.

Mirosław Aleksander Miernik
Institute of English Studies,
University of Warsaw, Poland

Lewis, Randolph. *Under Surveillance: Being Watched in Modern America*. U of Texas P, 2017.

McKenna III, Peter J. "Meet the New Boss: Dave Eggers's *The Circle* and the New Digital Totalitarianism." *College Literature*, vol. 50, no. 1, winter 2023, pp. 87–115.

Miernik, Mirosław Aleksander. "Optymistycznie krocząc ku prekaryzacji." *Dave Eggers*, edited by Julia Nikiel, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2023.

Mill, John Stuart. *On Liberty and Utilitarianism*. Everyman's Library, 1992.

Ortutay, Barbara and David Klepper. "Facebook Whistleblower Testifies: Five Highlight." *Associated Press*. 2 Oct., 2021. https://apnews.com/article/facebook-frances-haugen-congress-testimony-af86188337d-25b179153b973754b71a4. Accesses 30 July, 2024.

PBS. "Milton Friedman." *Commanding Heights*. https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/commandingheights/shared/minitext/int_miltonfriedman.html. Accessed 24 July 2024.

PBS. "Arnold 'Al' Harberger." *Commanding Heights*. https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/commandingheights/shared/minitextlo/ufd_reformliberty_full.html. Accessed 24 July 2024.

Pignagnoli, Virginia. "Surveillance in Post-Postmodern American Fiction: Dave Eggers's *The Circle*, Jonathan Franzen's *Purity* and Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story. Spaces of Surveillance: States and Selves*, edited by Susan Flynn and Antonia Mackay. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp 151–167.

Roth, Emily. "Here's the Elon Musk Interview That Got Don Lemon's Show Canceled." *Verge*. 18 March, 2024.

Schwartz, Barry. *The Paradox of Choice*. Harper Perennial, 2005.

Selisker, Scott. "The Novel and Wikileaks: Transparency and the Social Life of Privacy." *American Literary History*, vol. 30, no. 4, pp. 756–776.

Smith, Adam. *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. 1852. *Project Gutenberg*. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/38194/38194-h/38194-h.htm.

Sommer, Roy. "Beware the Siren Servers: How Techlash Novels Like Dave Eggers's *The Circle* and Jarett Kobek's *I Hate the Internet* Make the Need for Change Feel Real." *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1–2, Summer-Winter 2017, pp. 51–70.

Tangalakis-Lippert, Katherine. "Despite Calling Himself a 'Free Speech Absolutist,' Elon Musk Has a History of Retaliation Against Employees and Critics." *Business Insider*, 27 March, 2022. https://www.businessinsider.com/free-speech-absolutist-elon-musk-censors-employees-critics-2022-3. Accessed 11 July 2024.

Thornhill, John. "Elon Musk's Free Speech Absolutism May Endanger Fragile Democracies." *Financial Times*, 24 Nov. 2022. https://www.ft.com/content/994f0ef1-5a82-46d2-af6a-7e7eb074fcd8. Accessed 11 July 2024.

Van Dijck, José. *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*. Oxford, 2013.

Waldman, Steven. "The Tyranny of Choice." *Consumer Society on American History: A Reader*, edited by Lawrence B. Glickman, Cornell UP, 1999.

Wasihun, Betiel. "Surveillance and Shame in Dave Eggers's *The Circle*." *On_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture*, no. 6, December 11, 2018. https://www.on-culture.org/journal/issue-6/wasihun-surveillance-shame/. Accessed 24 July 2024.

Review of International American Studies
RIAS—Vol. 18, Fall-Winter, № 2/2025
ISSN 1991-2773
DOI: https://doi.org/10.31261/rias.18453

RIFLESSI DI GUERRA. STORIA E ANTIREALISMO NELLA NARRATIVA DI VIET THANH NGUYEN BY GIACOMO TRAINA

(A Book Review)

Carlotta Ferrando
Sapienza University of Rome, Italy and University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9678-7842

"All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory" (4), asserts Pulitzer Prize-winning Vietnamese American writer and scholar Viet Thanh Nguyen, a statement that not only addresses the never-ending struggle over historical narratives but also encapsulates the unresolved legacy of the Vietnam War, a conflict whose historiography—at least in the public imagination—remains incredibly fraught and obscure. As the fiftieth anniversary of the conclusion of the United States' involvement in Vietnam approaches, Giacomo Traina's *Reflections of War: History and Antirealism in Viet Thanh Nguyen's Fiction*[1] *emerges both as a timely and thorough reassessment of the experience of the Vietnam War and its postmemorial legacy in contemporary times, and as a stimulating critical reading of Nguyen's literary work, particularly The Sympathizer* (2015), which stands at the center of this study.

Published in Italian by Ombre Corte at the end of 2024, Traina's work situates itself within an emergent field of American Studies in Italy that seeks to bring attention to the literary production of the Vietnamese diaspora, a long-overlooked subject matter within Italian academia. Within the broader Italian cultural landscape, the Vietnam War has been largely understood through an "all-American" lens, predominantly shaped by Hollywood films, which have solidified and crystallized the war as an exclusively American trauma, a catastrophe that could have been easily avoided, but cost the United States an entire genera-

1 Both the title and the following quotations from Traina's work are my own translations.

tion of young American men. Yet, the other side of the story, namely the experience of the Vietnam War from the point of view of Vietnamese people, as well as the subsequent tragic diasporic ordeal of the "Boat people," has been disregarded or unexplored for the longest of times. In recent years, however, Italian scholars such as Vallone (2021) and Arioli (2024), following in the footsteps of proliferating US-based academic studies,[2] have begun to redress this imbalance by critically engaging with counternarratives emerging from the Vietnamese American literary production, a trajectory with which Traina's previous works (2021; 2022; 2023) and the present volume seamlessly align. In *Reflections of War*, Traina delves deeper into these themes, tracing the complex interplay of history, myth, and memory in the post-memorial literary representations of the Vietnam War, with a particular focus on Nguyen's work.

The book is divided into two distinct yet interconnected sections. The first part offers a historical and sociocultural introduction to the Vietnam War, which provides a critical lens through which Viet Thanh Nguyen's fiction—at the center of the second section of this study—can be ultimately understood. Indeed, at the core of Traina's work lies the assertion that Vietnamese American literature cannot be fully examined without acknowledging, interrogating, and problematizing Vietnam's troubled twentieth-century history, whose recent past, rather evidently, is not reducible to the war alone, but encompasses the decades that preceded and expedited the conflict as well as the years that followed, including the dramatic dislocations of Vietnamese refugees. This is why the first section of this study undertakes a rigorous reconstruction of Vietnam's twentieth-century trajectory, outlining the nation's slow yet steady descent into war by charting key historical events and political figures, both on American and Vietnamese sides, whilst recalling the genesis of the conflict in anti-colonialist movements—either nationalist or communist—that emerged during the 1930s under French colonialism, as well as the far-reaching consequences of its aftermath. Besides examining the military history of this major event, this study, in fact, also devotes particular attention to the climate of terror and repression that pervaded the newly reunified Socialist Republic of Vietnam after the DRV won the Western-allied South Vietnam, as well as to the economic and migratory crises that followed the reunification of the country, shedding light on the hor-

2 For reference, see Truong (1997), Janette (2003), Chan (2006), Yu (2009), Pelaud (2011), Janette (2018), Nock-Hee Park (2019).

Carlotta Ferrando
Sapienza University of Rome, Italy and University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland

rifying forced mobilities that dislocated thousands of Vietnamese people all over the world, and particularly to the United States.

Drawing on an extensive body of scholarly works belonging to the "new Vietnam War scholarship" (Asselin 2018; Goscha 2016; 2022; Guillemot 2012 and 2019; Nguyen 2012; Vu 2017)—much of which has hitherto remained largely inaccessible to the broader Italian readership—Traina's *Reflections of War* applies a "Vietnam-centric approach" (Tran 3) to the history of the Vietnam war and, as such, not only aspires to reconstruct the convoluted history of twentieth-century Vietnam, emphasizing both the agency of Vietnamese actors and the transnational dimensions of the conflict and its aftermath, but also appropriately portrays this event as a "multilayered" war, at the same time an international conflict and a civil war that involved, affected, and forever altered the lives of the entire Vietnamese population and nation. Ultimately, Traina problematizes the notion of a singular or definitive history of the war, contending instead that competing interpretations, myths, and counternarratives have started to emerge even before the DRV invaded Saigon in 1975 and have continued to evolve ever since. More appropriately, this study proposes reframing the conflict as the "war of *Vietnams*" (in original, "la guerra *dei* Vietnam," [*Riflessi di guerra* 7]), an expression that includes both the war first physically fought to assert one idealistic vision—or myth—of the nation over several others and then the "metaphorical" one fought later on in the memory of the various communities involved, one way or the other, in those tragic events. Even when the conflict is over, the fight perseveres in the collective imagination of those who survive, as their interpretations and narratives of the Vietnam War are continuously renegotiated to explain and comprehend the experience that inevitably determined and changed their lives altogether.

At the heart of what Traina terms the "war after the war" (*Riflessi di guerra* 9) stands, of course, the experience of the Vietnamese American community, whose "strategic memory projects" (Aguilar-San Juan 88) and idealization of the past have "fix[ed] in time an alternative Vietnam to the one celebrated at home by the communist victors—an imagined Vietnam that may have never existed, made up of alternative heroes, victories, and symbols" (*Riflessi di guerra* 54). Within this intricate process of negotiation between memory, perfectly crafted foundational myths emerging out of a displaced community, and *the* mainstream and authoritative historiographical account of what occurred, the post-memorial literary production of Vietnamese American writers emerges as a crucial site of exploration of historical traumas and cultural identity, dedicated to the reconstruction and *a posteriori* remembrance

of the complex genealogies of the war and the forced mobilities that lead up to the dislocation of Vietnamese people in the United States (Espiritu 2014). In the closing chapter of the first part, Traina traces the different phases and turns of the Vietnamese diasporic literature, revising scholarly studies of the early 2000s that, to this day, already appear updated (e.g., Pelaud 2011). Traina, in particular, focuses his attention on the literary production of the so-called "Generation 1.5," the one born in Vietnam yet raised in the United States, amongst whose ranks one can find the likes of Thi Bui, Monique Truong, Ocean Vuong, and, of course, Viet Thanh Nguyen.

As anticipated, the second part of this volume is entirely dedicated to Viet Thanh Nguyen's fiction, with a particular focus on his most-renowned work, *The Sympathizer*, and, to a lesser extent, the short story "War Years" from *The Refugees* (2017). Drawing upon theoretical frameworks from the Critical Refugee Studies field (Espiritu 2006; 2014; Espiritu et al. 2018), Traina's reading of Nguyen's oeuvre aims to shed light on the author's re-reading of the past as an ongoing cycle of imperial and colonial violence, a political act of interpretation that seeks to bring to the fore the invisible links between memory and power structures in action within the US. Seeking to draw connections between real-life places, historical events, and communities that may seem completely disconnected from one another yet are bound as by-products of wars and imperialistic projects, Nguyen represents the Vietnam War as a crucial moment in time within a much longer and over-arching historical continuum of violence—as Traina puts it, borrowing from Evyn Le Espiritu Gandhi, "nothing more than an island within an 'archipelago'" (*Riflessi di guerra* 79). Bearing this in mind, Traina pays close attention to how Nguyen's fiction posits the sequence of events that both led up to the conflict and followed its aftermath (the diaspora as well as the postmemorial fight for the imposition of a singular narrative over what happened) as inextricably concatenated, the Vietnam War being a single fragment within a much broader context. As a result, in Traina's reading, *The Sympathizer* does not only appear as an all-encompassing narrative of the Vietnamese post-war years up until the 1980s but is also described as "a thriller of ideas" (*Riflessi di guerra* 120) that puts into question every account and memory of the conflict, and that favors, instead, a surreal and antirealistic narrative, coherent with the illogical and surreal nature of the Vietnam War itself. In the second half of this study, particular attention is ultimately devoted to the multiple strategies of implausibility enacted by Nguyen within the novel, such as the Hollywood subplot, which seeks to address the biased

Carlotta Ferrando
Sapienza University of Rome, Italy and University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland

and imperialistic nature of memory industries operating in the US, both in the past and nowadays.

Traina's *Reflections of War* not only provides a thorough historical and cultural investigation of both the Vietnam War and Vietnam's twentieth-century trajectory, a rigorous reconstruction that will surely be extremely helpful for Italian readers who intend to approach this topic for the first time, but also offers a compelling and original contribution to the ongoing scholarly debate on Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*. By focusing solely on Nguyen's most renowned work, this study leaves a critical gap within Italian scholarship, creating an opportunity for further inquiries into his broader literary corpus, as well as the works of other Vietnamese American authors. In doing so, *Reflections of War* lays the groundwork for future research that may further illuminate the complexities of Vietnamese diasporic literature and its role in shaping narratives and discourses surrounding the Vietnam War.

Abstract: Giacomo Traina's *Reflections of War: History and Antirealism in Viet Thanh Nguyen's Fiction* (Ombre Corte, 2024) offers a timely and meticulous reassessment of the Vietnam War and its enduring postmemorial legacy. Framed through Viet Thanh Nguyen's assertion that "all wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory," the study interrogates the competing historical, political, and cultural narratives surrounding the conflict, foregrounding the long-neglected Vietnamese perspective. Divided into two complementary sections, Traina's volume first reconstructs the complex twentieth-century history of Vietnam, tracing the nation's descent into war and its aftermath through a Vietnam-centric approach that restores the agency of Vietnamese actors and emphasizes the transnational and multilayered dimensions of the conflict. The second section offers a sustained analysis of Nguyen's fiction—particularly *The Sympathizer* (2015)—through the theoretical framework of Critical Refugee Studies, illuminating how Nguyen's antirealistic narrative strategies challenge imperial historiographies and expose the entanglements of memory, power, and representation within the American cultural imagination. By conceptualizing the Vietnam War as both a physical and metaphorical "war of Vietnams," Traina situates Nguyen's work within a broader genealogy of diasporic memory and cultural negotiation, wherein the "war after the war" continues to be fought through competing myths, counternarratives, and postmemorial reimaginings. In bridging historical reconstruction with literary analysis, *Reflections of War* not only enriches Italian scholarship on Vietnamese American literature but also lays the groundwork for further studies into the transnational reconfiguration of war memory, identity, and narrative form.

Keywords: Vietnamese American literature; Vietnam War; Viet Thanh Nguyen; postmemory

Bio of the author: Carlotta Ferrando is a third-year PhD student in English Literature, Language and Translation at Sapienza University of Rome, in cotutelle

with the University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland. She graduated with honors in Comparative Literatures from the University of Turin, where she wrote a dissertation on contemporary American Literature titled "Family Dynamics in Blank Coming-of-Age Novels: *Less Than Zero* (1985), *The Lost Language of Cranes* (1986), and *Generation X* (1991)." Nowadays, her main research interests lie within the field of American Studies. Her current PhD dissertation—focused on the "Catastrofemales" of the New Millennium featuring in 21st-century American fiction—examines contemporary American culture, media, and literature through the lens of gender studies, feminist literary criticism, and posthuman feminist theory. She recently edited and translated into Italian the American poetry collection *Winning Hearts & Minds: War Poems by Vietnam Veterans* (1972), published by Urbino University Press in 2025. She is a member of AISNA, EAAS, and IASA.

WORKS CITED

Aguilar-San Juan, Karin. *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America*. University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

Arioli, Mattia. *Buone, sporche e dimenticate. Guerra a stelle e strisce*. Agorà & Co, 2024.

Asselin, Pierre. *Vietnam's American War: A History*. Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Chan, Sucheng. *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation: Stories of War, Revolution, Flight, and New Beginnings*. Temple University Press, 2006.

Espiritu, Yến Lê. "The 'We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose' Syndrome: U.S. Press Coverage of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the 'Fall of Saigon.'" *American Quarterly*, vol. 58, no. 2, 2006, pp. 329–352.

———. *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(e)*. University of California Press, 2014.

Espiritu, Yến Lê, Lowe, Lisa, & Yoneyama, Lisa. "Transpacific Entanglements." *Flashpoints for Asian American Studies*. Edited by Cathy J. Schlunds-Vials, Fordham University Press, 2018, pp. 175–189.

Goscha, Cristopher. *Vietnam: A New History*. Basic Books, 2016.

———. *The Road to Dien Bien Phu*. Princeton University Press, 2022.

Guillemot, François. "'Be Men!': Fighting and Dying for the State of Vietnam (1951–54). *War & Society*, vol. 31, no. 2, pp. 184–210.

———. "The Lessons of Yên Bái, or the 'Fascist' Temptation: How the Đại Việt Parties Rethought Anticolonial Nationalist Revolutionary Action, 1932–1945." *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, pp. 43–78.

Janette, Michele. "Vietnamese-American Literature in English, 1963–1994." *Amerasia Journal*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2003, pp. 267–286.

———. "Vietnamese American Literature." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, 2018. doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.895.

Carlotta Ferrando
Sapienza University
of Rome, Italy
and University of Silesia
in Katowice, Poland

Nguyen, Lien-Hang T. *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam*. University of North Carolina Press, 2012.

Nguyen, Viet Thanh. *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of the War*. Harvard University Press, 2018.

Nock-Hee Park, Josephine. "The Vietnam War and Asian American Literature." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, 2019. doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.857.

Pelaud, Isabelle Thuy. *This Is All I Choose to Tell: History and Hybridity in Vietnamese American Literature*. Temple University Press, 2011.

Traina, Giacomo. "Reverse Exoduses: Returning to Vietnam as a Trope of Vietnamese American Literature." *Jam It!*, no. 4, 2021, pp. 107–129.

———. "Una memoria al plurale: i vietnamiti, la guerra e l'editoria italiana." *Ácoma*, no. 23, 2022, pp. 180–198.

———. "Perverse Theaters and Refracted Histories: Violence and (Anti)realism in Viet Thanh Nguyen's 'The Sympathizer.'" *Review of International American Studies*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2023, pp. 141–158.

———. *Riflessi di guerra. Storia e antirealismo nella narrativa di Viet Thanh Nguyen*. Ombre Corte, 2024.

Tran, Nu-Anh. *Disunion: Anticommunist Nationalism and the Making of the Republic of Vietnam*. University of Hawaii Press, 2022.

Truong, Monique. "Vietnamese American Literature." *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*. Edited by Cheung King-Kok, Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 219–248.

Vallone, Mirella. "'Tell Me More Where It Hurts. You Have My Word:' Trauma e Scrittura in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* di Ocean Vuong." *Open Journal of Humanities*, vol 7, pp. 211–229.

Vu, Tuong. *Vietnam's Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology*. Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Yu, Timothy. *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry*. Stanford University Press, 2009.

Review of International American Studies
RIAS—Vol. 18, Fall-Winter, № 2/2025
ISSN 1991-2773
DOI: https://doi.org/10.31261/rias.17985

GASTROPOLÍTICA: UNA MIRADA ALTERNATIVA AL AUGE DE LA COCINA PERUANA BY MARÍA ELENA GARCÍA

(A Book Review)

José Ricardo Maldonado Arroyo
Autonomous University of Yucatán, Mexico
https://orcid.org/0009-0008-5394-1425

With a captivating narrative, María Elena García describes the experience of eating at the Astrid & Gastón restaurant: "The guinea pig, or cuy, arrived hidden, beautiful, never betraying the rodent it once was. The animal appeared in two small circular bits, and when you popped one into your mouth, it dissolved into air, with just a hint of the flavor of cuy meat" (García, *Gastropolitics* 27). Her words, in addition to highlighting the sensations involved in eating, aimed to exemplify the dominant gastropolitics that have integrated Indigenous and Andean culinary elements into haute cuisine. The Astrid & Gastón restaurant, owned by the famous Peruvian chef Gastón Acurio and his wife, chef Astrid Gutsche, is in the main house of a former hacienda in the exclusive San Isidro district in Lima. Casa Moreyra provides a perfect setting to transport diners back to an idealized colonial era, seemingly more favorable than contemporary Lima, whose edges are widened with waves of Andean and indigenous migrants.

In *Gastropolítica: una mirada alternativa al auge de la cocina peruana* (2023),[1] García interprets Perus' current gastronomic boom as a historical process that perpetuates racial and gender structures associated with the coloniality of power. This interpretation is grounded in at least two theoretical approaches: gastropolitics, understood as the power relations surrounding food that involve competition

1 Translated into English the title would read *Gastropolitics: An Alternative View of the Rise of Peruvian Cuisine*. Two years earlier, in 2021, the University of California Press published the book in English entitled *Gastropolitics and the Specter of Race: Stories of Capital, Culture, and Coloniality in Peru*.

and conflict (Appadurai 495), and the naturalization of colonial domination through the concept of race; which Aníbal Quijano (216–218) calls the coloniality of power. To understand their relationship, García first examines the influence of chefs, restaurants, and gastronomic events on the gestation of the dominant gastropolitical complex in Peru. Then, she explores the agency of subaltern subjects that offer counterhegemonic narratives.

This gastropolitical complex involves several organizations and individuals. García emphasizes the role played by the Commission for the Promotion of Peru for Export and Tourism (Promperú), which created the Marca Perú (brand name Peru); the Peruvian Society of Gastronomy (Apega), which organized Mistura, the most important gastronomic festival in Latin America until its last edition in 2017; the National Association of Ecological Producers of Peru (ANPE); as well as international renown restaurants and chefs, such as Gastón Acurio and his restaurant Astrid & Gastón, and the Central and Mil restaurants of chef Virgilio Martínez. Acurio is an iconic figure of the Peruvian gastronomic boom, not only for being its most recognizable face but also for actively promoting cuisine as a tool of national resurgence. Martínez, on the other hand, represents the next generation of Peruvian chefs. His approach aims to revitalize culinary nationalism using ingredients sourced from the diverse Peruvian ecosystems. He emphasizes the use of native ingredients, considering them "authentic," and connecting them to the "ancestral knowledge" of Indigenous Peoples.

The link between cuisine and nation has been deeply explored. Appadurai (1988) connects cookbooks to the construction of Indian national cuisine, Cusack (2000) to African national cuisines, and Pilcher (2001) examines the formation of Mexican identity through cooking. Unlike these authors, who associate cuisine with political emancipation, García tells a story of national resurgence. Peru was an independent and consolidated nation-state but was destabilized by violent internal conflicts, which motivated some elite groups to develop a nationalist gastronomic project. To shape this narrative, Garcia conducted his fieldwork in Lima and Cusco, visiting restaurants, fairs, markets, and farms. Her analysis incorporates several interviews and conversations, printed publications such as newspapers, cookbooks, novels, and comic strips, as well as audiovisual materials. She also reflects on her cultural connections with Peruvian cuisine and the experiences of her family, who left Peru in 1985 due to violence.

According to the author, the direction of Peruvian gastropolitics is largely explained by an attempt to blind the violence experienced

José Ricardo Maldonado Arroyo
Autonomous University
of Yucatán, Mexico

by the population during the 1980–2000 period, caused by the conflict between the Peruvian state and the armed groups Sendero Luminoso and the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement. Sectors of the Peruvian population composed of middle classes and individuals in positions of power perceive this violence as a consequence of the agrarian reform implemented by the government of General Juan Velasco Alvarado (1968–1975), who aimed to lead a "second independence" (Aguirre 49–50). The concept of "second independence" was resignified by Acurio and other members of gastropolotical elites, transforming it from a nationalist revolution to a project of peace and prosperity far removed from popular demands. The current international prestige of Peruvian cuisine presents an opportunity to develop markets for local producers and promote tourism while inspiring national pride. Since Acurio's return to Peru in 1994, after training as a chef in France, he has been driving national reconciliation by using cuisine as a banner. For him, Peruvian cuisine reflects the fusion of "all the bloods," a harmonious cultural hybridization rooted in the peoples who have shaped Peru.

However, as García reveals in her ethnographic study, this project of national resurgence remains silent about the violence of conquest and colonization, which implicitly involves sexual violence against Indigenous women to produce the mixing of "all the bloods." It also reinforces the racial, gender, and interspecies hierarchies that have persisted in Peru since European colonization. Just as nouveau Andean cuisine disguises the appearance of cuy (guinea pig) to avoid repelling certain tourists and diners, the cultural traits of indigenous peoples that do not align with the Eurocentric idea of modernity are denied or concealed. At events like Mistura and other agricultural fairs, there are efforts to present a sanitized and civilized image of producers, who are often Indigenous or peasants. They participate in a performance where they wear folk clothing, smile, and exude friendliness in a clean, organized environment that appeals to customers seeking an "authentic" experience and are willing to pay for it. Of course, this performance reflects not their own cultural dynamics but rather the interests of the neoliberal market and the gastropolitical elite.

Chef Virgilio Martínez also engages in performativity but from a different angle. He presents himself as the explorer who "discovers" Peru's culinary treasures on a journey as that of the colonizers who "discovered" new lands. Their "discoveries" are served on plates to high-income diners, and recorded and studied by Mater Iniciativa, a research center attached to Central. Martinez's dishes are the delectable products of "ancestral knowledge" refined by science and embellished for tourists. Through the windows of the Mil, diners are treated

to a spectacular panoramic view of the Andes and the archaeological site of Moray, with the living communities near the restaurant excluded from the frame.

García relies on multiple theoretical sources to discuss the colonial nature of certain hegemonic groups' practices. The performance of indigenous people at Mistura illustrates the concept of permissible Indian by Rivera Cusicanqui (83). Virgilio Martínez's "discoveries" echo Pratt's analysis of the imperial eyes, a supposedly neutral perspective, through which a non-European domestic subject is created (Pratt 4–5). The territory and culture of this subject are presented as waiting to be "discovered" by the colonizing gaze.

Highlighting these practices and symbolic forms of neocolonial domination has sparked controversy in Peru. However, beyond controversy, this book can serve as a starting point for broader discussions about the consequences of neoliberal extractivism in Latin America. Chefs and restaurants gain prestige; native products are studied, showcased, and consumed, yet the producers often remain anonymous. García acknowledges the exceptional virtues of the chefs who have elevated Peruvian cuisine to international fame. She also recognizes their genuine desire to help rebuild a wounded nation and extend the economic benefits of the restaurant industry to producers. However, she warns that their efforts are part of gastropolitics perpetuating long-standing inequalities.

García's alternative perspective on the Peruvian gastronomic boom not only considers hegemonic agents and discourses; she also emphasizes that the gastropolitical complex incorporates vernacular forms in which subaltern agents negotiate their representations, recognition, and sharing of economic benefits. Such negotiation oscillates between resistance and compliance. A representative of the ANPE, whom García calls Aída, underlines the visibility that producers gain through their partnership with chefs. However, she acknowledges that chefs receive greater economic benefits from these relationships. She also points out that these relationships are still rooted in a colonial order where Indigenous producers are tied to the land. This perception of indigeneity is inconsistent with the increasing presence of Andean and indigenous migrants in Lima. Aída says: "We have made ourselves visible" (García, *Gastropolitics* 126). The word "ourselves" carries weight in a historical context where producers have leveraged the rules of the gastropolitical complex to occupy spaces in which they demand state support, access to knowledge and technologies, and opportunities to improve their economic circumstances. Aída is also keenly aware that indigenous

José Ricardo Maldonado Arroyo
Autonomous University
of Yucatán, Mexico

and peasant women producers have suffered the most from marginalization and face the greatest barriers to empowerment.

Similarly, the organization Ccori offers a counterhegemonic gastropolitical approach through the optimization of cooking, which means reducing food waste, combating hunger, and working with female cooks in their communities. Ccori is an initiative driven by chef Palmiro Ocampo and his wife, Anyell San Miguel. Ocampo is part of the Generación con Causa,[2] a movement aimed at addressing social and environmental issues. He realized that his talent for creating gourmet dishes using ingredients often discarded for aesthetic reasons could be utilized to provide food for those experiencing food insecurity and to rally other social actors to support the same cause. Ocampo's relationship with Indigenous and peasant populations, particularly with women, is shaped by a deeper connection to his cultural roots—his grandparents were from the province of Andahuaylas—and by his commitment to transforming representations and imaginaries of indigeneity. Through various examples, García highlights the struggle for recognition of indigenous culinary knowledge, the contribution of women in combating hunger and food waste, their mobility and entrepreneurship, and the quest for food sovereignty.

García's analysis includes several voices, without neglecting the cuyes. Her approach to the figuration of the cuy offers a reflection, perhaps an argument, in favor of multispecies research. The cuy is a prominent cultural reference in contemporary Peru. It is not only a key ingredient in both traditional and modern recipes, but also a subject of domestic production and large-scale breeding, including for male and female stud reproduction. It is the protagonist of a comic strip, the mascot of the Credit Bank, and a symbol of Peruvianness. The treatment of the cuy serves as a metaphor for the "poor" and "dirty" Indigenous people who have migrated to Lima; its body is subjected to the same violence. The representation of the cuy and its assimilation with racialized populations reveals connections between the semiotic and the material, in line with how Castañeda (3) defines figuration. Observing the slaughter and exploitation of cuyes, particularly females, led García to explore the ethical and affective dimensions of ethnographic practice, one that must account for grief, pain and shame. García's multispecies perspective is not limited to the cuy; instead, she uses this animal as a focal point due to its increasing significance in nouveau Andean cuisine.

García presents a different perspective of Peruvian cuisine, connecting it to gastropolitics, coloniality of power, and interspecies

2 "Generation with a Cause." Causa is a Peruvian dish, too.

relations. This critical approach has gained increasing relevance in anthropology in recent years (Seshia Galvin 235–238; Petitt 23–24). In Latin America, cooking has played a significant role in constructing national identity, while also serving as a battleground for class, race, and gender dynamics. As national and regional cuisines undergo accelerated processes of gourmetization—an expression of culinary colonialism that exacerbates existing inequalities—García's critique of the Peruvian gastronomic boom is highly relevant.

Abstract: I review *Gastropolítica: una mirada alternativa al auge de la cocina peruana* (2023) by María Elena García, focusing on her interpretation of the Peruvian gastronomic boom as a historical process that, while pursuing national resurgence, maintains class, race and gender structures rooted in the coloniality of power. García explores the actions of gastropolitical elites and the subaltern subjects who develop forms of resistance and negotiation, while also considering interspecies relations. The collaboration between internationally renowned chefs and local food producers is often established in terms of inequality, reinforcing the racialization of indigenous and Andean peoples, as well as symbolic and economic violence against women.

Keywords: gastropolitics, coloniality, Peru, María Elena García,

Bio: José Ricardo Maldonado Arroyo. PhD in Anthropological Sciences from the Faculty of Anthropological Sciences at the Autonomous University of Yucatán (UADY). Holds a Master's degree in Anthropological Sciences and a Bachelor's degree in History from the same faculty. His research has focused on sex-gender diversity, public policy and HIV/AIDS, culinary-gastronomic studies, and migration. His doctoral research addressed the transformations of the culinary-gastronomic landscape in two towns in southern Yucatán, Oxkutzcab and Muna, highlighting the role of return migrants. In 2025, he began a postdoctoral fellowship funded by the Secretariat of Science, Humanities, Technology, and Innovation (Secihti) at the National School of Higher Education (ENES), Mérida Unit, of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), with the project "Culinary-Gastronomic Corridors, Tourism, and Gentrification in Mérida and Valladolid, Yucatán." He is the author and co-author of book chapters and peer-reviewed journal articles on HIV/AIDS and sex-gender diversity. He served as an associate researcher at the Dr. Hideyo Noguchi Regional Research Center of UADY from 2012 to 2013. He has taught undergraduate courses at ENES Mérida (UNAM) and the Faculty of Anthropological Sciences at UADY. He is currently a member of the Association of Historians of Science and the Humanities. He has also published scientific dissemination publications in digital magazines and news media.

WORKS CITED

Aguirre, Carlos. "¿La segunda liberación? El nacionalismo militar y la conmemoración del sesquicentenario de la independencia peruana." In *La revolución peculiar: repensando el gobierno militar de Velasco*,

José Ricardo Maldonado Arroyo
Autonomous University
of Yucatán, Mexico

edited by Carlos Aguirre & Paulo Drinot. Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 2018, pp. 41–70.

Appadurai, Arjun. "Gastro-politics in Hindu South Asia." *American Ethnologist*, vol. 8, no. 3, 1981, pp. 494–511. https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.1981.8.3.02a00050.

Appadurai, Arjun. "How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India." *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 30, no. 1, 1988, pp. 3–24. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417500015024.

Castañeda, Claudia. *Figurations: Child, Bodies, Worlds*. Duke University Press, 2002.

Cusack, Igor. "African Cuisines: Recipes for Nation-Building?" *Journal of African-Cultural Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2000, pp. 207–225. https://doi.org/10.1080/713674313.

García, María Elena. *Gastropolitics and the Specter of Race: Stories of Capital, Culture, and Coloniality in Peru*. University of California Press, 2021.

García, María Elena. *Gastropolítica: una mirada alternativa al auge de la cocina peruana*. Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 2023.

Quijano, Aníbal. "Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America." *International Sociology* , vol. 15, no. 2, 2000, pp. 215–232. https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580900015002005.

Pettit, Andrea. "Conceptualizing the Multispecies Triad: Toward a Multispecies Intersectionality." *Feminist Anthropology*, vol. 4, 2023, pp. 23–37. https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/fea2.12099.

Pilcher, Jeffrey M. *¡Vivan los tamales! La comida y la construcción de la identidad mexicana*. CIESAS, Ediciones de la Reina Roja, CONACULTA, 2001.

Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. Routledge, 2003.

Rivera Cusicanqui, Silvia. "Strategic Ethnicity, Nation, and (Neo)colonialism in Latin America." *Alternautas*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2015, pp. 10–20. http://www.alternautas.net/blog/2015/11/5/strategic-ethnicity-nation-and-neocolonialism-in-latin-america.

Seshia Galvin, Shaila. "Interspecies Relations and Agrarian Worlds." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 47, 2018, pp. 233–249. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-102317-050232.

Review of International American Studies
RIAS—Vol. 18, Fall–Winter, № 2/2024
ISSN 1991-2773
DOI: https://doi.org/10.31261/rias.18486

RIAS EDITORIAL POLICY AND STYLESHEET

Information for Authors

RIAS EDITORIAL POLICY

The Review of Interantional American Studies is an electronic, print-on-demand, open-access, peer-reviewed journal of the International American Studies Association, published by the University of Silesia Press in Katowice, Poland.

The *RIAS* is listed in the European Reference Index for the Humanities and Social Sciences (ERIH+) as well as in the Index Copernicus Journal Master List with the Index Copernicus Value (ICV) for 2021 of 120.54. As of 2018, *the Review of International American Studies* is also listed in the Elsevier Scopus database. In 2023, the *RIAS* has been granted 70 points in the parametric evaluation of the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education and, as of 2019, it is an "A" class category journal in the parametric evaluation of the Italian Ministry of Science.

RIAS appears twice a year, in Spring/Summer and Fall/Winter. Copy deadlines for unsolicited submissions are, mid-June, of the previous year for the June/July issue and mid-December of the previous year for the December issue. While calls for papers are not always disseminated for upcoming issues, when made, such calls will be announced at least 24 months prior to the scheduled publication date for each issue.

RIAS welcomes submissions from all disciplines and approaches and from all parts of the world, provided that they pertain to the study of "the Americas" in the broadest implications of that term.

Submitting a text to *RIAS*, the Author consents that if accepted, their contribution will be distributed in the Open Access formula under the provisions of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-SA 4.0) license. (The full text of the license

is available under the following hyperlink: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.en).

Please, send your submissions via our OJS system at the website http://www.rias-journal.org. Please, log in as "Author" and follow the instructions provided by the system. Please note, that submissions with incomplete metadata will be automatically rejected.

RIAS seeks articles (min 25 and max 35 thousand characters including spaces) of general interest to the international American Studies community, relevant to the theme of the CFPs announced on the *RIAS* website.Suggestions for special issues, position papers, or similar initiatives should also be addressed to the Editors-in-Chief at rias@iasa-world.org.

RIAS solicits two types of contributions: commissioned texts (such as Emory Elliott Prize Essays, Presidential Addresses or IASA World Congress Keynote Addresses, undergoing open peer reference) and non-commisioned submissions (undergoing double-blind peer reference). Each submission is reviewed by two independent referees.

RIAS accepts reviews of academic monographs pertinent to the broadly understood field of American Studies. Reviews, including 300 dpi reproductions of covers, should be submitted via our OJS system. Book reviews are peer-refereed. Book reviews cannot have been published previously. The character count for book reviews should be between 10 and 20 thousand characters (including spaces).

Every submission should be accompanied by the Author's name, ORCID number, institutional affliation, abstract, keywords, a brief biographical note, as well as a bibliography of works cited.

In principle, we accept contributions in all major languages of the Americas (i.e., English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, etc.). Accompanying abstracts should be in English.

RIAS will also publish short position papers (approximately 10 to 20 thousand characters including spaces) that address topical issues in the international arena of American Studies. Only four or more position papers, submitted together, will be considered. These papers will typically be derived from conference panels, colloquia or other kinds of scholarly activity. They should be gathered and edited by one contributor, who will arrange for them to be peer-reviewed prior to submission. The submitting contributor will obtain and submit all author information, and will submit along with the papers a brief explanation or synopsis of the debate that is treated, for the purposes of orienting the reader with regard to the questions or problems to be discussed. For each paper submitted, the submitting contributor will also obtain and provide the Author's name, ORCID number, institu-

tional affliation, abstract, keywords, a brief biographical note, as well as a bibliography of works cited.

Authors retain the copyright to their contributions. This means that the Authors are free to republish their texts elsewhere on the condition that acknowledgment is made to *RIAS*. Authors who wish to reproduce materials already published elsewhere must obtain permission from the copyright holder(s) and provide such permission along with their submission. This includes all photographs, graphs, diagrams, or other illustrations accompanying the submission.

Sumbitting a text to *RIAS*, the Author accepts the RIAS policy of Publication Ethics and Publication Malpractice. (For full text of the statement visit: http://www.journals.us.edu.pl/index.php/RIAS/etyka).

STYLESHEET FOR CONTRIBUTORS

Please observe the following editorial guidelines when submitting a text for publication in *RIAS*:

- Submit your document in the MS DOC or RTF format.
- Start with your name and your ORCID number, followed by your affliation between brackets, and the full title on the next line.
- Pre-format your text in Times New Roman or Unicode font typeface, 11 points, 1.5 line spacing.
- For emphasis, use italics only. Do not underline words, do not use boldface.
- All text should be justified with last line aligned left, without any special kerning or any other special text formatting.
- For page setup, use borders of 2.5 cm or one inch at all sides, format A4.
- Minimum resolution for images is 300 dpi.
- Keep titles, subtitles and section headers as short as possible to conform to the technical requirements of the new *RIAS* template.
- Use indents, not blank lines between paragraphs.
- Those writing in English should use American spelling (but quotations should remain as they are in the original).
- Those writing in languages other than English should observe the stylistic conventions (capitalization, alphabetical listing of personal names, etc.) of the academic register of these languages.
- Quotations from other languages should be provided either in translation or appear both in the original and in translation.

- Use double quotations marks. Use single quotation marks for quotations within quotations.
- Longer quotations (exceeding three lines) should be indented and single-spaced.
- Use single quotation marks around words used in a special sense.
- Periods and commas that do not appear in the original text should be placed inside the quotation marks.
- As to abbreviations, do not use spaces after periods between letters (the D.C.), except for initials of personal names (T. S. Eliot).
- Use em dashes without spaces before and after.
- Footnotes should be numbered automatically 1, 2, 3, etc.

IN-TEXT CITATIONS AND WORKS CITED STYLE

- Please, follow the 9th edition of the *MLA Handbook* for citations and the list of works cited. Cited publications are credited with parenthetical references in the text (please, follow the 9th edition of the *MLA Handbook* for the style manual).
- List your references in alphabetical order of authors' names (type: Works Cited) at the end of your document and format them in accordance with the MLA style as described in the 9th edition of the MLA Handbook (https://style.mla.org).
- For detailed information concerning particular instances of documenting various types of sources in accordance with the 9th edition of the *MLA Handbook*, consult the following websites: https://style.mla.org and https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/mla_style/mla_formatting_and_style_guide/mla_formatting_and_style_guide.html

THE REVIEW OF INTERNATIONAL AMERICAN STUDIES
ISSN 1991—2773

CONTACT INFORMATION
rias@iasa-world.org
www.rias-journal.org
www.iasa-world.org

TYPOGRAPHIC DESIGN
Hanna Traczyk / M-Studio s.c.

PUBLISHER
University of Silesia Press

CONTACT INFORMATION
University of Silesia Press
University of Silesia in Katowice
ul. Jordana 18
40-043 Katowice
Poland
wydawnictwo@us.edu.pl
https://wydawnictwo.us.edu.pl

first edition
publishing sheets: 14.5 — printing sheets: 13.0

DOI: https://doi.org/10.31261/rias.2025.18.2

UNIVERSITY OF SILESIA
PRESS

INTERNATIONAL AMERICAN STUDIES ASSOCIATION
IASA

Review of International American Studies
Revue d'Études Américaines Internationales
***RIAS* Vol. 18, Fall-Winter, № 2/2025**
ISSN 1991–2773
A courtesy copy – share with love

Free copy

ISSN 1991-2773 54
9 771991 277504

For more details