A Rumor of Redress: 

Literature, the Vietnam War, and the Politics of Reconciliation

By

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Abstract

Recent years have seen the emergence of reconciliation as a primary pursuit and dominant trope in the literature surrounding the Vietnam War, marking a literary and cultural shift from the diagnosis of rupture and internal division in the literature during and immediately following the war. This dissertation examines the literature of reconciliation surrounding the Vietnam War and also the disruptive literature of irreconciliation emerging out of that same conflict. Examining the differing and often discordant views of the war and its legacy, I analyze the divergent practices, premises, and stakes of representing reconciliation in the wake of normalization of U.S.-Vietnam relations in 1995. The literature studied in this dissertation includes experiential narratives of return by U.S. veterans, poetry by northern Vietnamese veterans, legacy narratives by the second generation sons and daughters of U.S. vets, and poetry by diasporic Vietnamese writers. Drawing on literary and cultural studies on the Vietnam War, trauma and memory studies, and diaspora and transnational studies, my dissertation performs a model of critical comparativism that maps the transnational contexts of cross-cultural production and at the same time explicates the local figurative sites of reconciliation in literary texts. This dissertation challenges the idea that reconciliation in the case of Vietnam is about greater cultural and historical understanding of opposing perspectives and experiences surrounding the war. Instead, the literature of reconciliation recuperates American and Vietnamese national identities and their normalizing narratives to the exclusion of southern Vietnamese historical and cultural perspectives on the war. Consequently, my dissertation considers the resistance to reconciliation from diasporic Vietnamese writers whose work gives witness to the historical injury and loss of the southern Vietnamese past, but also gives testimony to the ambivalent results of economic liberalism and
capitalist globalization of contemporary Vietnam. These irreconciled voices further complicate, contest, and expand what reconciliation means and for whom.
INTRODUCTION

A Rumor of Redress

We entered the garden by chance. We were like the rocks there, plucked from some other place to be translated by circumstance into another tongue. And in the silent crashing of stone waterfalls, and rising of inanimate objects into music, we remembered there was a time we would have killed each other.

—George Evans, “A Walk in the Garden of Heaven”

The Shock of Reconciliation

In the summer of 1993, an unlikely friendship formed between two people who, if they had met twenty years before, would have tried to kill each other. One of them was an American writer and veteran of what his countrymen called the “Vietnam War,” and the other, a Vietnamese writer and veteran of what her comrades called the “American War.” They fought on opposite sides of the Viet Nam/American war, but, as writers, they shared the same mission: to give witness to the war and its aftermath. Both were guest writers that summer in a program sponsored by the William Joiner Center for the Study of War and Social Consequences that brought together American and Vietnamese writers, most of whom were also veterans, to foster greater understanding and address the impact of war on literature and society. They are Wayne Karlin and Le Minh Khue, and the story of their friendship is recounted by Karlin in his introduction to The Other Side of Heaven, the 1995 anthology of post-war fiction by Vietnamese and American writers born out of their meeting. At the center of this story is the following passage where Karlin recalls one particularly transformative moment:

a moment when in a conversation over the breakfast table with Le Minh Khue she found I’d been a helicopter gunner for a time and I found that she, from the time she was fifteen to the time she was nineteen, had been in a North Vietnamese Army Brigade that worked, often under attack from our aircraft, clearing bombs on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. We had
become friends by then and at that moment I pictured myself flying above the jungle canopy, transfixed with hate and fear and searching for her in order to shoot her, while she looked up, in hatred and fear also, searching for me—and how it would have been if I had found her then. To waste someone, we called killing in the war, and the word had never seemed more apt. I looked across the table then and saw her face, as if, after twenty years, it was at last emerging from the jungle canopy. She looked across at me and saw the same. It was that look, that sudden mutual seeing of the humanness we held in common—which is of course what all good stories should do—that led to this book. (xii-xiii)

The dramatic scene of recognition remembered here by Karlin represents an instance of the cross-cultural reconciliatory encounters fostered by the William Joiner Center during the late phases of American “reengagement” with Vietnam. The official reconciliatory mood of these times is expressed, diplomatically, by the Co-Director of the Joiner Center, poet and veteran, Kevin Bowen in a 1988 piece for the Christian Science Monitor archived online: “Fifteen years have passed since American disengagement from Vietnam. Now for many veterans it seems the time has come for reengagement, for a new campaign of hearts and minds, a campaign that involves returning to the land where they fought” (Bowen). Published in 1995, the same year President Clinton announced “normalization of relations,” The Other Side of Heaven represents a timely testament to the kinds of work—individual and collective, cultural and institutional, emotional and psychological—involved in that new campaign of hearts and minds.2 Karlin’s above-referenced anecdote is offered as a personal testimony to the effectiveness of this campaign. The communicative and collective process of reconciliation described by Karlin is

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2 The year after their summer of friendship, President Clinton lifts the U.S. trade embargo against Vietnam on February 3, 1994; and announces “normalization of relations” on July 11, 1995, twenty years after American “disengagement” from Vietnam on April 30, 1975. As if starting a new historical timeline, the official “Chronology of U.S. - Vietnam Relations” featured on the homepage of the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi begins with the year 1991, with the following entry: “April 1991 – The George Bush Administration presents Hanoi with a ‘roadmap’ plan for phased normalization of ties. The two sides agree to open a U.S. government office in Hanoi to help settle MIA issues.” Chronology, Embassy of the United States, July 2010 <http://vietnam.usembassy.gov/chronology.html>
indicative of a model of therapy where trauma survivors, to facilitate recovery, are encouraged to share their stories with fellow survivors, therapists, or other sympathetic audiences, with the goal being to cathartically re-create of the traumatic experience. Here, the trauma survivors are American and Vietnamese veterans of a war that, at least in the U.S. context, came to signify national trauma. With the full knowledge of the history at his back, Karlin writes, “we shared a compulsion to use our art as an instrument of witness” (xii).

As a carefully constructed piece of writing, Karlin’s instrumental testimony both represents and enacts reconciliation, which can be defined as “an intersubjective process, an agreement to settle accounts that involves two subjects who are related in time” (Borneman 282). While shaped by the political, economic, and cultural transformations of the time, Karlin’s recognition scene in The Other Side of Heaven works on a more literary sense of time—multiple, nonsequential, and circular—to mark an event of reconciliation. Momentarily transported into the past and transformed in the present, both Karlin and Le Minh Khue are profoundly, unsettlingly, and permanently changed by what they learn about themselves and each other—namely that the “humanness” they now recognize in each other’s faces and read in each other’s stories is something they once, having been “transfixed with hate and fear,” refused or were unable to see. But Karlin’s belated recognition of Le Minh Khue’s humanity is haunted by a vision of its violent void, pictured above through his fictive recasting of the time of war when they would have killed each other. The “juxtaposition” of these opposing realizations, Karlin writes, “brought us to moments of what I can only describe as a grief so intense that it changed us so we could never again see each other—or ourselves—in the same way” (xi). Apart from painful or traumatic war experience recounted by Karlin and others in The Other Side of Heaven, the stories themselves attempt to discover the nonsequential connections that allow for those
experiences to become meaningful, not only for them but for their readers as well, in order to “extend the healing [they] hope will be suggested by the book” (xiii). Reconciliation, then, is not only a political or personal project but also an imaginative one. To reconcile means to render no longer opposed, and literature, for Karlin and others, offers a powerful vehicle for achieving a sense of ending and a sense of beginning.

Dramatically retold in the introduction to an anthology that overtly “seeks a moral reconciliation through the literary art,” Karlin’s personal anecdote also does work as an ideal for the literature of reconciliation after the Vietnam War, the subject of the present study. Representing reconciliation after Vietnam, as I read Karlin’s idealized model, would seem to carry out the work of Greek tragedy—taking us back into the action, witnessing horror, feeling pain, but coming out the other side, cleansed—where reconciliation as such names the tragic pleasure and beauty of catharsis: “In the communality of loss and pain, defeat and occasional triumph,” Karlin writes at the end of his introduction, “we see each others’ human faces, emerging from the leaves of the jungle canopy, from the blankness of the sky” (xvii).  

Tragedy is not the only way to represent reconciliation, but it suggests an example of the forms of closure enacted by the literature of reconciliation after the Vietnam War.4

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3 J. Peter Euben offers a nuanced and provocative reading of the political implications of Greek tragedy that both complicates what I acknowledge is my more simplistic use of the term here and also reinforces my general consideration of the politics of reconciliation literature, its embeddness within public institutions, and shaping of cultural memory, which I turn to shortly. Euben argues that “in its form, content, and context of performance, tragedy provided, by example and by precept, a critical consideration of public life. Unlike other political institutions, but like many political theorists, tragedy did not provide specific remedies or recommendations. Freed from the urgency of decision and the exigencies of the moment, tragedy drew its citizen audience to reflect on the latent pattern of their lives as that was disclosed in the play and lived outside it. Here was an opportunity to think about what they were doing in systematic and structural terms without losing touch with the traditions of their city and the concrete dilemmas it face,” (Euben 29). The description of Vietnam as a tragedy, as Gibson notes, was one of the many metaphors used in liberal constructions of the war: “Tragedy is also a favorite, as if thirty years of American intervention in Vietnam were a Greek play in which the hero is struck down by the gods. In the face of the incomprehensible, absolution: fate decreed defeat,” (Gibson 435).

4 A partial list of these works would include: W. D. Ehrhart’s Going Back: An Ex-Marine Returns to Vietnam (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co Inc, 1987), Le Ly Hayslip’s When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: A
Before complicating this picture, I want to put forward what I take to be the defining traits of a work of reconciliation surrounding the Vietnam War: (1) it revisits the time of the war, often from the vantage point of the present; (2) it seeks an enlarged understanding of the conflict by addressing different historical and cultural perspectives; (3) it manifests strong emotions, which express a mutual recognition of loss and pain between at least two subjects who are related through their respective experiences of war as combatants or civilians; (4) it bears witness to the aftereffects of the war—on veterans, their families, and their societies; (5) it produces an image of shared humanity; (6) and, it achieves a sense of closure. The circle, as archetypal symbol of wholeness or perfection, best unifies these traits and is the figure reconciliation literature seeks to make—in the circular time of its returns, the structural unity of its closure, and the transcendence of its vision of one humanity.

The traits above help us characterize a working paradigm of reconciliation literature, which might be said to function as a new genre in the expanding canon of Vietnam War literature. Like any genre, departures and deviations from any one, multiple, or even all of these traits refine and redefine the work of reconciliation by drawing attention to its formal means, and questioning its stated and unstated ends. Such disruptions point towards some of the unresolved questions pursued in this study: Must reconciliation literature revisit the thematics of the war? Does reconciliation mean the same thing for Vietnamese veterans as it does for American veterans? Where do the historical and cultural perspectives of those from former South Vietnam

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5 Partly drawn from the editorial criteria for the anthology as described by Karlin: “What we wanted, we decided, was a work of reconciliation that came from a mutual recognition of pain and loss; what we wanted was to open in our readers’ hearts the recognition that had opened in our own. We decided to collect the stories that had come out in both our countries about the aftereffects of the war—on the soldiers who fought in it, on their families and on their societies, stories both by veterans and non-veterans: our criteria would only be how good they were as stories, and how well they fit into the theme of the cost of the war to both countries” (xiii).

fit into a reconciliatory dialogue most often performed as an encounter between former North Vietnamese soldiers and former U.S. soldiers? What difference does the audience make in the discourse of reconciliation? How might post-war literature bear witness to the aftereffects of economic liberalism and globalization? What kinds of emotions are missing from reconciliation literature and why? What does a resistance to closure keep open?

Towards a Literature of Irreconciliation

Attempting to address these questions, this study explores the literature of reconciliation surrounding the Vietnam War and also the disruptive literature of irreconciliation emerging out of that same conflict. My study seeks to expose the limits of reconciliation literature as conventionally understood by drawing attention to the emergence of reconciliation as a dominant trope distinct from earlier representations of the war, to the politics of reconciliation and national memory, as well as to the identificatory investments and conflicted address of works of reconciliation written from different social locations. Despite the increasingly transnational conditions of literary and cultural production about the Vietnam War and its legacy since normalized diplomatic ties in 1994, I will show that the literature of reconciliation still tends to reify stereotypes and reinforce false notions of national and cultural coherence both within the U.S. and within Vietnam, as well as in the Vietnamese diaspora.

Moreover, I confront the general absence of historical and cultural perspectives representing former South Vietnam in post-war reconciliation efforts; the privileging of voices representing American and North Vietnamese experiences of the war in the public discourse of reconciliation (and reflected in the literature) not only limits a broader analysis of the politics of reconciliation, but also obscures the ambiguous relation between the narrative of reconciliation,
as such, and the economic agenda of U.S.-Vietnam normalization. Consequently, my study seeks to expand the potential archive of work considered as the literature of reconciliation by attending to works of poetry written in English and translated from the Vietnamese that represent critical Vietnamese diasporic perspectives. In form as well as in themes, these poets resist the closure of reconciliation through aesthetic practices that foreground ambivalence, record discrepant experiences, and privilege formal indeterminancy. Producing interference in the discourse of reconciliation, their indeterminate poetries suggest the potential political work of a literature of irreconciliation.

Exploring the fault lines of reconciliation, I am interested in works that resist the closure of reconciliation, not so much as a rejection of the aims of reconciliation, but as a critique of the politics of reconciliation. Consequently, much of this study focuses on writers and works that acknowledge the personal and public desire of coming to terms with the past while remaining critical of a politics of identity and nation. These works often risk irresolution by introducing elements, both formal and thematic, incompatible to the narrative of reconciliation. Intervening in the affirmative politics of reconciliation, writers of diverse cultural backgrounds, social

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6 To anticipate a potential source of confusion, let me clarify how I am using these identifiers of national identity in relation to reconciliation with the acknowledgement that they are broad categories with heterogenous elements. The two national identities I invoke most frequently in this study are the U.S. and Vietnam, the countries associated with the designations American and Vietnamese, who I see as the principle actors in reconciliation efforts. The Vietnamese diaspora is invoked to suggest those Vietnamese affiliated with former South Vietnam. I acknowledge that Vietnamese diaspora names a heterogenous group, but the rupture that defines diaspora in this case is still very much linked to refugee flight and subsequent patterns of immigration.

7 My study features critical diasporic perspectives, but the literature of irreconciliation surrounding the war in Vietnam is not limited to writing from the Vietnamese diaspora. In lieu of an expanded and revised version of this study, I list the following post-war works of fiction by American writers and writers from Vietnam that, it could be argued, variously resist forms of psychological, political, and literary closure: Joan Didion’s *Democracy: a Novel* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984); Alfredo Véa’s *Gods Go Begging* (New York: Dutton, 1999); Denis Johnson’s *Tree of Smoke* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007); Bao Ninh’s *The Sorrow of War* (New York: Pantheon, 1995); Nguyen Huy Thiep’s *The General Retires and Other Stories* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Pham Thi Hoai’s *The Crystal Messenger* (Dunedin, New Zealand: University of Otago Press, 1997). Moreover, I also do not want to suggest that Vietnamese diasporic writing inherently resists closure. Le Ly Hayslip’s *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: a Vietnamese Woman’s Journey from War to Peace* and *Child of War. Woman of Peace*, for example, overtly thematize and represent reconciliation. For critical a critical discussion of Hayslip, see Bow.
locations, and literary approaches, such as Yusef Komunyakaa, Danielle Trussoni, Phan Nhien Hao, and Linh Dinh, among others, take up the unruly, contradictory, and factious elements of what reconciliation leaves out. I write in defense of the importance of a poetics of (ir)reconciliation that remains partial and unreconciled by the unifying synthesis and solution of the politics of reconciliation.

Responsive to the global and diasporic conditions of literary and cultural production, I compare and contrast representations of reconciliation by American writers, Vietnamese writers, and diasporic Vietnamese writers. I call attention to the aesthetic forms in which the rhetoric of reconciliation is deployed and the institutional formations within which the cultural production on the war is entangled. Adapting John Carlos Rowe’s “comparative U.S. cultures model” of new American studies, the present study “compares different cultures within the United States” and also “situate[s] U.S. multiculturalism within international, transnational, and potentially post-national contexts” (7). What is especially necessary in the context of post-Vietnam war literature is a kind of critical comparativism that analyzes the conditions of cross-cultural production while at the same time being able to attend to the more formal and figurative poetics of reconciliation.

American Vietnam War Literature and The Reconciliatory Turn

If U.S. involvement in Vietnam was a function of a Cold War ideology of “containment,” and that involvement increasingly resulted in the radical disruption of the traditional unities of “community,” “nation,” “culture,” etc., both in the U.S. and Vietnam, then the post-Vietnam war politics of peace and reconciliation arguably constitute a cultural politics of “re-containment.” In making such politicized claims about the literature of reconciliation, my aim is not to delegitimise that project, at least not where it appears to shape subjective and interpersonal
experiences in a meaningful way, but rather to reconnect this recent post-war literary tendency to a much wider, complex and confusing, set of interrelationships with political, economic, and cultural institutions.

The emergence of reconciliation as a dominant trope, and its attendant figures of “healing” and “coming to terms,” registers a change in the construction of the Vietnam War in American literature and culture. By and large, “Vietnam,” as ideological signifier for the war and not the country, represents a national rupture in the U.S. that could not be reconciled to dominant myths like Americaan exceptionalism that underwrote previous understanding of a “good” war. Beginning in the early 1980s, Vietnam was often described as an “experience,” something one lives through, and, in a competing metaphor, as “syndrome,” something one is afflicted with (Tal). The ambiguity of Vietnam as figure and symptom for American national identity is probably best captured by the last lines of war correspondent Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* (1977), “Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, we’ve all been there” (243), an ironic mantra suggestive of the collective dis-ease of the war and its effects on Americans, which also finds an unlikely, but decidedly unironic, echo in Ronald Reagan’s final Cold War diagnosis of the “Vietnam Syndrome” still afflicting U.S. foreign policy. The medicalized metaphor, as James William Gibson underscores, emphasizes the need to “get over” the war (5). It is in the context of these earlier discursive constructs of Vietnam that the narratives of reconciliation emerging later can be read as serving to “heal” those ruptures by “putting the war behind us.”

The late 1970s and early 1980s saw the publication of a steady wave of books by Vietnam veterans, beginning with Philip Caputo’s *A Rumor of War* (1977), Larry Heinemann’s *Close Quarters* (1977), and Tim O’Brien’s *Going After Cacciato* (1978). This expanding literature, though differing in formal approaches and political positions, focused “almost solely

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8 Ronald Reagan, “Peace: Restoring the margin of safety,” speech at VFW Convention, Chicago, August 18, 1980.
on the war’s effect on the American soldier and American culture at large” (O’Nan 3); these texts also sought to “expose the untruths of official policy, progress reports, and propaganda, media sounds bites, and popular mythology that misrepresented the reality of Vietnam” (Heberle 300). In contrast, the works of reconciliation, by some of the same American writers who produced the best writing to come out of the war, are less centered on the veteran and, instead, attempt to understand Vietnamese perspectives and culture at large.

The opening of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1982, and the debates surrounding the ambiguity of Maya Lin’s abstract memorial design, helped renew public discussion and debate on the meaning of the war. The Wall, engraved with all of the names of the American dead, brought national attention to Vietnam veterans’ claims that they had been largely forgotten by their country. Though it has been understood within a therapeutic culture of healing, the Vietnam Memorial Wall encourages a more complex interaction with the past and by the surface of its black granite, provides a metaphor and space for individual and national self-reflection. As Lisa Lowe writes, it was precisely the magnitude with which the war abroad exposed cultural conflict at home, as it were, that “shook the stability and coherence of America’s understanding of itself” (3).

Indeed, cultural production surrounding U.S. involvement in Vietnam, particularly during the 1960s and 70s, exposed critical ruptures to national unity and hierarchy along the fault lines of ideology, race, gender, and class, as a number of literary and cultural critics have persuasively argued.9 Within the field of American literature, studies by Milton Bates (1996), John Carlos

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Rowe, and Bruce Franklin all provide important critiques of American culture through their analysis of U.S. cultural production on the war in Vietnam, especially with regards to the dismantling and reconstruction of dominant American myths. Bringing feminist critical perspectives to bear on the war in Vietnam, Susan Jeffords, Katherine Kinney, and Lynda Boose examine the complex ways our notions of masculinity and femininity were strategically mobilized to recuperate a culture of patriarchy and militarism.

The period of renewed U.S.-Vietnam relations marked by normalization in 1994 and extending to the present can be considered a turn towards reconciliation. A new wave of literary production surrounding the war arrived, which not only featured American writers, but also included Vietnamese. Collaborative literary projects between American and Vietnamese writers often framed themselves as “works of reconciliation” that sought to “come to terms” with the past and “heal.” In addition to The Other Side of Heaven, such anthologies as Poems from Captured Documents (1994), Love After War: Contemporary Fiction from Vietnam (1995), Mountain River: Vietnamese Poetry from the Wars, 1948-1993 (1998), and From Both Sides Now: The Poetry of the Vietnam War and Its Aftermath (1998) all foster cultural understanding and seek moral reconciliation through literature.

The literature of reconciliation surrounding the Vietnam War would appear to represent a significant development, posing new challenges to the study of Vietnam War representation. The normalizing rhetoric of reconciliation initiated by the cultural politics of 1980s and 90s threatens to defuse and dismantle the forms of cultural critique and protest found in literary representations and cultural productions from the war. Over and against reputed forms of national recovery and healing, my study considers the disruptive literature of irreconciliation in order to activate the
critical potential of a past and present archive of literary representations surrounding the Vietnam War.

**Vietnam, The Wound, and The Witness**

Because of reconciliation’s attendant language of healing and recovery, the wound remains a central trope in the literature of reconciliation and most often signifies the incommunicable experience of trauma and the paradoxical attempt to give voice to injury and loss. Hence, notions of trauma have been central to critical interpretations of Vietnam War literature and, I would argue, continue to structure the reconciliation literature as a form of witness and redress. Literary and cultural critics studying Vietnam War representation often draw on the discourse of trauma generally, and the interdisciplinary field of trauma studies specifically, to interpret questions of violence and extremity, especially in relation to forms of witness and testimony. Robert Jay Lifton’s 1973 study of combat trauma, *Home from the War: Vietnam Veterans: Neither Victims nor Executioners*, brought public attention to the widespread rage, guilt, and self-disgust of many former combat soldiers and was part of a larger movement within the medical profession that recognized, researched, and attempted to treat Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD.

In her groundbreaking 1991 essay on Vietnam War literature and trauma, “Speaking the Language of Pain,” Kali Tal situates Vietnam War literature within the larger context of twentieth-century literatures of trauma. For Tal, the “literatures of trauma” share common elements: “the experience of trauma, the urge to bear witness, and a sense of community” (16). Tal’s study drives a wedge between survivor accounts and mainstream representations of the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, and victims of sexual violence. While Tal offers a useful and
suggestive comparative model for reading what she calls “the literatures of trauma,” her typology of common elements risks eliding or erasing the historical and cultural differences of such literature. Her study also underscores the fundamental contradiction of all trauma literature, which “defines itself by the impossibility of its task—the communication of the traumatic experience” (16). For Tal, the deepest source of much of the writing by veterans is the shattering experience of combat and its attendant fear, grief, guilt, and sense of helplessness. She distinguishes the work of battlefield participants from that of other Vietnam veterans who did not see combat. Tal’s early attempt at articulating the problematic of Vietnam War representation within the matrix of trauma offered models for later criticism, such as Mark Heberle’s thoroughgoing study, *Tim O’Brien: A Trauma Artist and the Fiction of Vietnam* (2001), which reads O’Brien’s fiction as a form of traumatic realism. In reading Vietnam War literature in the context of trauma literature, critics, such as Tal and Heberle, treat literary representations of the U.S. war in Vietnam as a special or particular case of trauma literature writ large. This paradox—the impossible task of communicating the incommunicable—continues to haunt Vietnam War literature. In many ways, reconciliation literature underscores the difficulty of giving witness to trauma, and by extension, the processes of healing. As explorations and enactments of this structuring paradox, reconciliation literature raises further questions about the mediation of war wounds.

**Reconciliation and the Politics of Representation**

The reconciliatory turn in literature post-normalization is also a humanizing turn. Wayne Karlin’s sudden and belated realization of the humanness shared between himself and his Vietnamese counterparts, in the opening example, illustrates a defining characteristic of the
anthology The Other Side of Heaven specifically, and post-war literature of reconciliation more generally, that I would call the humanizing function of literature that seeks expressly to come to terms with the war’s painful legacy. An inclusion of Vietnamese responses to the war represents not just a tendency but a necessity of post-“Vietnam war” literature. Thus, as veteran and poet Bruce Weigl argues that postwar efforts of reconciliation “must involve a willingness […] to understand the other side” (vii). The act of translation across language, culture, and history, embodied by the bilingual volume of Poems from Captured Documents (1994) that Weigl selected and co-translated with Thanh T. Nguyen and others, represents a symbolic act of reconciliation through literature. As Weigl goes on to write in his Introduction:

Thanh T. Nguyen and I hope that these translations will serve as a bridge to such an understanding, and that by making available these intimate and deeply human glimpses from the lives of North Vietnamese and National Liberation Front soldiers during the American war, we will encourage and facilitate some kind of reconciliation—if not a political one, then an emotional and psychological one.” (vii)

In his noble but, as I shall explain shortly, problematic desire “to understand the other side” for the sake of “some kind of reconciliation,” Weigl offers a particularly instructive instance of the complex poetics and politics of reconciliation that my dissertation aims to study. Karlin also acknowledges the necessary inclusion of writers from the overseas Vietnamese community. He writes, “the anthology could not in justice be defined as a work of reconciliation unless it included voices from the other Vietnamese side of the war” (xiii). Of the existing anthologies, this appears to be the most generous selection. Still, as Linh Dinh points out in a review of the anthology, The Other Side of Heaven contained at least one glaring absence in the exclusion of Vietnam’s “most famous writer,” Duong Thu Huong.10

10 Dinh writes, “Huong first attracted international attention in 1991, when she was arrested by the Vietnamese government after a speech in Ho Chi Minh City (old Saigon), and jailed for seven months. Her absence from this anthology is more than suspicious, and may be blamed on her acrimonious relationship to The Writers Union. Although its influence is waning, this government-sponsored cabal, created to push the Party's line, has long
Responses to the war in Vietnam can no longer be studied solely through U.S. texts, but the reconciliatory desire “to understand the other side” nevertheless risks uncritically constructing “Vietnam” and “the Vietnamese” as unified, coherent, and accessible objects of knowledge. By shifting the object of knowledge to “the other side,” works of reconciliation by American writers can obscure both the individual and national investments in their attempts to humanize the Vietnamese. I would argue that postwar literary projects between Vietnamese and American tend to form and maintain cultural identities with a relative degree of homogeneity and coherence. The case of the Curbstone series shows that U.S. canons of Vietnamese literature have not only created specifically U.S. representations of those literatures but enabled the construction of cultural identities for U.S. veteran-writers, as well as consolidated Vietnamese national identity sanctioned by Communist political doctrines and aesthetic doctrines of Socialist Realism.11

Understanding Vietnam becomes immediately complicated when we consider how the literary and cultural production of reconciliation may be responsive not only to domestic needs and concerns of the U.S., but also conditioned by the ideological agendas of the “other side” in mutually shaping—as interpreters, co-translators, and hosting institutions—the selection, production, circulation and reception of Vietnamese literary and cultural texts, and by extension, the construction of a “Vietnamese” national identity. Such a post-war epistemological project may further not only an American agenda of economic-political “normalization” and social-cultural “re-containment,” but also collaborate with a Vietnamese cultural politics of


“reunification” and “liberation” that seeks to neutralize the potentially disruptive counternarratives produced by dissident and diasporic Vietnamese perspectives.

Despite the “transnational” conditions of post-war cultural production, representations of reconciliation often recover and reinscribe national and cultural identities and national mythologies. Reconciliation in the post-Vietnam War context often assumes—perhaps even depends upon—the coherence of a national identity, and, in this way, works to recover and maintain a coherent national subject over and against the fault lines of gender, race, class, or politics, or, in short, whatever elements that might threaten the harmony and resolution of reconciliation. The emphasis on humanity mitigates against the intractable—and perhaps irreconcilable—differences that inhere in conflicting views of the war and its historical representation, opposing political ideologies, confusing language and culture, divisive emotions of hatred, bitterness, and deep resentment, as well as uneven access and participation in conciliatory efforts.

As numerous literary and cultural critics have argued, Vietnam War representation is part and parcel of an ongoing struggle over the cultural and historical significance of the war. Marita Sturken’s *Tangled Memories* (1997) historically situated and specific argument about the production of cultural memory in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s is invaluable here. Sturken defines cultural memory as “a field of contested meanings in which Americans interact with cultural elements to produce concepts of nation, particularly in events of trauma, where both the structures and the fractures of a culture are exposed” (2-3). Sturken writes: “Attempts to rescript the Vietnam War, have been as much about healing, with its bodily metaphors, as they have been about smoothing over the disruptions of the war’s narratives” (16). If, as Sturken suggests, “[c]ultural memory is a field of cultural negotiation through which
different stories vie for a place in history” (1), then what place in history do those other stories that fall outside the boundaries of cultural memory’s field of negotiation have? The multiply positioned narratives and poetry examined in my dissertation—second generation narratives and diasporic perspectives in particular—suggest that the field of cultural negotiation over the legacy of the Vietnam war remains as contested as ever, and even more, that when we consider the project of reconciliation, we can see how the terms of inclusion and participation in history or cultural memory themselves are challenged.

**Reconciliation About What, Among Whom?**

For Vietnamese refugees, reconciliation can too often mean forgetting a past that, while painful and traumatic, profoundly shaped their individual and cultural identities in the diaspora. The following remarks by Phan Nhien Hao, spoken to me during a personal interview, help illustrate why the topic of reconciliation can still open old wounds over thirty years after the war:

Reconciliation is a very complex topic. For one, the term “reconciliation” is projected by the Vietnamese government. They want us to forget about the past if we are to cooperate. In other words, reconciliation on their own terms, which means you don’t criticize, you don’t raise issues about human rights, or they just shut you out of the so-called conversation on reconciliation. They will tell you that you can write about anything you want—people, country, etc.—so long as you avoid politics, so long as you don’t criticize the government. That’s their reconciliation. Overseas Vietnamese writers are actually asked to help. You should help, they tell us, you should reach out and put Vietnamese writers in contact with the rest of the world. You should be a bridge between Vietnamese literature and the “outside” world. (Phan)

The prevailing terms of reconciliation, Phan suggests above, are unacceptable for two primary reasons. First, reconciliation becomes synonymous with forgetting. More specifically, it means forgetting and excluding South Vietnamese perspectives (by “overseas Vietnamese writers”) on the war and its aftermath. This is partly why, by implication, works by American writers who remember the ruptures to personal and national identity become important: the historical
presence of South Vietnamese becomes inscribed in their memory of combat experience in former South Vietnam. Second, the terms of reconciliation are ultimately driven not by otherwise meaningful efforts to come to terms with the past, but they are dictated by a hidden agenda to consolidate political power in the present. A more legitimate or genuine process of reconciliation must include diasporic Vietnamese perspectives, which carried the cultural memory of South Vietnam into exile. As Phan says in my interview with him, “reconciliation has to involve multiple sides and not just in a symbolic or superficial way” (Phan). To listen to Phan Nhien Hao, it is as if the wounds had never healed. Spoken to me during an interview with the poet, it is not difficult to hear in his words a deep skepticism and bitter antagonism directed towards the Vietnamese government. What is harder to hear and understand—and what my study attempts to identify and analyze—are the underlying sources (historical, political, and aesthetic) of this resistant stance towards postwar reconciliation efforts between Vietnam and the U.S. more generally, and the literature of reconciliation more specifically. Before moving on, let me contextualize reconciliation in the case of Vietnam.

While discussing reconciliation in the specific context of Vietnam, John Borneman offers an instructive analysis of the broader assumptions and greater stakes of post-war reconciliation efforts for Americans and Vietnamese. John Borneman, a cultural anthropologist specializing in the theory and practice of reconciliation, articulates a fundamental question my study also seeks to address through the interpretation of literary texts and their social contexts: “reconciliation about what, among whom?” (204). He argues that for Americans and Vietnamese, reconciliation starts from different premises, involves competing stakes, and, in the thirty years since 1975, produces ambiguous results. For the United States, Borneman argues,

reconciliation—actively pursued or spontaneous—has been framed largely as an internal affair—internal to itself. Perhaps precisely because of this, internal divisions from the
war eerily reappear in various guises, and many Americans, some identified as victims, others as perpetrators, continue to desire redress for individual and collective loss. In the United States, “Vietnam” had the effect of calling into question not only the legitimacy of U.S. foreign policy but also the government’s secretive and deceptive relationship with its own people. Hence U.S. efforts at reconciliation are largely at attempt to rehabilitate not the Vietnamese but the U.S. government as a moral interlocutor whom one can trust. (206)

My reading of the recent reconciliatory turn in American literature about the Vietnam War and its legacy, to the extent that those works can be read as less interested in exposing the ruptures of American identity and culture, generally confirms Borneman’s claim. However, the literature of reconciliation also complicates Borneman’s analysis because the writers and veterans discussed in my study do not overtly seek to rehabilitate the U.S. government, but rather they seek to rehabilitate themselves through an intersubjective process of giving witness through writing. And yet, because of the overdetermined signifier of Vietnam, American writing about the Vietnam War is always already fraught with national significance. Moreover, within the local and global networks for articulating reconciliation, American veterans must also negotiate, consciously or unconsciously, their relation to individuals and institutions affiliated with the Vietnamese Communist Party.

The ruling strategy of the Vietnamese government, according to Borneman, also shapes the discourse of reconciliation. In the case of contemporary Vietnam, Borneman observes, “rebounding violence from the war experience is rarely expressed as hostility against either Americans or Chinese. Rather, it is part of a psychosocial process that infects the social and is directed against other Vietnamese” (204); “At stake is reconciliation among members of resident communities who fought for different visions of Vietnam, and these differences usually fall along a north/south axis” (204). He cites the particular costs for those Vietnamese (both resident and now in the diaspora) affiliated with the American sponsored regime in the south, who, under
the regime change of the Vietnamese Communist Party, suffered overt policies of discrimination as “collaborators,” including confiscation of property, imprisonment in “reeducation camps,” and suppression of dissent. In Vietnam, according to Borneman,

there appears to be a repression of war-related issues at different levels. Victim groups, especially in the south, still have no political power to obtain redress, and this lack of redress continues to sour relations between north and south. Any attempt by southerners to seek redress for injury is understood by the Party not as a demand for justice but merely as a bid for more political power. The Party prohibits the media coverage (and hence public discussion) of certain issues and historical injuries, a tactic that may transform aspects of the past into ‘public secrets’—but does not make them go away. They fester […] in the political unconscious. There they operate like unsubstantiated but irrepressible rumor, continuously dissimulating reality and therefore never able to reach the status of either truth or lie. Trust under these circumstances makes no sense, sociality appears fictitious, and dissimulation offers the best ruling strategy. (208)

What appears to be reconciliation, in Borneman’s pointed analysis, turns out to be a form of repression and coercion connected not only to the Vietnamese Communist Party’s consolidation of power but also to the deceptive effects of economic liberalism and global capitalism on Vietnamese post-war society: “overt policies of discrimination against those who were affiliated with the prior regime are now pursued with much less vigor, a development that is primarily due to the effects of economic reforms” (204); “If the responsibility for injuries and loss is displaced into the realm of economic management, then the creation of comfort and wealth serves as perhaps the major source of legitimacy for the Party, mitigating bitterness and resentment between north and south” (207). Borneman’s critique of reconciliation in the case of Vietnam alerts us to the Realpolitik—the shaping presence of power and interest—in the practice of reconciliation. At the same time, he defends the utopian aims of an idea of reconciliation and justice contingent on networks of trust and enacted through the practice of witnessing and its intended end, truth-telling. “Whatever the benefits of achieving reconciliation through material betterment,” as Borneman puts it, “truth-telling appears to be the major casualty” (205). Given
the corrosive situation diagnosed by Borneman, how are we to understand the literature of reconciliation surrounding the war in Vietnam? And where might we locate alternative acts of witnessing? Borneman’s sense, in terms of public forums and political reform, is that “these injuries and losses will require, perhaps in another generation at another time, some form of redress” (208). My own sense is that forms of redress can be found in the literature that emerges out of the war in Vietnam, in works that thematize reconciliation, and in works that disrupt reconciliation as such.

John Borneman and Phan Nhien Hao both describe a politics of reconciliation in Vietnam where access to the public sphere of discourse—the space of witnessing and redress—is blocked in advance or uneven access is given only under conditions that do not threaten the legitimacy of the ruling power. Their respective critiques of reconciliation in the Vietnam context, and defenses of the alternative histories and unheard voices of southern Vietnamese perspectives, both resident and in the diaspora, call for a reconceptualization of the public sphere on the model theorized by Michael Rothberg. Adopting Rothberg’s notion of the “multidirectionality of memory,” we might also conceive of an alternative practice of reconciliation after the Vietnam War that “supposes that the overlap and interference of memories help constitute the public sphere as well as the various individual and collective subjects that articulate themselves in it” (162). Rothberg posits a notion of the public sphere along the contours of a “multidirectional model of memory” in order to assert and create a space of political engagement for counterpublic testimony. Predominant conceptions of the public sphere, according to Rothberg, are based on a “competitive memory” model that “assumes that both the arena of competition, the public sphere, and the subject of the competition are given in advance,” a “zero-sum logic of competition” where “memories crowd each other out of the public sphere” (161-162). The
politics of reconciliation, in the case of Vietnam, likewise seem to revolve around a “competitive memory” model in which both the space and the subject of reconciliatory testimonies are given in advance, and where discordant perspectives from dissident voices within the country and in the diaspora are seen as threats to the authority of the Vietnamese Communist Party. Consequently, the cultural memory produced within the Vietnamese diaspora represents what Foucault calls the “subjugated knowledges” of Vietnam War discourse. As I examine in Chapter Three, Phan Nhien Hao’s simultaneous rejection, along partisan lines, of what he sees as the governing terms of reconciliation and his own testimonial articulation of unreconciled memories in the “diasporic public sphere” speak to the ambivalent position he appears to occupy between these two models. Phan, and other irreconciled writers considered in my study, perform acts of counterpublic witness that attempt to document injuries and losses, inflicted in the past and accrued in the present, for a future form of redress.

**Comparison, Circulation, and Translation**

Given the transnational dimensions of reconciliation efforts suggested above, through a reading strategy of critical comparativism, my study attempts to better understand and analyze the global entanglements involved in the practice of reconciliation after the war in Vietnam. As Christina Schwenkel argues in her study of the practices of memory and knowledge production, “[s]ocioeconomic reforms and intensified global movements of people, knowledge, and capital have engendered particular social spaces for transnational actors to engage in practices of

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12 By “diasporic public sphere,” I have in mind Arjun Appadurai’s preliminary and provocative outline in *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996). Appadurai argues that “there is a similar link to be found between the work of the imagination and the emergence of a postnational political world” (22). He goes on to write: “But as mass mediation become increasingly dominated by electronic media (and thus delinked from the capacity to read and write), and as such media increasingly link producers and audiences across national boundaries, and as these audiences themselves start new conversations between those who move and those who stay, we find a growing number of diasporic public spheres” (22). Along these lines, Vietnamese literary and cultural webzines may help constitute an emergent diasporic public sphere.
memory that diversify and transnationalize history in new and distinct ways” (5). One way my study acknowledges these transnational sites of contestation and negotiation surrounding the discursive production of reconciliation is to pay attention to the modes of production, circulation, and translation of postwar texts of reconciliation—as well as those texts that do not thematize reconciliation or come to terms with the past. This comparative approach to reconciliation has necessarily demanded greater attention to works written in Vietnamese by Vietnamese writers, both resident and in the diaspora, and in the case of Phan Nhien Hao’s work, has involved my own creation of new translations of literary value and critical importance. “A historicized analysis of the production, distribution, and reception of a contemporary Vietnamese literary text,” Mariam Lam argues, “would navigate the complications of interdisciplinary critique and the ambiguities of desire for diverse critical audiences” (176). Taking up the task of the translator has allowed me to better appreciate why translation matters for reconciliation in particular and literary studies more generally.

Consequently, I treat the post-war literature of reconciliation produced by Vietnamese and American writers as “a mode of circulation,” to borrow from David Damrosch’s discussion of world literature, that involves overlapping, competing, and contradictory conditions of production and reception. Damrosch claims that “world literature is not an infinite, ungraspable canon of works but rather a mode of circulation and of reading, a mode that is as applicable to individual works as to bodies of material” (5). The works of reconciliation produced by Vietnamese and American writers—often through collaborative translation and often involving international travel—enter the realm of world literature as “literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language” (4). Throughout my study, I draw attention to the modes of travel and translation between American veteran-writers
and their former North Vietnamese counterparts that circulate their work and transnationalize the
literature of reconciliation. Resulting in a proliferation of publications (by Curbstone Press and
University of Massachusetts Press) and events (hosted by the William Joiner Center and the
Vietnam Writers Association), access to the level of the international for Vietnamese writers like
Nguyen Duy, Le Minh Khue, Nguyen Quang Thieu, and other officially-sanctioned Vietnamese
writers is inextricable from the institutional formations that authorize and legitimate their travel
and translation in the name of reconciliation.

However, as a serious consideration of dissident writing within Vietnam and diasporic
writing beyond its borders shows, access to the public sphere of discourse and the level of the
international is uneven and contested. Without the same access to the modes of circulation
benefitting U.S.-Vietnam reconciliatory texts, how are texts written in Vietnamese by
Vietnamese overseas produced, received, and circulated? In his monograph on *Võ Phiến and the
Sadness of Exile* (2006), John C. Schafer examines the politics of translation and reception for
literary works written in Vietnamese by Vietnamese overseas in comparison to their counterparts
living in Vietnam. Schafer notes how, on the one hand, “[e]xtremely few works written in
Vietnamese by Vietnamese exiles have been translated into English,” and, on the other hand,
“[m]ost works that have been translated are by northerners who fought against the South
Vietnamese regime and its American allies” (12). For Schafer, the relative paucity of the former
and profusion of the later Vietnamese texts in translation is rather “puzzling” and confirms that
view that “Americans take more notice of Asian writers who stay home than of those who come
to the United States” (12). Schafer offers two tentative explanations for this disparity, both of
which identify problems of reception and production.
First, what makes the works by writers from the North more noticeable and noteworthy to American publishers and readers, Schafer suggests, is how such texts potentially fulfill or readily respond to “a (very laudable) desire to heal the wounds of war, to understand and reconcile with the other side” (13). Schafer tactfully avoids directly criticizing the wide-ranging literary and cultural projects aimed at post-war reconciliation between the U.S. and Vietnam, and associated with the William Joiner Center in Boston and the Hanoi-based Vietnam Writer’s Union. Instead, he obliquely critiques the conspicuous consumption by American publishers and readers of the voices and histories associated with America’s former enemies, who “may be thought to have more interesting stories to tell than Vietnamese we see on the streets of Los Angeles, Montreal, or Sydney” (13). Shafer’s humorous jab at the inhospitable interests of American publishers, readers and critics when it comes to the Vietnam war and literature allows us to question the privileging of works written from the “other side”—that is, by Vietnamese national writers associated with former North Vietnam and the current Communist government—and not those works emanating from “here”—that is, by Vietnamese living in the diaspora. What might make stories by Vietnamese diasporic writers less interesting? Or to put it more specifically within the terms of my dissertation, why do literary works by Vietnamese diasporic writers fail to appeal to the interests of post-war reconciliation efforts sought through literature?

The comparatively positive and visible reception of literary works from Vietnam during the mid-1990s and onward may have something to do with what I see as the vested political and economic interests behind reconciliation efforts. The prevailing literature of reconciliation, I claim, ultimately reasserts and reaffirms master narratives of national recovery (for the U.S.) and national reunification (for Vietnam). At least in the case of the American canon of Vietnam war literature, the literary works themselves are almost always about individuals and their attempt to
come to terms with their personal experience of the war and its aftermath. However, because of
the political and historical overdeterminations of “Vietnam” in the American imaginary, the
meaning of those same literary works inevitably exceeds whatever individual significance they
might portray or possess. Furthermore, literary works that thematize reconciliation necessarily
focus on the impact of the war and its aftermath on individuals and society, but as a result—and
this is my second point—can problematically disregard the impact of economic normalization
and globalization on individuals and society as well.

I find the separation of economic normalization from reconciliation problematic for a
number of reasons. For one, it risks overlooking writers that explore the legacy of the war
through thematics other than, or resistant to, reconciliation, especially those whose work
examines the subjects and subjectivities of contemporary life in an era of globalization. Second,
it disconnects literary works of reconciliation from the realities of economic normalization and
capitalist globalization within which they are imbricated as cultural products. Consequently, this
disconnection serves to disable what is arguably another more problematic realization—that is,
seeing the contradictions produced by a capitalist economy within a repressive socialist country
as one of the unresolved legacies of the war. My study attempts to enable and activate such
connections between art and politics, literature and diplomacy, by contextualizing reconciliation
literature and paying more attention to who and what reconciliation tends to leave out. Doing so
involves historicizing the literature of reconciliation within the period of renewed diplomatic and
economic ties between the U.S. and Vietnam and means articulating economic normalization as,
to use Frederic Jameson’s term, the “political unconscious” of post-war, post-normalization
literature of reconciliation.
Works of Irreconciliation in Diaspora

In the second part of the dissertation I turn to literary works of the Vietnamese diaspora to critique the reconciliation projects of US-Vietnam. Literature from the Vietnamese diaspora occupies a significant place in my dissertation for a number of reasons. The first reason arises from the observation that Vietnamese diasporic writers and their works are generally absent in the post-war literature of reconciliation. Literature by Vietnamese diasporic writers has yet to receive the critical attention I think it deserves in U.S. literary studies (which still focus on Vietnam War representation from an American perspective), ethnic U.S. literature and Asian American studies (which both tend to focus on works written in English), and Viet Nam studies (which seems less invested in analysis of literature). Their notable exclusion marks an unexamined problem that I suggest is related to the way in which literature from the Vietnamese diaspora, which itself is heterogeneous and multifaceted, often does not fit into the existing critical frameworks of reception and does not thematize postwar reconciliation.13 Second, socially diasporic writers occupy a marginal space from which to critique the assumptions of official discourse of reconciliation, which help to rehabilitate the moral legitimacy of U.S. foreign policy and to validate national reunification under the Vietnamese Communist Party. My reading of diasporic poetics attempts to highlight the ways in which a “practice of diaspora,” to adopt Brent Hayes Edwards’ critical trope, can complicate, challenge, and critique the prevailing post-war reconciliation literature by Vietnamese and American writers, particularly the ways in which such literature can often perpetuate national myths and master narratives.14

13 I do not mean to suggest that diasporic perspectives in literature are inherently critical or resistant to reconciliation. Many works of Vietnamese American literature, for instance, proffer familiar narratives of the immigrant experience that serve to reinforce the master narrative of U.S. benevolence and exceptionalism, and maintain an anti-communist nationalist stance.

14I borrow from Brent Hayes Edwards’s (2003) work on diaspora, particularly his understanding of diaspora less as a social condition and more as a set of social, cultural and aesthetic practices, in order to show how contemporary
Introducing a 2005 special issue of *Amerasia Journal* assessing the cultural and political legacy of the Vietnam War thirty years afterward, Yen Lê Espiritu reflects on the absence of Vietnamese perspectives on the war and argues that artists and scholars who wish to look for and call attention to these lost subjects of history “have to be willing to become tellers of ghost stories” (xix). For Espiritu, telling and writing “ghost stories” means actively working through the past, “to pay attention to what modern history has rendered ghostly, and to write into being the seething presence of the things that appear to be not there” (xix). Drawing on sociologist Avery Gordon’s discussion in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (1997) of the experiential realities of social and political life that have been systematically hidden or erased, Espiritu outlines an interventionist project that seeks to wrest from oblivion past and present voices from the margins. “As a consequence of U.S. history’s erasure of Vietnamese—especially South Vietnamese—accounts of the war in United States history,” Espiritu argues in the same vein in an article for *PMLA*, “we have only partial and imperfect recollections of the war” (1702). Faced with the haunting legacy of the Vietnam War, Espiritu places writers and critics in the role of the witness who must “look for the things that are seemingly not there, or barely there,” and, quoting Gordon again, must listen “to fragmentary testimonies, to barely distinguishable testimonies, to testimonies that never reach us” (xx). In speaking of the need “to write ghost stories,” Espiritu enlists narrative for the political project of “[l]ooking for and calling attention to the lost and missing subject of history” (xx).

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Vietnamese diasporic poets like Phan Nhien Hao and Linh Dinh pursue a variety of international alliances through the claims, correspondences and collaborations of diasporic culture. Another theorist of diaspora, the cultural anthropologist James Clifford writes, “Diaspora consciousness lives loss and hope as a defining tension” (257). Sometimes, as the growing literature of diasporic writing attests to, out of this lived tension of loss and hope, trauma and recovery, come new words opening onto new ways of encountering the world. For Robin Cohen, the remembered experience of diaspora can also help constitute transnational communities as “the memory of a single traumatic event … provides the folk memory of the great historic injustice that binds the group together” (23).
The language of haunting pervades discussions invoking the history and memory of the war in Vietnam. Haunting, as the pervasive critical trope of many critics in the emerging field of Vietnamese American literary and cultural studies, attempts to articulate the ways in which the past continues to shape our lived experience of the present, and how individual and historical trauma often escapes our ability to rationalize or analyze it. Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong refers to the work of reading and writing diaspora as “spectral readings” (4) and “spectral writing” (6); she suggests, moreover, that “various ontological specters haunt a large portion of diasporic works in Vietnamese” (2). Viet Thanh Nguyen likewise calls attention to “the haunting absence of the Vietnamese in American and Asian American memory and the haunting presence of the dead and the lost in Vietnamese refugee memory” (32). Nguyen and these critics analyze the problematic ways in which the Vietnamese do “not count” in the history and literature written from the American perspective. Following Espiritu, Nguyen identifies mourning as a central problem in writing by refugees and claims that the work of mourning presents writers with the following injunction: “The writer and the witness face the ethical demand to speak of things others would rather not speak of, or hear about, or pass on into memory, even if in so doing they may perpetuate the haunting rather than quell it” (9). Another way of approaching my dissertation might be to read it as an examination of the implications of this “ethical demand” for reconciliation and literature as reconciliation after the Vietnam War. Drawing more directly on Derrida’s notion of spectrality to read magical realism in pre-1975 South Vietnamese and post-1975 diasporic literature in Vietnamese, Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong argues that “the interrupted history of the South, the death of its nation, is a major creative force behind spectral writing in

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15 This claim of non-representation and recognition is only partly true and needs to be complicated. However, the figure of the Vietnamese and the voice of the Vietnamese have not been completely absent. Certain stories and voices have been heard and privileged, in both American and Asian American literature. One only needs to call to mind Robert Olen Butler’s controversial book, *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*, which attempted to do just the work of mourning that Vietnamese American critics like Nguyen and Espiritu call for.
the South Vietnamese and diasporic texts” (159). For Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong, literary texts from South Vietnam and the diasporas are “continuous in that they make possible subject positions in a necessarily spectral nation whose circumstances of death are specific to its postcolonial history. What such spectral writing does is interrupt official historiography and confront us with a Levinasian ethics of the other” (6-7). Drawing on Pheng Cheah’s discussions of spectral nationality, Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong provocatively points to the “afterlife of the nation abroad” (28). This observation has profound consequences for the way in which we discuss diasporic literature in Vietnamese, for it suggests that the specters of the interrupted nation and national literature of South Vietnam live on in diaspora. Ghosts, haunting, and spectrality are radically open-ended, ongoing, and persistent. Consequently, they resist attempts at closure. In terms of my study, then, haunting would signify the disruptive force of irreconciliation and irresolution attending post-war attempts to come to terms with the past in and through literature.

However, the tropes of haunting and mourning can limit our understanding of the potential political work of literature that resists closure, as well as literature that seeks closure. The task Espiritu and others claim for diasporic writers is certainly necessary, but I wonder if in its restless search for the missing subjects of history, such a project limits both the subject being articulated—namely, the history of South Vietnam—and the audience of articulation, again, other diasporic writers and critics. Just as important to my study is an analysis of the social location and representational positionality of the historical actors and writers involved in the process and practice of reconciliation. Doing so allows us to see how the politics of reconciliation are inseparable from its audience and forms of address. Taking Leslie Bow’s cogent reading of Le Ly Hayslip’s reconciliatory narrative as a model, I wish to provide an “understanding of the purposes that personal narrative may serve as it intersects and is invested
in multiple discourses” (136). Like Bow, I suggest that the multiply located positions of Vietnamese and American writers are intrinsic to their narratives and poems’ overt and oblique political messages regarding the war and its legacy. The central issue is not about the specific agenda of such texts, to extend Bow’s insights for the implications of my study, but about “rhetoric and the multiple political uses” that works of (ir)reconciliation “can serve in their appeal” to closure or non-closure (118). My aim is not simply to expose the specific ideological agendas behind reconciliation efforts, but rather to point to the complex processes of representation, circulation, and reception that shape, and are shaped by, works of reconciliation and irreconciliation. Consequently, my study represents an initial attempt to bring together the differing and often discordant views of the war and its legacy around the question of reconciliation.

**Outline of Chapters**

Chapter 1 explores one of the central narratives and thematics of reconciliation after Vietnam, the narrative of return, in order to explore the meaning of reconciliation from different cultural and historical perspectives on the war. The chapter is intended to map the transnational routes of reconciliation within the historical changes of normalization of U.S.-Vietnam relations and to critically frame the discourse of reconciliation around what I consider to be its two most representative and predominant actors, namely the American veteran and the Vietnamese veteran. I follow the converging and diverging itineraries of real and imagined returns, as well as the differing historical contexts and political agendas in which return is enacted and imagined. Whereas the physical “return to Vietnam” often represents the possibility of reconciliation, if not its realization, the more discursive and psychic senses of return, I think, always possess the
disruptive potential of releasing heterogeneity, irresolution and resistance back into forms of reconciliation. In this light, I am interested in those works that occupy the gray zone of this conceptual slippage, and I explore return not so much as historical continuity or overcoming, but also as historical disruption, psychic spectralization, and social disintegration. The chapter centers largely on Larry Heinemann’s *Black Virgin Mountain*, a memoir of return by a canonical Vietnam War novelist, but it also considers the metaphor of return in poetry by two established Vietnamese poets and veterans. I argue that reconciliation for these Vietnamese and American writers begin from different premises and hold different stakes for them as individuals and for their respective countries. Larry Heinemann’s memoir represents an instructive case of reconciliation literature partly because his return narrative enacts a form of closure which Heinemann himself overtly rejects. His contradictory rejection and eventual performance of a sense of closure, I suggest, can be read through the conflicted form of his memoir’s national address to Vietnam and the U.S. Heinemann’s rejection of closure is inseparable from his ambivalent implication in a distinctly American discourse of national trauma and healing after the Vietnam War. At the same time, Heinemann’s identificatory investments in a peaceful image of post-war Vietnamese society prefigure the overwhelming sense of belonging he feels during his return “home” to Vietnam. In its image of shared humanity and achievement of closure, Heinemann’s return narrative is indicative of the genre of reconciliation emerging from American representations of Vietnam and, despite the disruptive potential I also read in his work, ultimately reinforces the idea that reconciliation from the American perspective is primarily about rehabilitating a sense of personal and national identity. Shifting to the Vietnamese veterans and poets in the last part of the chapter, I show how the politics of reconciliation is inextricable from matters of real and imagined audience. Nguyen Duy’s poems address multiple audiences,
including American veterans actively engaged in reconciliation efforts and overseas Vietnamese resistant to reconciliation, and through different rhetorical strategies that obscure the ideological differences and historical evasions of a more inclusive reconciliation. Nguyen Quang Thieu’s poems also draw on the metaphors of place and home, but in ways that avoid the redemptive and nostalgic overtones of Nguyen Duy’s celebrations of peace and humanity in poetry addressed to an American audience and appeals to a timeless idea of nation that erases the historical injuries and losses of the war in poetry addressed to a diasporic Vietnamese audience. Ambivalent and melancholy in its evocations of home, Nguyen Quang Thieu’s poetry obliquely figures the loss and injury, present but unsubstantiated, still awaiting redress.

Chapter 2 considers Yusef Komunyakaa’s ongoing attempt to represent and give meaning to his Vietnam War experience across three different collections of poetry: *Dien Cau Dau*, the “Debriefing Ghosts” section from *Thieves of Paradise*, and *Warhorses*. Representing reconciliation as re-vision, Komunyakaa practices an open-ended poetics of inquiry in order to re-see the past and its relation to the present, as well as to other historical and cultural experiences. As evidenced in the trajectory of his poetry, Komunyakaa demonstrates an ethical commitment, as a now canonized writer, to reengage questions of violence and war within changing historical circumstances. Reinvigorating traditional poetic forms, such as the lyric, prose poem, and dramatic monologue, his poetry draws on and elaborates figures commonly associated with reconciliation, such as injury, loss, wounds, and voice, but in ways that reinvest these figurative sites with new meaning and critical significance for a deeper historical understanding and broader cultural perspectives. Komunayakaa occupies an important position in my study because his poetry remains a productive site of irresolution where the ruptures of racialized violence, historical injury, and social contradiction are complexly figured through his
poetics of re-vision and improvisation. As powerfully exhibited in Dien Cai Dau’s exploration of the war through the social and psychological realities of black soldiers, Komunyakaa’s position as an African-American male poet and Vietnam veteran is integral to the political consciousness of his poetry, which is ever attuned to the past and present injustices contradicting America’s democratic visions of itself and often underwriting its long history of violence and war. As his poetry also shows in great measure, in the prose poems of “Debriefing Ghosts” and recent poems from Warhorses, Komunyakaa uses poetry as a vehicle to articulate and imagine new networks of affiliation and trust, in which different voices and perspective can be heard. Depicting a day touring historical sites with Vietnamese guests in the prose poem “Frontispiece,” Komunyakaa records the ambiguous ways in which personal articulations of war memories intersect with different public audiences, and must thereby compete and negotiate with redeeming constructions of national identity. In “Autobiography of My Alter Ego,” the long dramatic monologue closing Warhorses, Komunyakaa takes on the persona of a white Vietnam veteran partly to speak to the historical lessons unlearned from Vietnam as the U.S. pursues wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In these and the other poems examined in this chapter, Komunyakaa’s poetry represents and performs a dialogical relationship between poet and reader, self and other. By revisiting and reevaluating personal and public archives of memory and knowledge, Komunyakaa ultimately resists closure and keeps open the possibility of a new relationship to others, self, and society.

Chapter 3 reads the reconciliation not from the perspective of writers who were veterans, but rather from the perspective of the children of Vietnam war veterans, in order explore how the memory, history, and legacy of the war is being passed on and shaped by the second generation. The four works I have examine, one novel, two hybrid memoirs, and a ghostwritten
autobiography, variously show how the legacy of the Vietnam War is partly received, partly modified, and partly created—and entirely entangled in the politics of remembrance and poetics of postmemory. They are written by authors with very different personal or subjective relations to the war in Vietnam: an American civilian during the war (Mason), a daughter and son of American veterans of the Vietnam War (Trussoni and Bissell), and a Vietnamese refugee (Pham). I demonstrate how these legacy narratives enact their own forms of reconciliation and evasion of closure, which I read as indicative of their negotiations with various forms of generational, historical, and literary mediation. The first legacy narrative discussed in this chapter, Bobbie Ann Mason’s novel *In Country* (1985), for instance, foregrounds the way in which its second generation protagonist is invested in the popular culture and political discourse of America at a particular historical juncture in the 1980s, when Ronald Reagan was president, Bruce Springsteen the boss, and the newly opened Vietnam Veterans Memorial sparked controversy over how best to represent the war in a national monument. At the other end of the chapter, Andrew X. Pham’s *Under the Eaves of Heaven* attests to a historical and cultural moment after which Vietnamese national and Vietnamese diasporic perspectives on the war and its aftermath are not only possible, because of the historical conditions like economic normalization and diasporic politics, but also necessary. An autobiographer by proxy, Andrew X. Pham ghostwrites his father’s story in his father’s voice to give witness to a diasporic Vietnamese perspective of the war. Together, the proxy witnesses of these legacy narratives manifest the public significance of their individual responses to the wounded psyches of their fathers and the collective damage of war. They are attended, on the one hand, by problems of identification with and appropriation of their family stories, and on the other hand, by possibilities of a critical inheritance of the past. In her memoir *Falling Through the Earth,* for
instance, Danielle Trussoni recounts pouring over history books about the Vietnam War to help her fill in the gaps of knowledge from her father’s war stories, a project she pursues to help her substantiate her personal claim that the source of her parents’ divorce resides in her father’s experience in Vietnam. While the boundaries between her father’s memories and her own are generally marked as distinct in Trussoni’s memoir, Tom Bissell often intentionally projects states of mind onto his Vietnam veteran father, even while acknowledging his distance from his father’s experience. His essay, “War Wounds,” and the book that grew out of it, *The Father of All Things: A Marine, His Son, and the Legacy of Vietnam* (2007), approach the historical and generational differences not as a liability so much as a license to explore questions about knowledge and uncertainty that can overwhelm such second-generation projects and projections.

Very little scholarship has been devoted to studying the impact of the war and its aftermath on the children of Vietnam War veterans. My chapter offers a preliminary and concerted attempt to map out some of the formal and thematic issues of this emergent literature written by the second generation. To do so, I draw on recent work on second-generation memory by scholars such as Marianne Hirsch and Eva Hoffman, whose studies examine the legacy of the Holocaust specifically but whose critical terms might have wider historical and cultural applicability.

Chapter 4, following from my discussion of Andrew X Pham’s ghostwriting the legacy of southern Vietnamese cultural memory in *Under the Eaves of Heaven*, marks my study’s decisive turn towards diasporic Vietnamese writing. In this chapter, I consider the case of poet Vietnamese poet Phan Nhien Hao, whose work resists direct engagement with the thematics of reconciliation insofar as the discourse of reconciliation is understood to evade truth-telling about the experience of the war from southern Vietnamese perspectives, resident and in the diaspora. Phan Nhien Hao’s practice of diaspora resists the teleology of exile and return, loss and
recuperation through ambivalent forms of poetic address, deterritorialized language, and ambiguity of surrealist associations and images. Marginalized from both the public sphere in Vietnam and literary culture in the U.S., Phan Nhien Hao performs a counterpublic witnessing that both affirms his freedom and private existence within the Vietnamese diaspora yet registers a melancholic testimony to the absence of an audience that might publically seek forms of redress for the injuries and losses of those Vietnamese affiliated with former South Vietnam. I read the poetry of Phan Nhien Hao in order to intervene in the ongoing conversation about the past, present, and future of diasporic Vietnamese poetry specifically and literary representations of Vietnamese diaspora more generally.

Chapter 5 attempts to situate post-Vietnam war literature of reconciliation within the context of economic normalization specifically and globalization more generally. The chapter focuses mainly on poetry by Linh Dinh, but also includes an excursus on new Vietnamese poetry translated by Dinh. I aim to show how Dinh’s work explores cultural and economic transnationalism as the ambivalent promise and problem of a reconciliatory project that prepares for economic normalization. Dinh’s parodic postmodern representations of global subjects, which are marked by the negative affect of disgust and grotesque image of the body, I argue, call attention to the politics of representing reconciliation in the age of globalization. Unsparing, unsentimental, and uncompromising, Dinh’s poetry exposes and diagnoses the hidden contradictions, violence, and discontent of a postwar reconciliation that fails to account for the grotesqueries of globalization.

The work of Vietnamese diasporic poets featured in these last two chapters of my study foregrounds the failures of nation-centered paradigms of post-war reconciliation literature to give an enlarged account of the historical and cultural perspectives on the war and its aftereffects. By
“writing outside the nation,” to adapt Azade Seyhan’s notion of diasporic literature, the poetic practices of Phan Nhien Hao and Linh Dinh document the cultures of dislocation and exile, thereby “serv[ing] as condensed archives of national, ethnic, and linguistic memories” (13).

Their diasporic poetry of irresolution disrupts the narrative of reconciliation by helping us bring to light a number of critical insights about the literature of reconciliation and its politics of representation: first, reconciliation literature manifests an identificatory investment in the dyadic or binary relationship of enemy-friend to the exclusion of what I suggest is the third more troublesome term represented by diasporic writers, whose history of displacement carries the residue of the fallen state of South Vietnam and America’s lost war and foregrounds reconciliation’s politics of friendship; second, works of reconciliation perform narratives of individual healing and national recovery from past trauma while disregarding the ambivalent results of economic liberalism and capitalist globalization as registered by contemporary life and society. What Phan Nhien Hao and Linh Dinh offer instead, I argue, is something that can be read as both more deeply historical, as in the case of Phan Nhien Hao’s melancholic witness of diasporic history and memory, and more complexly contemporary, as in the example of Linh Dinh’s grotesque image of the transnational subject and body. In the end, their distinct voices speak disquietingly of reconciliation’s rumor of redress.
CHAPTER ONE

Return to Vietnam:
The Routes/Roots of Reconciliation

There’s a need to take that voyage. In order to make oneself whole there has to be this journey back so the future can exist, because the past and the future are all part of the same man. I had to go back and accept my history in order to take steps forward. (Komunyakaa, *Blues Notes 78*)

Why return to Vietnam? For poet Yusef Komunyakaa, like many other veterans of the Vietnam War, the journey of return offers possibilities of completeness and wholeness. In Komunyakaa’s philosophical reflections, the return to Vietnam is integral for one’s personal identity; it is a journey that stitches together past and present, but also one that makes the future possible. Many of the American writers and veterans who produced the most enduring literary responses to the Vietnam War have made, and continue to make, the journey back to the country of Vietnam. As early as the mid to late 1980s, while political and economic relations between Vietnam and the U.S. were not yet officially recognized or “normalized,” writer-veterans like W.D. Ehrhart, Bruce Weigl, and Kevin Bowen, amongst others, travelled to Vietnam under the auspices of the William Joiner Center for the Study of War and Its Social Consequences. Back in the U.S., it was only a matter of time before an American audience would be able to read about the country and people of Vietnam during a time of peace, about the profound encounters between men who once fought each other on opposite sides of the war, and about the personal reflections of American veterans returning to the crossroads of history and violence. With the

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16 Former correspondents and photojournalists, such as Henry Kamm and David Lamb, have also returned to Vietnam and covered the country not at war, but at peace. The children of American veterans of the Vietnam War are also beginning to retrace their second-generation inheritance back to Vietnam, as exemplified by recent publications of books by Tom Bissell and Danielle Trussoni that mix memoir and travel narrative. See Henry Kamm, *Dragon Descending: Vietnam and the Vietnamese* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1996); David Lamb, *Vietnam, Now: A Reporter Returns* (New York: Public Affairs, 2002); Tom Bissell, *The Father of All Things* (New York: Pantheon, 2007); Danielle Trussoni, *Falling Through the Earth* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006).
1985 publication of *Going Back: An Ex-Marine Returns to Vietnam*, outspoken poet and veteran W.D. Ehrhart produced one of the earliest first-person accounts of post-war Vietnam. Bruce Weigl’s poetry collections published after this period, such as *Song of Napalm* (1988), *What Saves Us* (1992), and *Sweet Lorain* (1996), feature many poems about his return trips. As Weigl writes in the opening lines of “Dialectical Materialism,” from *Archeology of the Circle: New and Selected Poems*:

> Through dark tenements and fallen temples  
> we wander through Old Hanoi  
> oil lamps glowing in small  
> storefronts and restaurants  
> where those, so long ago my enemy,  
> sit on low chairs and praise the simple evening. (90)

Weigl’s poem, indicative of the reconciliatory impulse behind returning to Vietnam, attempts to see past blinding ideologies and views Vietnam and the Vietnamese through a humanist perspective, one that perceives, with ironic detachment and quiet disbelief, the binding relations between former enemies recollected in a time of peace. For others, like Larry Heinemann, the reconciliatory impulse can be in tension with the traveler’s impulse to seek out new experiences and knowledge, or as he articulates the two competing impulses in his 2005 memoir *Black Virgin Mountain*, “I went back to ride the trains and I had the chance to take a look at a country I had never seen” (64); “I don’t have to travel halfway around the world to ‘see’ the war, but to be rid of it” (238). All of these journeys, all of these returns reengage, reactivate, and rearticulate memory and history.

This chapter considers representations of reconciliation through the trope of return in recent works by American and Vietnamese writers and veterans. I examine what I view as a conceptual and figurative slippage in the trope of return. Whereas the physical “return to
Vietnam” often represents the possibility of reconciliation, if not its realization, the more discursive and psychic senses of return, I argue, always possess the disruptive potential of releasing heterogeneity, irresolution, and resistance into the literary representation of reconciliation. In this light, I am interested in those works that occupy the gray zone of this conceptual slippage, despite, or because of, their respective claims about reconciliation.

The centerpiece of this chapter is a close reading of Larry Heinemann’s 2005 memoir, *Black Virgin Mountain: A Return to Vietnam*, which I present as an exemplary and symptomatic text of the literature of reconciliation written from the perspective of an American veteran who is regarded as one of the essential literary chroniclers of the Vietnam War. In Heinemann’s case, the performance of returning to Vietnam attempts to produce experience and knowledge about the country and people of Vietnam, which in the belated form of its representation as a return narrative seeks a symbolic compensation for a prior dehumanization of the Vietnamese.

Heinemann’s return narrative is also indicative of and constituted by the overlapping and competing modes of touristic travel and reconciliatory journeys. The chapter ends with an opening out towards poetic representations of reconciliation from the perspective of two Hanoi-based Vietnamese veterans and poets, Nguyen Duy and Nguyen Quang Thieu, both of whom are regarded as leading literary voices who explore the Vietnamese experience of the “American War” and its consequences. In the case of their distinctive poetry, the representation of return is fraught with questions of post-war Vietnamese national identity. In reading these works, I try to draw attention to the ways in which return as a representational form of closure is always discursively open to return in the form of textual deviations, historical disruption, psychic spectralization, and social disintegration.
To provide some important background to these various returns, the normalization of
diplomatic relations between the United States and Vietnam in 1994 stirred a renewed American
interest in literary and cultural productions surrounding the war and its legacy and in exploring
modern Vietnamese culture and society during a time of peace. Collaborative U.S.-Vietnamese
literary projects framed as works of reconciliation were particularly well positioned to offer
representations of personal and public feelings about the war and its aftermath.17 These cross-
cultural collaborations, mostly involving the Boston-based William Joiner Center for the Study
of War and Its Social Consequences and the Hanoi-based Vietnam Writers Association,
produced a great number of literary anthologies, the “Voices from Vietnam” series of
contemporary fiction from Vietnam, and numerous translated collections of poetry by important
contemporary figures such as Nguyen Quang Thieu, Nguyen Duy, Huu Thinh, and Lam Thi My
Da, among others.18 These literary works represent not only one of the important material
outcomes of these returns, as cultural productions disseminating knowledge, but as I will

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17 Vietnamese Americans are also returning to Vietnam. There was also an increased interest in literary and cultural production by Vietnamese-Americans after 1994, as Isaballe Pelaud points out: “America’s return to Viet Nam through the market economy facilitated the entry of Vietnamese American cultural production in the U.S. national narrative” (27). Ly Ly Hayslip’s memoir, _When Heaven and Earth Changed Places_, travels back and forth between her remembrances of life growing up in the war-torn countryside of Vietnam and her chronicle of returning to Vietnam in 1986 during the lean post-war years. Nguyen Qui Duc’s _Where the Ashes Are: The Odyssey of a Vietnamese Family_ (1994), a family memoir intertwining the personal stories of the author’s father, mother, and his own, ends with the return of a native son who reflects: “some of us had to come back for the things we left behind: our childhood home—the place, as the Vietnamese say, where our umbilical cords were cut. We would come back changed, but we would come back” (229). This need to return to the place of one’s birth and site of one’s painful inheritance continues in more recent books like Andrew X. Pham’s travel memoir _Catfish and Mandala_ and Andrew Lam’s autobiographical essays in _Perfume Dreams_. Pelaud also notes how “a special fascination has developed for journeys of escape by boat and more recently what I call Vietnamese American ‘Tales of Return’” (37). Citing some of the same titles mentioned above, Pelaud characterizes these Vietnamese American return narratives as featuring “narrators physically returning to Vietnam, tracing a journey marked by strong emotions and painful memories, a need to heal, and a desire for self-identification” (38).

demonstrate in the course of reading Larry Heinemann’s *Black Virgin Mountain*, also enact imaginative forms of reconciliation through writing.

**Pilgrimages, Memory Tourism, and Tours of Reconciliation**
**In Larry Heinemann’s *Black Virgin Mountain***

Larry Heinemann provides an instructive case as the representative American veteran and writer, because his struggle to produce writing that confronts the horrors of war (two novels and a memoir) closely parallels the Vietnam generation’s struggles to comprehend and come-to-terms with the personal and societal impacts of the war. Born and raised in Chicago, Heinemann served in Vietnam in 1967-68, with the 25th Infantry Division, and he saw extensive action in the “Iron Triangle” region northwest of what was then Saigon. Heinemann wrote two novels based on his experiences in the Vietnam War, *Close Quarters* (1979) and *Paco’s Story* (1986), which won the National Book Award for fiction. His first novel, *Close Quarters*, tells the story of draftee Philip Dosier. His second novel *Paco’s Story*, which he described in a 1997 interview as plumbing “the everlasting reverberations of the aftermath of the war”, follows a disconsolate Vietnam veteran wandering in a ghastly ghostly haze through an oblivious America (Heinemann). It won the Carl Sandberg Literary Award and the National Book Award in 1986. He has also written a memoir, *Black Virgin Mountain: A Return to Vietnam*, which has been described as the third book of his Vietnam trilogy. First published in 2005, the same year as the thirty-year anniversary of the Vietnam War, *Black Virgin Mountain* represents a timely and topical return to Vietnam.\(^{19}\) Heinemann is typical of the leading writers of the Vietnam War generation in that he contributes to and benefits from the literary and cultural exchanges between

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\(^{19}\) Vintage Books published reissued editions of *Paco’s Story* and *Close Quarters*, in April and August respectively, through their Vintage Contemporaries line, and would later publish the paperback edition of *Black Virgin Mountain* in 2006.
Vietnamese and American veterans and writers, which are sponsored and maintained by the William Joiner Center and the Vietnam Writer’s Association.

Heinemann’s *Black Virgin Mountain* offers a probing, if problematic, memoir of a Vietnam veteran and writer’s return to Vietnam. Part autobiography, part travelogue, and part diatribe, *Black Virgin Mountain* recounts Heinemann’s inward and outward journeys back to Vietnam, including reflections on the his war-year, opinions about the travesties of past and current wars, and encounters with the country and various people of Vietnam. In order to confront nagging questions about private and public feelings about the war and its aftermath, Heinemann’s Vietnam return memoir draws on the same plainspoken barracks language and the personal experience of the American GI, if in a toned down version, that memorably characterized his war novels, *Close Quarters* and *Paco’s Story*. Within the frame of its return narrative, *Black Virgin Mountain*, like his novels, also contains a strong indictment of the American politicians and generals who conscripted young men, like him, to fight in a foreign country. The first two chapters, in particular, track Heinemann’s “transformation from a nonpolitical son of the working class into a disillusioned young soldier who became virulently politicized,” as the jacket copy of the paperback describes. By narrating his journeys back to Vietnam in *Black Virgin Mountain*, Heinemann blurs the distinction between tourist travelogue and veteran-writer’s memoir, and creates a post-war return narrative divided between what I read as the conflicting subjectivities of the tourist and the veteran. My reading of *Black Virgin Mountain* examines the modes of “memory tourism” Heinemann participates in—or, to make a crucial distinction, sees himself participating in—and how he negotiates the paradoxes and contradictions of his subject position as a veteran and writer through the performance of return and the writing of a return narrative.
In “Pilgrimages, Reenactment, and Souvenirs: Modes of Memory Tourism,” Marita Sturken considers memory tourism as “a rite of mediated return through which tourists, some of whom may also be survivors, create an experience of memory” (281). Sturken sees memory tourism falling into several overlapping modes, which she identifies as the modes of pilgrimage, reenactment, pedagogy, and kitsch consumerism. In Black Virgin Mountain, the overlapping modes of memory tourism identified by Sturken variously mediate, at one point or another, and with differing intensity, Heinemann’s return to Vietnam: the pilgrimages to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and Black Virgin Mountain, sites that are nationalized and sacralized respectively; the reenactment experience of the Cu Chi Tunnels, where visitors can crawl through the tunnel or fire an AK-47 at the rifle range; the pedagogical function of the lecture on the “American War” given by the Vietnamese park ranger and veteran at the Cu Chi Tunnels as well as the didactic dimensions of Heinemann’s own text as he relates his privileged understanding of the history of the war and newfound experiences of Vietnamese culture and society; the kitsch repackaging of the cultural memory of the war in the form of t-shirts blazoned with “I Survived the Cu Chi Tunnels,” phony Zippo lighters, fake GI dog tags, and more.

Two competing impulses—the tourist’s noncommittal wanderlust for exotic places and the veteran’s sense of forging a new ethical relation to the other—mutually structure the modes of memory tourism performed by Heinemann in his return to Vietnam. In addition to his impulse to see the lives of ordinary Vietnamese in a time of peace, Heinemann also admits to his touristic and more fanciful desire as a self-identified “train buff” to see the country by train (63). With a nonchalance that belies the urgency of what he refers to as settling the “unfinished business” of Vietnam, Heinemann writes: “I’ll go back, hang around, and see what else there is to see. Besides, in the 1990s, Vietnam was an exotic place, especially for those of us who don’t get out
of the house much” (62-63). The pull of two subject positions is only partially reconciled in Heinemann’s belief that traveling Vietnam by train will bring him into closer contact with the people and country he wants to understand.

Shadowing the conflicting subject positions of the tourist and the veteran in *Black Virgin Mountain*, Heinemann’s memoir also struggles with ambivalences and oppositions associated with his working class background and tragic family history—all of which, I argue, are partially reconciled through the closing and revelatory journey represented in the text, Heinemann’s pilgrimage to Black Virgin Mountain. Heinemann’s representation of the eponymous Black Virgin Mountain, or Nui Ba Den as it is called in Vietnamese, as a sacred site demanding his time, labor, and empathy reflects the way in which the pilgrimage “codes tourist activity as one in which the journey makes as much meaning as the rituals of the visit” (Sturken 286). The journeys represented in *Black Virgin Mountain* are both literal and symbolic and outward and inward, and they take Heinemann from Hanoi to Saigon by train, from recollections of his tour of duty during the war to anecdotes of being a tourist and returned vet in post-war Vietnam, and from the descent into private grief and anguish to the ascent into the revelation of a country and a people.

Admittedly, Heinemann preemptively rejects the notion that his returns to Vietnam can be interpreted as redemptive and reconciliatory. At the beginning of chapter 3, after he and his travel companion have just arrived in Hanoi and before the trip recounted in the memoir begins, Heinemann puts up the following signpost:

> These sojourns are not ‘guilt trips.’ And I don’t go to Vietnam to ‘heal’ myself with one of those good, cleansing New Age crying jabs. No, ‘healing’ is too dicey a business to be settled with a couple weeks’ vacation. And there’s nothing about ‘reconciliation’ in these visits; I was a soldier once, as was just about every Vietnamese of a certain age I have ever met; we know what that means, and leave it at that. (118)
Heinemann’s cutting criticism here, not unjustifiably aimed at the therapeutic culture of healing, is tempered by a wounded defensiveness. Appealing to his own and Vietnamese veterans’ first-hand experiences of war, Heinemann launches his attack against the imposition of a narrative of trauma and healing; his preemptive rhetorical measure functions both to reassert his unassailable identity as a soldier within the added security of the first-person plural and to substantiate his claims about how not to read his returns to Vietnam. While fully acknowledging Heinemann’s cautionary note about the way in which words like “guilt,” “healing,” and “reconciliation” can too often function as the jargon of discourses of national trauma or the film scripts to certain Hollywood movies, I push against and through Heinemann’s self-defensive and prescriptive measures to read the return narrative at the center and circumference of *Black Virgin Mountain* as a paradigmatic instance of literature as reconciliation after the Vietnam War.20

Moreover, to read reconciliation back into Heinemann’s return narrative, as I do here, necessarily involves a bracketing and implicit critique of the “combat gnosticism” that I see animating the passage quoted above and underlying much of *Black Virgin Mountain*. James Campbell has written about the “combat gnosticism” of First World War poetry and criticism as an ideology; for Campbell, combat gnosticism resides in “the belief that combat represents a qualitatively separate order of experience that is difficult if not impossible to communicate to any who have not undergone an identical experience” (203). Such an ideology, Campbell argues, both severely limits what gets to count as war literature by legitimating writing produced exclusively by first-hand combat experience and simultaneously cordonning off war literature

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20 See Moore and Galloway. Heinemann’s words, “I was a soldier once,” echo the title to the 1992 book about the Vietnam War, *We Were Soldiers Once ... And Young*, by Lt. Gen. Joseph G. Harold (Ret.) and war journalist Joseph L. Galloway. In the book’s prologue, Moor and Galloway sum up the position shared above by Heinemann: “We knew what Vietnam had been like, and how we looked and acted and talked and smelled. No one in America did. Hollywood got it wrong every damned time, whetting twisted political knives on the bones of our dead brothers” (xx). A *New York Times* best-seller, the book eventually was adapted into the 2002 movie *We Were Soldiers*, directed by Randall Wallace and starring Mel Gibson as Moore.
from non-war literature by promoting it as a separate literary canon. Similarly, Heinemann’s rejection of reading his “Return to Vietnam” as an enactment and representation of reconciliation is underwritten by his self-identification as “a soldier once” and his legitimating of a select group and generation of American and Vietnamese warriors who possess what Campbell describes as “a secret knowledge which only an initiated elite knows” (204). Given the logic of Heinemann’s Vietnam combat gnosticism, it is no wonder he fiercely defends his right not to represent reconciliation or be representative of a culture of reconciliation, since, presumably, only a soldier would have access to the real meaning behind such words. This is not to paint Heinemann as the portrait of patriotism however. Heinemann also rejects narratives of heroism and sacrifice, embraced by people like novelist and former secretary of the Navy James Webb, for whom Heinemann reserves some of his harshest words and whom he disdainfully portrays as “one of those professional soldiers” (161), “a lifer’s lifer” (164), or embodied by the critics of Maya Lin’s memorial design who, for Heinemann, “seemed to say, let’s not have any of that; let’s have something grandly martial and inaccessible and pointless, something we can march around and salute” (236). A stoic and survivalist strategy, Heinemann’s wary ambivalence towards the world forbids him from accepting any of these conditions of reconciliation.

Heinemann’s return to Vietnam on his own terms offers an instructive case about the paradox of a desire for and suspicion of the narrative of reconciliation. As Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller have written, “[t]o some extent the desire for return always arises from a need to redress an injustice, one often inflicted upon an entire group of people caused by displacement or dispossession, the loss of home and of family autonomy, the conditions of expulsion, colonization, and migration” (7). For Larry Heinemann, the desire to return to Vietnam likewise emerges from a need to redress an injustice, or what Heinemann obliquely refers to as the “itchy,
undeniable sense of unfinished business between us Americans and the Vietnamese” (56). His numerous returns to Vietnam since his first return trip in 1990, for a literary conference of Vietnamese and American writers and veterans sponsored by the Joiner Center and hosted by the Vietnam Writer’s Association, have been compelled by a persisting desire to understand Vietnam as a country and as a people; he writes, “[a]t bottom, behind and beneath everything else, was always the question, ‘Who are these guys?’” Heinemann thus articulates the central question behind his “long-felt impulse to return to Vietnam” (56). Heinemann’s empathetic impulse falls in line with what I discussed earlier as the universalizing humanism of post-war reconciliation projects between American veterans and writers and their Vietnamese counterparts. As Heinemann would have it, the return to Vietnam is driven not by a need to confront dark demons; for that, he can stay in the United States: “I don’t have to travel halfway around the world to ‘see’ the war, but to be rid of it” (238). Being rid of the war, Heinemann insists, involves first developing the empathetic and imaginative capacity to see Vietnam as a country—“So, Larry and I went back to ride the trains and I had a chance to take a look at a country I had never seen” (64).

For veterans and writers like Heinemann and his travel companion Larry Rottmann, the return to Vietnam carries out a symbolic compensation, making up for a knowledge that was lost with the war. Heinemann’s elaboration of that nagging question—“Who are these guys?” (56)—expresses forms of return freighted with a melancholic sense of belated ethical responsibility; for this was precisely the kind of question, he tells us in the book’s first chapter about his war year in Vietnam, that American soldiers like himself were strongly discouraged and disciplined not to ask: “We did not have what anyone would remotely regard as ordinary human contact with the Vietnamese […] We were severely and earnestly warned not to ‘fraternize’ with the Vietnamese;
not to learn their language; not to eat their food; not to listen to their music, or in any way come to appreciate them as a people or a culture” (25). Asking such questions would only threaten the logic of a militarized worldview and foreign policy, through which, as Viet Thanh Nguyen reminds us, “Vietnamese bodies were not granted the same right of humanity accorded to American bodies” (113). Recalling his personal experience as a soldier in the first chapter called “Several Facts,” Heinemann describes a standard operating procedure during the Vietnam War that dehumanized the enemy and produced what he confesses at one point as a concomitant apathy within himself, despite his professed recognition of how the U.S. Armed Forces exploited the bodies of its own citizens: “And truth be told, I did not want to know about the Vietnamese, much less understand; still less appreciate. Even so, it seemed clear to us that the war was not simply a pointless waste, but egregious and iniquitous”—these are among the several facts about how the war worked that Heinemann plainly reiterates in his memoir and unflinchingly pursues in his vivid novels about the Vietnam War (27).21

If Heinemann’s “naïve impulse” towards self-preservation as a soldier colludes with the discourse of war to dehumanize the Vietnamese, then his unstated post-war mission of returning to Vietnam can be viewed as a wish to rehumanize the Vietnamese. This humanizing impulse, as outlined in my introductory chapter and given explicit expression by Karlin and Khue and Weigl and Nguyen, represents one of the defining characteristics of the genre of reconciliation literature surrounding the Vietnam War. Heinemann tropes his evolution towards accepting the other as a turnaround from his initial refusal—“Like everyone else, I simply wanted out, and when the end of my tour finally arrived, I turned my back and left that place” (28); facing “that place” again, he returns with new eyes. As Heinemann writes, “it was important for me to see the country at

21 Readers familiar with Heinemann’s second novel may recall how Paco’s Story also opens with several facts: “Let’s begin with the first clean fact, James: This ain’t no war story” (3).
peace; to see ordinary folks leading ordinary lives without the ordeal of the war” (62-63). The directness and sincerity with which Heinemann expresses and pursues this empathetic impulse should not prevent us, however, from asking a question that troubles Heinemann’s return narrative and, more generally, the post-war project of representing reconciliation: Who benefits from the humanization of the Vietnamese? The short answer is people; both the American and the Vietnamese have vested interests in the humanizing operation of the Vietnamese body, from the noble personal interest of finding value again after unspeakable violence and guilt to the gross economic and political interests of normalizing relations in an era of globalization. On one hand, through the humanization of the Vietnamese enacted over multiple return journeys, Heinemann is able to glimpse the greater geography of reconciliation, with its intersecting and overlapping, convergent and divergent routes: “If there are Americans (veterans and kin) who travel to Vietnam on unfinished business that has nagged them all their adult lives, then the Vietnamese also travel—south, to look for sons and brothers, husbands and fathers gone missing since the war by the tens of tens of thousands. So the Vietnamese of the north have their own bereavements and griefs to hone off” (119). On the other hand, through this recognition of shared humanity with the Vietnamese, Heinemann also returns to the human in himself, a self-recognition being prepared for throughout the memoir, but that is not fully revealed until the concluding scene atop Black Virgin Mountain.

The longer answer to the fraught question about the humanization of the Vietnamese, to open up the larger implications of Heinemann’s symbolic acts of return, suggests that the discourse of reconciliation, from the American perspective, uses the once dehumanized, now humanized body of the Vietnamese to substantiate the nation’s claims of peace and reconciliation and to rescue meaning from the war. More specifically, the symbolic investment
of the American humanization of the Vietnamese helps prepare for the political and economic normalization of relations between nations figured, in the parlance of geopolitics, no longer as “enemies,” but now as “friends.” For despite his overt rejections of official narratives, Heinemann’s text is imbricated in complex and contradictory social contexts, the politics of reconciliation among them. Heinemann’s anecdotes about his travels to Vietnam since his first trip in 1990 incidentally describe the increasing ease with which such travel is made possible by changing policies, like the Vietnamese government’s initiation in 1987 of economic reform policies known as Đổi Mới or “Renovation” and the United States’, under President Clinton, lifting of the trade embargo in 1994 and reestablishing diplomatic ties in 1995. For example, Heinemann recalls the once complicated and frustrating conditions of his first return to Vietnam thusly: “The sheer logistics of the process was exasperatingly slow, which was one reason why the 1990 conference of American and Vietnamese writers took years to arrange” (91); “Before the Vietnamese government declared doi moi in 1987, foreign visitors were not encouraged” (91). With the reestablishment of the market economy in Vietnam, and the associated expectation that U.S. visitors, and other international tourists, would return to Vietnam, state tourism officials began developing and constructing a market around the “selective re-Americanization of the Vietnamese landscape of war” (Schwenkel 7). Hence, while visiting the Cu Chi Tunnels during his latest return to Vietnam, Heinemann can now observe, with his typically colorful commentary, “carloads of European tourists, young Scandinavians and Germans on vacation (the word is spreading that Vietnam is cheap travel)” (203). These, and other, Vietnamese practices and processes of modernization in an era of globalization are both represented by and constitutive of Heinemann’s travel narrative. The rapidly shifting contours of U.S.-Vietnam relations are thus recorded throughout Black Virgin Mountain in the incidental
descriptions and irrelevant details pushed to the margins by Heinemann’s narrative drive to return to Vietnam. These historical changes not only provide the backdrop but also contextually frame the ambivalent tone of Heinemann’s return narrative.

Heinemann’s ambivalence about the subjectivity of the tourist in Vietnam, and his reluctant recognition of his own position as a tourist find their strongest articulations in accounts of the last day of his trip during a visit to the Cu Chi Tunnels. Returning to Cu Chi, Heinemann records an emergent awareness of the economy of war tourism in Vietnam as a source of much-needed revenue, and consequently how his embodied experiences of memory tourism too are “inevitably caught up with the practices of consumerism” (Sturken 289). In particular, Heinemann’s ironized descriptions of the new tourism industry at the Cu Chi Tunnels, I argue, codes his own ambivalent relation to contemporary modes of memory tourism at sites of collective trauma such as Cu Chi, which during the war was both headquarters for the 25th Infantry Division, in which Heinemann served, and, infamously, part of the vast underground system of tunnels from which Vietnamese soldiers of the military branch of the National Liberation Front waged the war.

Heinemann attempts to authenticate his own practice of memory tourism within and against the increasingly commodified cultural productions of the “American War” in Vietnam, and he deploys a delegitimization strategy of ironic description to undermine the memory tourism practiced by others. Explaining his reasons for traveling to Vietnam’s most popular war attraction, Heinemann is quick to emphasize his personal connection to the place of Cu Chi; his mechanized infantry battalion was stationed there, after all, and his reconnaissance platoon of armored personnel carriers was tasked with search and destroy missions in the area (“This was the ‘thing’ I’d spent my whole, long war-year looking for” [201]). Heinemann’s “sheer, rhetorical curiosity” to “find out what the tunnels actually looked like” is intended to shield him
from the potential embarrassment incurred by his curiously ambivalent return to Cu Chi. As “one of the great running gags of the war”, the tunnels not only represent the embarrassing historical return of American defeat and the vulnerability of the American soldier in Vietnam, but also the embarrassing economic returns of Vietnamese victory (202). At the beginning of the tour, Heinemann observes:

The Vietnamese, to no one’s surprise, have turned a portion of the Cu Chi Tunnels into a must-see stop on the ‘war nostalgia tour’—gift shop, rifle range, and all: think the back yard version of Frontierland at Disney World; think Boxcar Willie’s in Branson, Missouri; think Hunter Thompson’s Las Vegas. I don’t know that the Vietnamese go near the place, except for those obligatory busloads of grammar school day-trippers. (202)

By the end of the tour, he is lead to ask the overwhelming question: “The Vietnamese are pretty quick about everything else, what happened here?” (205). Pointing to the commodification of sites, objects, and imaginaries associated with the war, Heinemann comically captures what Sturken calls the “kitschification of history” in his catalogue of souvenirs sold at the gift shop: “rack after rack of T-shirts” emblazoned with “I SURVIVED THE CU CHI TUNNELS’ along with “stacks of phony Zippo lighters and the ubiquitous owls of really phony GI dog tags” (216). Heinemann’s ironic disposition towards the kitschy repackaging of the war belies deeper truths about his rites of return; Heinemann’s returns to Vietnam are invariably mediated, layered, and available to many others, including those Scandinavian and German tourists he gleefully ridicules; the outward and literal returns to Vietnam also compel Heinemann to confront the emotional truths of his ongoing inward and psychological journey from young soldier to politicized veteran and writer.

For all of his sarcastic remarks, Heinemann brings a serious symbolic investment to his practices of tourism. His reluctant, but still curious, tour of the Cu Chi Tunnels illustrates how that state-run site primarily uses the tourism of reenactment to construct official narratives of
history. The reenactments of the Cu Chu Tunnels are intended not simply to provide representations of the “American War” for tourists but to actually create war-time experiences for them. In this way, as Sturken characterizes the technique of the tourism of reenactment, the Cu Chi Tunnel returns visitors to Vietnam, as it were, “by placing visitors in an experiential relationship to the event,” i.e. of living in the tunnels, planning the war, and firing machine guns (286). As Heinemann recounts, after the lead park ranger’s “dumbed-down lecture” and “deadening presentation,” the visitors are all lead outside by one of the young tour-guide park rangers to the hidden tunnel entrance and invited to follow the tour guide as he disappears into the tunnel (205). During his war year, Heinemann was not one of the soldiers, or “tunnel rats,” who went into the tunnels, and his reconnaissance platoon failed to ever find and destroy part of the tunnel network: “it was always the platoon shrimps that got stuck tunnel-ratting” (208); he had “never been handed a flashlight and a .45 and told to go” (209). Finding himself in a tunnel for the first time as a returning veteran, Heinemann casually remarks how the “tunnel has been generously enlarged, scoured out, to accommodate the hefty, middle-aged American tourists, like Larry and me” (208). It is worth noting that this is one of the few times in the course of Heinemann’s narrated travels that he actually identifies himself as a tourist. The acknowledgment of his own tourist positionality allows for the reenacted experience of being a tunnel rat, which was impossible for Heinemann during the war. At this point, Heinemann’s narrative suddenly shifts into the second-person and, in an extended passage, imaginatively reenacts the experience of tunnel-ratting from the perspective of an American GI during the war:

You zip your flak jacket to your chin, chamber a round in the .45 (clicking the safety off), snap the flashlight on, get on your belly, and lean headfirst with a long stretch of your whole body down into the tunnel entrance (someone holding your ankles).

You pause to accustom your eyes to an atmosphere of dark And smoke; alert, instead, for the smell of shit; of blood.
You swirl the light around—looking; for sand straps, for scraps of clothes, for body parts, for a splash of eviscerated slime; for—you don’t know what. (210)

The narrative reenactment goes on in this manner for some six pages, descending into the imagined darkness and terror, and eventually delivering “You” to the so-called light at the end of the tunnel: “It is the light of men’s lives. It is the ambient light from another spider hole. The light of your life. Ah” (214). How are we to read this reenactment/return to Vietnam? Who or what is returned here? Certainly, it fulfills a number of individual and collective fantasies symbolically, chief among them the fantasy of discovering and destroying the Cu Chi tunnel system which had eluded the Americans during the war; Heinemann expresses this bitter fact earlier—“we knew the tunnels were there, the sons-a-bitches were hardly a secret, but we just couldn’t fucking find them; not with bombs, not with bulldozers, not on our hands and knees” (202). Written in the second-person, with terse declarative sentences, Heinemann’s construction of the passage is so deliberate in structure and in a style distinct from the rest of his return narrative that it sounds a spectacularly false note. Appropriately, like the reenactments at the site of the Cu Chu Tunnels, the rigged artifice of its prose intends to create a sense of being there, all the while revealing how “reenactment can constitute a kind of mediated return” (Sturken 287).

As an exercise in imagination, the passage nevertheless conjures the important presence and experience of the American GI for Heinemann. By self-consciously reenacting and imaginatively attaching significance to a tunnel experience that was not his own, Heinemann plays up the mediated nature of his return and, at the same time, performs a fantasy operation in which the tunnels are discovered and destroyed, and consequently, fewer American lives are wasted.

This foregrounding once again of soldier subjectivity is important because, from his social location as a returning American veteran once stationed at Cu Chi, Heinemann brings to the site of war tourism a particular knowledge about the reconfigured landscape of history. In the
voice of ironized consolation, Heinemann invokes the historical traces of a forgotten landscape: “Rest assured, all these years later no one remembers Cu Chi for the American base camp (long ago dismantled board by board and carted off; vanished as if it had never existed), but rather for the tunnels that spread out beneath us for two hundred kilometers” (201). Heinemann’s melancholic recognition of the erasure of one historical site and the commoditization of another at Cu Chi poignantly testifies to what Christina Schwenkel refers to as the “recombinant history” produced through divergent “transational practices of memory and knowledge production” at tourism sites like Cu Chi; she writes, “[t]he complex memory and antimemory work engaged in by diversely situated actors at Cu Chi […] attests to the plurality of meanings that people bring to the site and those they take away from it” (6). The critical distance with which Heinemann, as a returning veteran, approaches “the tour” of “The Tunnels of Cu Chi” complicates and expands the modes of historical representation and reenactment performed there, whether the official Vietnamese history of the war as a struggle against “American imperialists” delivered by the park ranger’s “boilerplated lecture” or the trauma narrative of the returning American veteran seeking forgiveness for “rape, pillage, and murder” seemingly embraced by other international tourists (205, 203). In these ways, Heinemann’s embodied and narrative forms of return to Cu Chi reinscribe the public space of the tourism site with the traces of other histories, whether military history or his own personal history, in order to leave behind a record of the not so simple fact that he was a soldier once and in that space. Moreover, Heinemann’s experience at Cu Chi further underscores his resistant stance towards official narratives of the war, whether American or Vietnamese, which he sees as obscuring and falsely reconciling the historical and emotional truths of the soldiers and civilians who participated, witnessed, and bore the human costs of the war.
Heinemann’s frustrated quests to see the real Vietnam and ordinary Vietnamese attest to the idea that “[t]he subject of the tourist is […] infinitely tied up with concepts of authenticity and inauthenticity” (Sturken 282). On the one hand is Heinemann’s noble intention of forging meaningful connections to the people and places of Vietnam, and on the other hand are his countless criticisms of the self-indulgence of catharsis, the touristic consumption of collective trauma, the politics of professional patriots, and the symbolic violence of official narratives of history. For all of his noble intentions to better understand Vietnam and the Vietnamese, Heinemann’s memoir is unfortunately riddled with overgeneralizations and reductions about Vietnam and the Vietnamese. In his negative review for The New York Times online, Chris Hedges criticizes Heinemann for failing to capture the complexities of contemporary Vietnamese culture and society: “[Heinemann] wanders the landscape in a kind of haze, not sure what to think, detesting the self-indulgence of catharsis yet studiously avoiding any encounters that would force him to face his own complicity in the debacle that was Vietnam” (Hedges). While I think Heinemann produces a compelling account of the practices of memory tourism in Vietnam, Hedges is right to locate a failure of Heinemann’s return memoir in the kinds of encounters depicted, and not depicted, in the book. According to Hedges, Heinemann “retreats into the camaraderie of the old soldier, something that reaches across national lines after a war,” a critique tied to my earlier reservation about the shaping force of “combat gnosticism” for Heinemann’s return (Hedges).

But where Hedges places the blame squarely on “Heinemann’s unwillingness to seek out” the civilians and communities crippled by the war, I think the situation is more complex and would locate part of the limitations of Heinemann’s return in the institutional role played by the Hanoi-based Vietnam Writers Association as long-standing host and sponsor of such trips
Throughout his book, Heinemann makes frequent references to the men and women of the Vietnam Writers Association, emphasizing their hospitality and instrumental role in organizing, often in collaboration with the William Joiner Center in Boston, literary conferences and cultural exchanges between Vietnamese and American writers and veterans. Heinemann’s often mentioned first return to Vietnam, in 1990, to attend one of the first of these conferences was made possible through the Joiner Center and the Writers Association. Heinemann’s numerous returns since evince the continued involvement of the Writers Association in his travels. One example, describing preparations for Heinemann and Rottmann’s trip, will have to suffice:

Our upcoming tour of Vietnam by train had been known to the Writers Association members for a long while; here were many letters and extremely-long-distance phone calls back and forth. But now that we are here, specific arrangements have to be made. Contacts, phone calls, hotels, train tickets—just like everywhere else. The structure of the trip is gone over so that everyone pretty much has an idea where we will be and when. As our host, the Writers Association is responsible for us, and if there is a screw-up, they will never hear the end of it. Besides, they genuinely want us to have a good time, just as any host does no matter where you travel. (148)

Even with the obliging terms of the guest, it is not difficult to detect the protective, supervising, and almost parental concerns of the host. This description also makes clear that Heinemann and Rottmann are not entirely independent travelers, free to go anywhere, see and talk to anyone (as Hedges would have it), at least not without first informing their hosts about “where [they] will be and when,” and despite that closing platitude, the persistent references to both the Vietnam Writers Association and Joiner Center here and throughout Black Virgin Mountain suggest yet another way in which “the structure of the trip” and practices of memory tourism are highly mediated by many actors. What makes the memory tourism performed by Heinemann and Rottman distinctive from forms of memory tourism practiced by others is precisely their
privileged position as representative American writers, veterans, and activists who actively contribute to the production of memory and knowledge surrounding the war and its legacy. Because their travels and writing are entangled in and shaped by complex networks of individual and institutional actors, from tour guides and interpreters to government agencies and institutions, their works of reconciliation demand a greater awareness and deeper analysis of the mediating forces behind literal and discursive returns to Vietnam. 

If Heinemann ultimately dismisses his practice of memory tourism at Cu Chi Tunnel as inauthentic, he anxiously welcomes his chance to see Black Virgin Mountain as the culminating experience of authenticity he has sought all along his return to Vietnam. Black Virgin Mountain, or Nui Ba Den as it is called in Vietnamese, occupies a particularly powerful place in Hienemann and other vets’ psyches as a landmark of the area in Vietnam’s Tay Ninh Province, northwest of then Saigon, bordering Cambodia—Cu Chi, Dau Tieng and Tay Ninh, and Nui Ba Den—where they served during the war. Heinemann writes, “we could see the mountain from everywhere we operated, everywhere we camped, everywhere we sat ambush, every firebase—all you’d have to do is look up and there was this mountain, this presence, this silhouette” (238); their image of Nui Ba Den, Heinemann repeats, “does not have anything to do with the war” (238). The mountain not only symbolizes Heinemann’s gnostic connection, in James Cambell’s sense of combat gnosticism, with the “many guys who served in that neck of the woods” as an image purified of war, but also offers Heinemann a presumed vernacular connection to Vietnamese people as an invocation of the folk legends about Ba Den surrounding the mountain and giving it its name: “I have traveled Vietnam from one end to the other […] absolutely everyone, north and south, man or woman, young or old, scholar or buffalo boy knows of Nui Ba Den because of the story. And, as I take it, the story is very Vietnamese” (238-239). Black Virgin Mountain, or Nui
Ba Den, place names comparatively free of the immediate signification of war, thus connects Heinemann to experiences and stories that substantiate his claims of authenticity.

As the final and highly anticipated destination of his return trip, Nui Ba Den contrasts radically from the other sites of memory tourism that Heinemann experiences, particularly the Cu Chi Tunnels. Indeed, the Cu Chi Tunnels and Nui Ba Den could not be more different in terms of Heinemann’s embodied experience and narrative representation of them: his descent into the tunnels underscores and gives rise to his ascent up the mountain; Cu Chi attracts Western tourists by the busload, while at Nui Ba Den, Heinemann observes, “[t]here are not many visitors, but not few either, and, we notice right away, we are the only Westerners” (225); where the tour of the Cu Chi Tunnels is highly curated and moderated by interpretive lectures, guided tours, reenactment strategies, and kitsch consumption, the tour of Nui Ba Den is really no tour at all, in Heinemann’s experience of it, but rather a kind of personal and spiritual pilgrimage. Instead of a gift shop at the top of the mountain Heinemann finds Ba Den Temple, “not a static artifact of Vietnamese history, and hardly a tourist site, but rather a functioning Buddhist pagoda and monastery, and a place of serious pilgrimage and worship” (240). Herein lies Heinemann’s consolation about the memory tourism he nevertheless practices at the site of Nui Ba Den—his journey to the mountain is seen to approximate and attempts to enact a spiritual pilgrimage.

As I argue, Heinemann’s pilgrimage to Nui Ba Den is the reconciliatory detour in his return to Vietnam. The journey to Nui Ba Den is a detour in the multiple senses of the word. Performed at and as the end of an ex-soldier’s memoir that makes repeated claims against the presumably self-indulgent catharsis of reconciliation, the journey to Nui Ba Den deviates from Heinemann’s intended course away from the war; Heinemann writes, “it is Nui Ba Den, and not
the war, that draws me here” (238). The journey up Nui Ba Den, for Heinemann, also suggests the circuitous and alternative routes towards reconciliation and redemption.

Coded as a spiritual pilgrimage and final homecoming, Heinemann’s memory tourism at Nui Ba Den partially reconciles, despite and because of his own claims to the contrary, the ambiguities, contradictions, and paradoxes of his feelings about the war and its aftermath. Sturken identifies the pilgrimage as a primary mode of memory tourism, analogous to its traditional meaning of a religious journey to a sacred site that implies a kind of personal transformation: “[l]ike religious pilgrimages, which display religious devotion through the arduousness of the journey, memory pilgrimages are often about signaling the effort of the journey to the site of memory” (285). As will be seen, Heinemann’s practice of memory tourism at Nui Ba Den is depicted as a strenuous, transformative, and revelatory experience. “Seeing the Nui Ba Den teases up an intense anticipation that does not have anything to do with the war,” Heinemann writes (218); reading the reconciliatory detour in Black Virgin Mountain, however, reactivates the sense that it has everything to do with the war.

The final scene uses the narrative of Heinemann’s unexpectedly difficult climb up the mountain and to the Ba Den temple as a vehicle for digressive reflections about the war. Heinemann builds this scene around a circular design, moving back and forth in time, alternating between the present tense experiential immediacy of the actual climb and key retrospective reflective commentary about his personal war experience. Arriving at the stairs on the low slopes of the mountain, Heinemann and his travel partner Larry Rottmann set out on the 1 km. hike up to the Ba Den temple. Soon, they are pouring sweat, exhausted, and cramped; they have to stop. Heinemann’s emphasis of the physical strenuousness of the climb ironically codes his “memory pilgrimage,” to use Sturken’s term, along the same lines as the Buddhist pilgrimages to Nui Ba
Den. About halfway up to the temple of Ba Den, Heinemann pauses and takes in the panoramic view of the countryside for the first time: “Here before me lies my war-year of soul-deadening dread (the whole fucking thing, as if compressed in dream) as I have never seen it before, and I am standing in the middle of it, like a bull’s-eye” (227). The climb up Nui Ba Den would now seem to incontrovertibly set the stage for another kind of return. Ancient, immovable, and simply there, the mountain becomes symbolic of war itself. Early on in the memoir, Heinemann describes the continued presence of the war in his life and psyche: “My war-year was like a nail in my head, like a corpse in my house, and I wanted it out, but for the longest time now, I have had the unshakable, melancholy understanding that the war will always be present in me, a literal physical, palpable sensation” (46).

At this later point, as if unable to contain a reconfrontation with his “soul-deadening dread,” the narrative of the climb is interrupted by four digressions. In the first, Heinemann recollects the horrific battle he was in during the Tet Offensive of 1968. Spanning over three pages, Heinemann’s recollection of the “longest night of [his] life, and without a doubt the worst” is straightforwardly narrated with little reflective commentary (228-231). This recollection triggers the second digression, in which Heinemann once again rejects the notion that he has come back to “heal” and, for four pages, describes the profound experience of visiting the Vietnam Veterans National Memorial (233-238). Offered up as a contrasting example to his present journey, Heinemann’s reflective commentary interrupts Black Virgin Mountain with the national pilgrimage to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The third, shorter digression returns discursively to Nui Ba Den by recounting versions of the story or legend surrounding the mountain, which all contain the elements of a woman, Ba Den, grieving over the loss of a soldier (238-240). Once Heinemann and Rottman have finally reached the temple, the fourth digression
manifests itself in the form of a lyrical evocation of the “enchanted image” of Nui Ba Den, as Heinemann remembers the many ways the mountain appeared to him during his war-year vigils as last night guard. All these digressions, these detours, return to the war, to Heinemann’s self-reflections and not to Vietnam, or the Vietnamese.

Through the vehicle of the pilgrimage Heinemann comes full circle, approaching his unexpressed sorrows of war in the spirit of peace and reconciliation. Inside the temple, he joins a small crowd of worshippers, other pilgrims who have come to pray in front of the seated image of Ba Den. Heinemann’s reconciliatory detour, in the shockingly cathartic conclusion of his memoir, ends up taking him, of all places, “home”:

A long moment I stand there, thinking that it all comes down to this. The blessings of your life sought; discovered; stumbled upon; given to you, as if pushed into your hand. Beginning with the simple fact of your life; any soldier will tell you that. You haven’t blown your brains out; you haven’t boozed yourself to death; Agent Orange hasn’t incinerated your liver with cancer; you’re not in the Lifer’s Club at Joliet. I stand there so long, in face, it becomes a meditation. And when I step forward, like the rest, to plant my several sticks of joss, the monk nods, signifying with a large smile and a long wink, and whacks the bell a swift and righteous lick. That hardy boom reverberates up into the smoky rafters.

Outside, shortly afterward, Larry and I stand at the low compound wall around the edge of the thick stone patio; the temple, the constant murmur and hubbub of the crowd at our backs. We look across the wide, hazing panorama of the hot Tay Ninh countryside, taking it all in; talking about the whole trip, and other things besides. While we talk, the clear sense rises in me, bursting on me in a rush of honest revelation; and how odd a sensation. I’m home, I say to myself; I have arrived home; this place is home. Larry and I look at each other, and I am almost embarrassed at the discovered clarity. Home. Well.

Larry, I say, what do you make of that? (243)

The revelation of homecoming achieves precisely the kind of closure that Heinemann, in the rest of Black Virgin Mountain, is so quick to reject. There is a palpable release of tension, built up not only through the preceding digressions, but also accumulated over the course of the memoir. The prose breaks into an incantatory catalogue of what Heinemann has to be grateful for, an
affirmation of life and survival, if not healing consolation. The quiet, peaceful, and meditative
tone stands in stark contrast to what has come before. This is the whole point, of course, of
performing the journey to Nui Ba Den as a pilgrimage. Heinemann rids himself of the war
through the pilgrimage to Black Virgin Mountain.

An expedient, heartbreaking, measure, the pilgrimage narrative that takes over Black
Virgin Mountain attempts to reconcile the multiple returns and journeys that follow Heinemann
up the mountain. These other returns, with their ambivalences and unspoken traumas, are not so
much reconciled or resolved by the self transformations coded in the transcendent mountaintop
return “home,” as they are displaced and left behind in a way that evades the putative catharsis of
the closing scene. Heinemann’s homecoming to the U.S. after his tour of duty is one of these
other returns and his past journey to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is another.

As a symbolic journey of reconciliation, Heinemann’s return to Vietnam enacts a kind of
compensatory homecoming, a sense of uncanny belonging expressed earlier through the
friendship and hospitality of the Vietnamese and culminating in the final revelation atop Nui Ba
Den. As a negative memory of estrangement, Heinemann’s American homecoming and
politcized identity haunt his return to Vietnam and unsettles, for the reader, Heinemann’s
feelings of finally being at home atop Nui Ba Den. The story of this earlier homecoming is given
in the first chapter of the memoir, as one of the “Several Facts” about his personal war
experience that intends to authorize and authenticate his return to Vietnam. Describing his return
to the U.S., Heinemann emphasizes the sense of alienation pervading his life after the war, and
representative of the Vietnam generation and of veterans more broadly: “Coming home, I looked
around and I knew for a fact that this was not my ‘place’; that I had not come home. Rather, I
was deeply estranged, as if I had been taken out of time, knocked out, a disquieting, disorienting
sensation. But homebound soldiers have always felt thus” (36). In contrast, Heinemann recalls how “by 1990 it was already cliché among ex-GIs who traveled to Vietnam (Hanoi, no less) that we received a more warm welcome and expression of hospitality when we returned than we commonly received when we came home from the war” (59). These discomforting revelations from earlier in his memoir unsettle the symbolic grounds for Heinemann’s “honest revelation” that he has come home. Heinemann’s universalizing concession about the alienated feelings of all “homebound soldiers,” and clichéd admission about the warm feelings of veterans returning to Vietnam, another function of combat gnosticism, betray the otherwise historical and political particularity of Heinemann’s ideological critique of the U.S. containment strategy against Communism throughout Black Virgin Mountain. At its strongest, the political consciousness of the text historicizes Heinemann’s personal experience in Vietnam to speak to present conflicts:

Our war in Vietnam is now thirty years past, and, as we speak, more than a generation removed from our war grinding along in Iraq, but soldier’s work is always the same. As a veteran and a writer I am a little chagrined, yet and still, that the whole topic of the Vietnam War can not only get a discussion going, but can also get the hair up on the back of my neck; it is clear that there is much, still, to talk about. Since ‘Vietnam,’ several other wars have come our way, including Iraq and Afghanistan (as of this writing), and I don’t know about you, but I have watched and been appalled by the horror-struck nonchalance with which we seem to enjoy them. We are fascinated and repelled simultaneously by the endless loop of televised imagery and skimpy narration, oiled with the patina of exaggerated patriotism that begins with the dusty, desert-bred bogeyman, travels clean through the bloody wrath of the Old Testament, and ends with those prickly little tingles in the scalp, the moistened eyes, and the grand old flag; everyone declared a ‘hero’ just for showing up; love of country as religious experience. On television, at least, the war has been justified and prettified in a way this is truly pornographic. (55)

The antagonistic spirit animating Heinemann’s diatribe, delivered just before he discusses his “long-felt impulse to return to Vietnam,” is substantially quieted by the epiphanic meditation at end of Black Virgin Mountain that seeks to contain them (56).
Other tragic facts about Heinemann’s home—his family and his country—remain unreconciled by the ending. As mentioned earlier, both of his brothers, Richard and Philip, served in the war, and Philip served two tours. Both returned home from war, eventually married and started families, but Richard committed suicide in 1999 and Philip would walked away one day, and hadn’t been heard from since. So of three brothers, only Heinemann survives. From the tragic story about Heinemann’s brothers, the war and its aftermath are sharply felt in the toll it exacts on Heinemann’s family, and on his sense of home. The recollections in chapter one of his respective brothers’ disappearance and suicide produce some of Heinemann’s strongest, and most emotionally engaged, writing in Black Virgin Mountain, but he never returns to them again. Entangled in the story about Heinemann’s and his brothers’ military service is the class narrative that informs many of Heinemann’s political views about the war. Coming from a working-class family, he knows that young men like him and his brothers represent “an endless supply of cheap labor that will work for peanuts, shut up, and do what it’s told” (10). Indicting homeland politicians and generals thusly, Heinemann remembers the men and women from working-class backgrounds who bore, and continue to bear, a disproportionate toll of the war’s human loss.

That irredeemable toll is given form in the profound and brutal simplicity of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. As mentioned earlier, Heinemann’s personal pilgrimage to Nui Be Den carries with it the national memory of the pilgrimage to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. In the middle of his ascent up Nui Be Den, Heinemann remembers the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in order to draw a contrast: “If I wanted to soak myself in the war, to drape it around me, and disappear into that wallow of grief, all I would have to do is visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington. Panel 46 East, that wing of the memorial pointed directly at the Washington Monument; there are the score of names I know” (233). The pilgrimage to the
Vietnam Veterans Memorial sits uneasily in Heinemann’s mind, as a site of national memory and discourses of national trauma that demands a complex interaction with the past; or as he describes it:

So you stand there, wallowing in that irresistible welling-up of irremediable grief. You stare at the granite, those several names familiar to you deeply and sharply incised (and your clear, dark reflection), and you spread your hands out to touch the names (leaning on them), and the tips of your fingers grasp the raw granite texture of the very letters, and the whole fucking war comes pouring out of you as if you’re drunk sick—you cannot fucking help it […] You stand there a good long time, squeezing your hands against the granite. But then you look again, and, as poet Yusef Komunyakaa has said, it is only a woman brushing a boy’s hair.

Meanwhile, the tourists are gathered six deep around you, watching with curiously engaged, theatrical appreciation and a kind of awe, waiting for you to launch into one of those crying jags that veterans at the memorial are famous for. Sad to say, the memorial is also quietly for suicides, but those happen at night (a story for another time). (237)

Heinemann’s description invites the reader to participate in the narrator’s grammar of mourning, a present-tense unfolding of the tactile process of interacting with memorial that demands emotional energy “from you” (235). Heinemann’s self-consciousness and discomfort again mark how the veteran’s practice of pilgrimage and tourism are intermixed and inseparable, and, as I have argued, are the overlapping and competing subjectivities of the veteran and the tourist that structure Heinemann’s *Black Virgin Mountain*.

The convergence of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial upon *Black Virgin Mountain* thus tracks the transnational detours of reconciliation, exemplified and performed through Heinemann’s privileged mode of memory tourism in his return to Vietnam. Lauren Berlant has written about the “pilgrimage” to Washington, D. C. as a mode of “infantile citizenship” that incorporates the activity of national pedagogy, the production of national culture, and the construction of citizenship; she writes, “when Americans make the pilgrimage to Washington they are trying to grasp the nation in its totality,” a test of citizenship made virtually impossible
by the multiplicity of mass mediations converging on the site (398). According to Berlant, “adult citizens have learned to ‘forget’ or render as impractical, naïve, or childish their utopian political aspirations, in order to be politically and economically functional” (399). Similarly, we might say that in making the pilgrimage to Black Virgin Mountain, Heinemann is trying to grasp a nation in its totality. But through the false consolation of “home” found at the mountaintop, it becomes difficult to see what nation he is grasping. The blurring of national boundaries here, it can be argued, demonstrates that a form of reconciliation has taken place. Heinemann’s Black Virgin Mountain is an instructive work of reconciliation because of its own conflicted relation to resolution. As I read his return narrative, Heinemann denies the need for cathartic, psychological resolution but nevertheless enacts it. In the end, then, his return narrative partially embodies what I see as the defining characteristics of works of reconciliation: Heinemann’s narrative revisits the time of the Vietnam War from the perspective of the present and through the vehicle of literal return; it seeks a broadened understanding of the country and people of Vietnam, though his actual contact and understanding still appears to be superficial; it manifests strong emotions of friendship and identification with Vietnamese veterans of the war, but also expresses ambivalent feelings about the results of Vietnam’s modernization and antagonism towards American foreign policy; it bears witness to the social consequences of war, particularly on Heinemann’s family, on working-class citizens, and on Vietnamese citizens; it produces an image of shared humanity; and, it achieves a sense of closure through a sense of belonging. These traits of literary reconciliation after Vietnam remain schematic, as my interpretation of the aspects of irresolution in Heinemann’s text is meant to suggest, and will need to be further refined. To offer one refinement, Heinemann’s narrative reinforces the idea that reconciliation efforts for the U.S., and for American vets, are still largely an internal affair concerned with individual and national
rehabilitation. Are the politics of reconciliation inseparable from its audience? What difference does the national address of Vietnam or the U.S. make in the discourse of reconciliation? How is the American vet reconciliation narrative different from the Vietnamese or Vietnamese diasporic attempts at reconciliation? To answer some of these questions, I want to turn to poetry written by two northern Vietnamese veterans of the war. Their work shows that the audience makes all the difference when addressing the question, “reconciliation about what, and for whom?” (Borneman 204).

Post-War Vietnamese Poetry and the Politics of Return:
Nguyen Quang Thieu and Nguyen Duy

John Baca squeezed the trigger
Of his gun twenty years ago
But the bullets still fly.

His dog licks and licks
And licks and licks.

—Nguyen Quang Thieu, “Nightmare” (39)

So read the last lines of Nguyen Quang Thieu’s poem “Nightmare.” In this poem, the Vietnamese poet imagines the ongoing internal conflicts—the titular “Nightmare” of the poem—of John Baca, the “American veteran of the Viet Nam War” to whom and for whom the poem is written. As poet and translator Martha Collins writes in her translator’s preface to Nguyen Quang Thieu’s 1997 volume, The Women Carry River Water, in which the poem above appears, “We see our collaboration with Thieu as part of a growing cultural exchange between our countries, and we hope that the poems will allow the reader to participate in that process” (xiii). But to what extent can readers participate in the process of reconciliation? And how is the desire to “understand the other side” mediated, thwarted, and sometimes blocked?
In his introduction to *Distant Road: The Selected Poems of Nguyen Duy*, editor and translator Nguyen Ba Chung begins with a scene of reconciliation that inadvertently offers a cautionary tale applicable to these and other questions concerning the sources and roots of reconciliation. He relates two occasions during the summer of 1995, on the campus of Harvard University and another at the Garden of Poetry in L.A., in which the Vietnamese poet Nguyen Duy produced an “electrifying moment” between himself and his veteran-writer “American counterparts” and the general audience: “The war ended for them in the heart where the poem was centered; it spread to the audience when the words were read. It was an electrifying moment. Peace, genuine peace, could once again connect people with people across the abyss of time and the chaos of false hopes. Poetry, genuine poetry, can give us back our humanity” (xv). Appearing in the introduction of a translated volume of poetry, Nguyen Ba Chung’s anecdote is aimed to testify to not only the quasi-magical powers of the poet, Nguyen Duy, to “mesmerize an audience by his sheer presence alone,” but more generally to the powers of poetry to transcend cultural and historical barriers (xv). Moreover, Nguyen Ba Chung attributes part of the power to the “characteristics of Vietnamese poetry,” which he goes on to enumerate (xv). To put it another way, reconciliation speaks in a universal language—a language without words, a language that aspires to the form of music: “Though Nguyen Duy read his poem in Vietnamese, and [t]hough most of the audience did not understand a word, they erupted into prolonged applause” (xv). This “electrifying moment” is expressive of an aspect of reconciliation I wish to explore this section, namely the extent to which the politics of return and reconciliation relied on a poetics of address.

Return for both Nguyen Quang Thieu and Nguyen Duy represents a recovery of roots. The site of return is, most often, the native village, the place of birth or the image of an agrarian,
peasant society. “A Song for my Native Village,” the opening poem of Nguyen Quang Thieu’s *The Women Carry River Water*, is rooted in the birthplace:

I sing a song of my native village.  
I sing through my navel cord  
Which was buried there  
And became an earthworm  
Crawling under the water jar  
Crawling through my ancestor’s graves  
Crawling through the paupers’ graves  
Pushing up red earth in its path like blood. (3)

Blood, earth, and mother are all symbolically tied together through the image of the “navel cord” and “native village.” Nguyen Duy’s line expresses a desire to return not only to a place but to a time before the war. As he writes in “Song”: “Please take me farther back, / Into the fermenting darkness that covers the field” (33). Here, the poet imagines himself as a mythic bird, “born at the start of dusk, at the end of dawn,” a bird that flies through “spring fields full of regret” and where “The graveyard of my ancestors greets me.” The Vietnamese “goi toi ve,” here translated as greets, actually means to call me home, to call me back—a call of return issued from past.

In the poetry of Vietnamese veterans, return is inextricably tied to the land and a discourse of rootedness. “There is perhaps no other period of Vietnamese history in need of recovering its common roots than the present one,” observes editor and translator Nguyen Ba Chung in his introduction to *Distant Road: The Selected Poems of Nguyen Duy* (xxii). Nguyen Ba Chung effectively describes the “recovery” project of Nguyen Duy’s poetics of reconciliation. Poet Kevin Bowen, co-translator of Nguyen Duy’s poems, says the following in an article entitled “Vietnamese Poetry: A Sense of Place”:

It probably should not be all that surprising that the poetry of a people deeply uprooted by war should be a poetry of rootedness; a poetry focusing on the endurance and continuity of life in the villages, in the highlands, and along the deltas; a poetry, almost Buddhist in tone, that seeks to affirm the interconnectedness of all things. The reality of the war may
intrude in Vietnamese poetry written during the American war, but the great enduring themes remain the traditional Vietnamese ones of home and love. (49-50)

“The images of these poems are those of people and places struggling and enduring,” Bowen continues, “the sense of place and person may appear under siege, but endurance and overcoming are always implied” (50). He notes too that in the two most prominent post-war poets, Nguyen Quyen and Nguyen Quang Thieu, “the sense of the countryside of Viet Nam as a world of minute and numinous particulars endures” (50). This section asks what is at stake, politically and intellectually, in invocations such as Nguyen Duy’s of homecoming and recovery of common roots.

Nguyen Duy’s call for return is impelled by a desire to recover what he considers a lost homeland, a theme explored in his 1994 collection entitled Ve, which means “Return” in Vietnamese. In an interview with the Vietnamese newspaper Lao Dong [Laborer], Nguyen Duy describes what he sees as the multiple dimensions of the word “ve” for his poetry:

In terms of time, like the wheel of rebirth, the road of return for me has come full circle. I have experimented with many different paths in the hope of finding a new and distinct voice. After many starts and stops, the journey leads me back to where I first began—the six-eight forms. In terms of topography, I have traveled to many places—from one end of the country to another, from one galactic space to the next. Eventually I come back to where I have always been—the place I am in closest contact with, where my blood and sweat have ties. Then there’s the spiritual return: the awakening of values that have been sound asleep or dying within one’s self. (qtd. in Nguyen xxix)

For Nguyen Duy, “return” encompasses temporal, geographical, and spiritual dimensions. Once again, we have the dominant motif of the circle and the idea of reconciliation, in which reconciliation and return means “to come full circle.” For Nguyen Duy, the return is a journey back, a journey that posits an origin: a return to the traditional Vietnamese poetic form of luc bac, a conventional metric. This is coupled with a return to ancestral roots. As we’ll see in his poetry, Nguyen Duy’s concept of return carries with it an idea of nationalism and cultural purity,
and a concept of poetic form and language that functions as a secure vessel for transmitting that knowledge.

Nguyen Duy’s typology of return leaves out that other kind of return: the revenant. It is this spectral return that haunts his own relatively long poem called “Our Nation from a Distance.” “Our Nation from a Distance” consists of twenty-one untitled sections and dates back to a period of general liberalization in the realm of economics, culture and the arts referred to as Doi Moi, or Renovation, inscribed in the date and location of the poem: “Moscow, 5/1988 - Ho Chi Minh City, 8/19/88.” In its twenty-one untitled parts, the poem reflects on the imagined community of the nation from a critical distance. Ultimately, it calls for a return to an idea of home:

Let’s return, let’s come home.
The white sheet is still unblemished,
there’s still a flicker of something there. (131)

Towards the end of the poem, the second to last section holds out a timeless vision of the nation:

Whatever happens,
the land lives within us always.
The spiritual stream remains untainted.
Poetry still lives, the people still live.
We are the people—we will endure. (133-135)

Nguyen Duy and Nguyen Quang Thieu write a deeply nostalgic poetry enmeshed, as I suggest, in a nationalist politics of memory. In her study on nostalgia, Svetlana Boym sees two primary kinds of nostalgia at work, which she calls “restorative nostalgia” and “reflective nostalgia.” “Restorative nostalgia” characterizes the particular relationship to the past and imagined community in Nguyen Duy’s poetry. Boym writes, “Nostalgia is an ache of temporal distance and displacement. Restorative nostalgia takes care of both of these symptoms. Distance is compensated by intimate experience and the availability of the desired object. Displacement is
cured be a return home, preferably a collective one.” Restorative nostalgia is marked by an anxiety about those who draw attention to historical incongruities between the past and the present and question the wholeness of the restored tradition (45). Nostalgia, then, is not so much about the past, not only retrospective, but also prospective.

Nguyen Duy represents a restorative vision of return and reconciliation, a complete recovery of roots. A restorative project, Nguyen Duy’s ideal of return emphasizes continuity instead of discontinuity and fragmentation and seeks to establish meaning and significance over confusion and contingency. His poetry shows us the ways in which return, as a formal trope of post-war reconciliation in the Vietnam context, operates around a particular narrative plot: a restoration of origins. By reading the trope of return in Nguyen Duy’s poetry, I hope to show the ways in which the rhetoric of reconciliation can situate subjects in the ideology of nation and nationalism. Full of territorial claims to the land, Nguyen Duy’s poetics of return reterritorializes the nation.

But what does this all mean for reconciliation? For one, it means that the site of return—often home, or homeland, or, in Duy’s poems, ancestral village—is actively constructed in the very process of return. In many ways, the representational forms of return recreate and reimagine an image of ‘home’ and ‘homeland.’ As Subarno Chattarji comments on the sense of place in poems by Vietnamese veterans, “cultural memory constructs a notion of an ideal country that can and must be retrieved” (210). The image of homeland for Nguyen Duy, and others, is often idealized into a domain left untainted, uncorrupted by time and the ravages of war—it is a pastoral vision of the Vietnamese countryside, of a country unscarred by war.

So far, I have been arguing that in certain postwar Vietnamese poems “return” functions as a trope of restoration and recovery of the nation, specifically a natal rootedness in the village
as a site of birth and ancestral lineage. The construction of an idealized site and stable origin paves the way for another return: namely, the return of overseas Vietnamese to the homeland.

In a poem addressed “To the Vietnamese Living in Foreign Lands,” Nguyen Duy calls for such a return. The poem reads:

How dark the road—how far it stretches, 
it reaches the earth’s four corners.

From the heavens a star calls you home, 
crossing the river, ca dao makes a bridge.

A long dark past balanced between us, 
an ocean of longing hanging before us.

A long dark past tensed between us, 
but feet always returning to the ricefield dikes.

You picked up to leave, you looked back to the bamboo hedges, 
now the scent of the bo ket wakes you in the midst of the night.

You turned to go, you memorized the face you left, 
lips red as roses take a lifetime to fade.

This world a mystery—strange isn’t it, 
too close and things die…in distance they rise up… (253)

The poem begins by invoking what seem like immeasurable and insurmountable distances in the image of the dark road that stretches “far” from “home,” a center-periphery image of a Vietnamese global diaspora which “reaches the earth’s four corners.” The historical factors and political differences that presumably lead to this dispersal and fragmentation are abstractly and evasively alluded to in the spatial metaphors of “A long dark past balanced between us, / an ocean of longing hanging before us.” The difficult task of the poet and poem, then, is to bridge the unbridgeable chasm of history and memory separating “us” from a rearticulation of imagined community. As the second couplet makes clear in a spatial metaphor that breaks beyond the bounds of the earthly, this elevated and heightened call to return and reconciliation is figured not
so much as an invitation from one person to the next, but as an injunction issued from a higher authority outside both poet and poem: “From the heavens a star calls you home.” The star here is both symbol of navigation and nationhood; the yellow star against a red background representing, since 1975, the national flag of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

Reoriented against an over determined symbol of universal navigation and national sovereignty, the remainder of the poem lays the groundwork for return by invoking a series of cultural signifiers: ca dao, the oral tradition of folk poetry, “makes a bridge” between the elsewhere of foreign lands and the here of home; the pastoral image of “feet always returning to the ricefield dikes” supplants the looming reminder of a “long dark past tensed between us”; and the remembered “scent of the bo ket wakes you in the midst of the night”—all these images attempt to establish the “common roots” and “common ground” that Nguyen Duy and others see as vital to recovery.22

The key to Nguyen Duy’s poetic address lies in the reconciliatory rhetoric it focuses on the Vietnamese diasporic subject with the aim of uncovering these common cultural roots and rediscovering a sense of national belonging, despite, or because of, the geographic distances and ideological differences mentioned earlier. Towards these ends, Nguyen Duy mobilizes the techniques of lyric apostrophe to bridge not only the geographic distances, but, as proves to be more difficult, the political differences separating his lyric “I” from the “you” imagined “living in Foreign Lands.” While intimate and direct, the apostrophe actively imagines and constructs a unified addressee both singular and plural, both a particular “you” as well as a generalized “you.” Furthermore, I would argue that the lyric address of Nguyen Duy’s poem can be

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22 In the English translation, “cao dao” and “bo ket” remain untranslated from the Vietnamese but are nevertheless glossed for their cultural significance in two separate footnotes. I think this further speaks to the culturally specific intelligibility of those signs.
interpreted as an interpellation of a subject—the Vietnamese living in foreign lands or what I call the diasporic subject—within the centered and centralized order of the nation. Through its pronominal designations of “you” and “us,” the poem positions the intended reader vis-à-vis the homeland and the imagined community of the nation.

At stake in the poem’s call to return home is the potentially disruptive return of the repressed—past, memory and history. Haunting this poem of return and reconciliation from within is a memory of departure. “You picked up to leave, you looked back to the bamboo hedges,” Nguyen Duy imagines the moment of dispersal, “You turned to go, you memorized the face you left.” Nguyen Duy prefigures return, in a kind of retroactive sleight of hand, in the very moment of departure: the “you” imagined in the moment of flight is represented as already turning back. In this way, the poem cures longing with belonging, departure with return; it wishes to recuperate flight and departure within a telos of origin and return.

This spectral presence of the departure haunts Nguyen Quang Thieu’s poem, “Boats on the Day River.” Less direct than Nguyen Duy’s forceful call for overseas Vietnamese to return home, Nguyen Quang Thieu’s poem is more oblique in the way it takes up the question of return and departure. Here are the opening three stanzas:

Mother, why don’t you call back the boats,
The old boat that shuffled toward the sea?
It’s rained so long, the whole river is wet.

I sit by the window coughing with fever
And wonder where the sick boats lie.
Mother, please give my shirt to the river
To keep the boats warm and well.
I can live without shirts, because I have you,
But the boats sleep on the water by themselves.

The boats born in the deep forest
Go back to the sea in the shape of leaves.
A brown sail waves at me like a small hand,
Waves as it goes to the place
Where the river bursts into tears as it greets the sea. (15)

I suggest that we can, and should, read Nguyen Quang Thieu’s boats as metonyms for the “boat people,” that over-determined image of Vietnamese refugees. The poem begins with the speaker asking the figure of the mother, and by extension the motherland, to “call back the boats.”

Curiously, the poem is largely devoid of people, excepting the voice of the speaker and rather abstract presence of the Mother figure who receives the child’s pleas and remains an abstract presence, never tied to particularized individual. The poem’s concluding two stanzas offer little in the way of consolation and, certainly, no redeeming narrative of return:

The old boats don’t come back;
The sea was so lonely it tricked them.
Because I’ve been unhappy, I understand
And let the boats sail beyond the river.

At dusk I sit by the window coughing with fever.
Threads of rain snap at the distant horizon
As I wait for the boats, with feelings older than sand.
All my life I will take off my shirts
In silence and release them on the river. (15)

“The old boats don’t come back,” after all. The speaker’s longing finds no cure in a vision of national belonging, and his distance from the boats—not to speak of the unmentioned and invisible people who must be aboard those boats—never achieves the reunion of the desired object returning. “Because I’ve been unhappy, I understand,” the speaker says in what could be taken as an oblique statement on not just his individual illness but also a collective malaise.

At a fundamental level, Nguyen Duy’s and Nguyen Quang Thieu’s poetry of return serves as a crucial reminder of the multiple sides involved in the process of reconciliation after the war in Vietnam. Yet their poetry also uncovers the deeply nationalist roots of certain
conceptions of reconciliation. Return narratives and calls for return thus map the many routes, roots, and rites of reconciliation. The writers and veterans discussed in this chapter participate in what Christina Schwenkel calls “transnational practices of history and memory.” Following Schwenkel, my readings of return in the narrative and poetry of reconciliation highlight the “transnational forces involved in the diversification of knowledge and meaning” (3). However, as suggested by Heinemann’s memoir of return and the poems by Nguyen Duy and Nguyen Quang Thieu, these transnational forces can actually help reconstitute self-identity (Heinemann) and nationalist-based narratives (Nguyen Duy). While the task of rearticulating the past is global and translational, as Schwenkel rightly points out, these post-war narratives and poems of return can collude, on the one hand, with American national narratives of global capitalism via diplomacy, and on the other hand, with Vietnam national narratives of reunification.
CHAPTER TWO

Facing It, Again: Revision/Reconciliation in Yusef Komunyakaa’s War Poetry

My black face fades,
hiding inside the black granite.
I said I wouldn’t,
dammit: No tears.
I’m stone. I’m flesh.
My clouded reflection eyes me
like a bird of prey, the profile of night
slanted against morning. I turn
this way—the stone lets me go.
I turn that way—I’m inside
the Vietnam Veterans Memorial
again, depending on the light
to make a difference.

—Yusef Komunyakaa, from “Facing It”

Reconciliation, one might say, begins with the face. The idiom, to face someone or something, expresses the act of confronting an overwhelming problem or conflict. As discussed earlier, American and Vietnamese writers and veterans active with post-war peace projects often single-out and represent their face-to-face encounters as the transformative moments of mutual recognition of shared humanity that make reconciliation possible. In the opening lines above, from the poem “Facing It,” Yusef Komunyakaa connects the idiom directly to reconciliation as the poem records and enacts an experience of visiting the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The final poem in Komunyakaa’s *Dien Cai Dau* (1988), “Facing It” thematizes post-war reconciliation perhaps more directly than any other poem in the collection. As evidence of the poem’s privileged position in a now canonical book, “Facing It” appeared in *The Best of the Best American Poetry, 1988–1997*. In a postscript to the poem included in the anthology, Komunyakaa situates the composition of the poem in the pivotal summer of 1984 when he was
living in New Orleans and began writing the poems that would eventually be published in *Dien Cai Dau*:

I had meditated on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as if the country’s blues songs had been solidified into something monumental and concrete. Our wailing, our ranting, our singing of spirituals and kaddish and rock anthems, it was all captured and refined into a shaped destiny that attempted to portray personal and public feelings about war and human loss. It became a shrine overnight: a blackness that plays with light—a reflected motion in the stone that balances a dance between grass and sky. Whoever faces the granite becomes part of it. The reflections move into and through each other. A dance between the dead and the living. Even in its heft and weight, emotionally and physically, it still seems to defy immediate description, constantly incorporating into its shape all the new reflections and shapes brought into it: one of the poignant shrines of the twentieth century. (Clytus 55)

The poem mines the multiplicity of meanings and associations behind the title’s expression and, while doing so, offers a moving reflection on personal and public feelings about the Vietnam War, human loss, and the process of confronting the history of war and violence in a national memorial and in poetry.

From title to last line, the poem title begs the question: What is being faced? The indefinite pronoun brings multiple meanings into play. Standing in front of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the speaker is at once facing the black granite of the wall, his own face reflected on the surface of the memorial, and all the other reflected persons and things that move in and out of the speaker’s field of vision. As portrayed by the twisting movement of the opening lines (“I turn this way…,” “I turn that way…”), and mirrored in the way Komunyakaa deftly applies torque to the poem through enjambment, fragmentation, and caesura, the speaker of the poem is also facing his own private memories and feelings about the war. That the ability to confront all these things is a struggle that underscores the painful nature and interactive engagement implied, as it were, by “Facing It.” As the speaker also suggests, this is neither the first time nor will it be the last time he finds himself “inside / the Vietnam Veterans Memorial / again.” In the next lines
from the poem, Komunyakaa portrays a speaker in an ongoing process of meditating on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial:

I go down the 58,022 names,
half-expecting to find
my own in letters like smoke.
I touch the name Andrew Johnson;
I see the booby trap’s white flash.
Names shimmer on a woman’s blouse
but when she walks away
the names stay on the wall.
Brushstrokes flash, a red bird’s
wings cutting across my stare.
The sky. A plane in the sky. (63)

The poem tracks the speaker’s reflective process through the thread of active verbs: “I said I wouldn’t,” “I turn,” “I go down,” “I touch,” and “I see”—we follow the speaker’s progress away from resisting the pull of the memorial to an embodied interaction with its reflective surfaces. As reflections play over the surface of the memorial, so images play over the surface of the poem. The poem’s transcriptions of observed reality produce dramatic confusions and striking combinations, where names are etched like a pattern into a woman’s blouse, a red bird becomes a brush stroke, and the speaker’s black face fades into the black granite. What the speaker sees, or thinks he sees, becomes increasingly unstable and uncertain in the second, concluding, half of the poem:

A white vet’s image floats
closer to me, then his pale eyes
look through mine. I’m a window.
He’s lost his right arm
inside the stone. In the black mirror
a woman’s trying to erase names:
No, she’s brushing a boy’s hair. (63)

How we interpret these last lines, I think, affects whether or not we see Komunyakaa representing reconciliation as offering consolation and resolution. In his various statements on
poetics, Komunyakaa makes it clear that he wants to resist closure in his poetry. In “Poetry and Inquiry,” he writes that “a poem shouldn’t have a resolution. I try to cultivate an open-endedness that invites the reader to enter, not merely to read the poem as an outsider but to experience it from within” (Clytus 30). Interestingly, Komunyakaa’s image of the speaker of “Facing It” finding himself “inside / the Vietnam Veterans Memorial” echoes his description of an experience of a certain kind of poem so that the speaker’s physical, emotional, and imaginative interaction with the memorial works as a kind of metaphor for poetry (63). Elsewhere, discussing his approach to writing endings, Komunyakaa says: “For me it is always a cutting back, a honing that compresses the energy, as I hope for a last line that is an open-ended release. Working back up through the poem, listing all the possible closures, I search for a little door I can leave ajar” (Clytus 37). As his metaphor of a door left ajar suggests, Komunyakaa’s endings are both entry and exit strategies; the reader engages and enters into the meaning-making process of the poem and the poet slips out.

The ending of “Facing It” achieves just this kind of “open-ended release” as the speaker literally revises his lines, which is a gesture that invites further interaction and introspection from the reader. On the one hand, the initial image of the woman “trying to erase names” (63) appears to be one of pained reflection and violent forgetting. On the other hand, the revised image appears to be one of consolation and embrace of the war’s legacy. Yet the poem teaches us that the meanings behind these images are subjective and elusive, “depending on the light / to a make a difference” (63). The reader occupies the space vacated by the speaker and is left to ponder the various images. The images form motifs of internal conflict by contrasting blackness with lightness, stone with flesh, night with day, and past with present. What Komunyakaa says about Thelonious Monk applies equally to himself: both are “interested in how things struggle with
opposites—an intensity that expands possibility” (Clytus 22). This poem, and for that matter Komunyakaa’s poetry in general, does not attempt to resolve opposing images, tones, or motifs, but instead it seeks to hold them in a balanced and brilliant tension.

I begin with a reading of “Facing It” because it is an exemplary poem for thinking about how Yusef Komunyakaa represents reconciliation. As I argue in this chapter, Komunyakaa represents reconciliation as a necessarily ongoing process open to renewed inquiry, dialogue, improvisation and revision that allows for personal and historical reevaluation. Discussing his poetic process, Komunyakaa states: “Revision means to re-see, and, at times, it seems more accurate to say re-live” (Clytus 6). By extending this notion of revision to the poetry discussed in this chapter, I aim to show how Komunyakaa’s real and imagined returns to Vietnam in his poetry since Dien Cai Dau allow him to not only “re-see” and “re-live” the conflicts of the near and distant past but also to critically address the cultural and political assumptions behind America’s past and present wars. Komunyakaa’s poetics of revision as re-seeing offers an alternative critical paradigm for thinking of reconciliation as an ongoing process of negotiation.

Revisiting Dien Cai Dau in light of the present discussion of reconciliation, I read Dien Cai Dau’s major intervention in the canon of Vietnam War representation to be centered on how many of the poems dealt specifically with the black experience in Vietnam. While other books and movies have drawn attention to race relations amongst American soldiers in Vietnam, Dien Cai Dau offers one of the first and most psychologically complex records of what it was like to be an African American soldier in Vietnam, and in so doing, represents a history that troubles master narratives of national identity. Next, I turn to a section of prose poems, “Debriefing Ghosts,” included in Thieves of Paradise that find Komunyakaa returning to subject of the Vietnam War in his poetry, as well as the history of African Americans in combat, after he
makes an actual return trip to the country in 1990. I then turn to his collection *Warhorses* (2008) to discuss how Komunyakaa’s interest in historical consciousness and cultural memory becomes increasingly important as the Vietnam War recedes in the distance, and contemporary wars continue to be waged. As I hope to show, these collections and poems extend, elaborate, and revise one another, and, I think, ultimately form a poetic triptych that explores human conflict on and off of the battlefield. We can experience a more “open-ended” understanding of reconciliation and an even greater appreciation of Komunyakaa’s position in American poetry by considering the breadth of his engagement with the theme of twentieth century war, from Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan. Implicit in my extended treatment of Komunyakaa is the suggestion that a contemporary study of his war poetry can no longer be confined to *Dien Caï Dau* but must also take into account his continued excavations of the buried legacies of the Vietnam War. What follows is an initial attempt to offer such a reading.

**Dien Caï Dau Redux**

Between 1969 and 1970, in the wake of the bloodiest year of fighting for U.S. soldiers, Yusef Komunyakaa served as a reporter for and then editor of the Army’s *Southern Cross* newspaper. A recipient of the Bronze Star, he recalls being in the field every day for six months: “Whenever there was any engagement, I’d be ferried out on a helicopter to the action—to the middle of it—and I had to report, I had to witness” (Clytus 93). After the war, fourteen years passed before Komunyakaa, who started writing poetry in 1973, attempted to give witness to the difficult truths of what he saw and experienced in Vietnam in his own poems. Then in 1988, Komunyakaa published *Dien Caï Dau*, which helped establish him as poet and became the most acclaimed book of American poetry about the Vietnam War.
Like the helicopter that ferried Komunyakaa the war correspondent to the front lines, Komunyakaa the poet carried American readers back into the action—into the middle of memories of a lost war they fought so hard to forget. *Dien Cai Dau*, which means “crazy in the head,” is what the Vietnamese called the Americans and is an apt title for a collection of poems that explores the deeper recesses and fault lines of the American psyche at war. Beginning in the jungles of Vietnam and ending at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, *Dien Cai Dau*’s forty-three poems covered an uncommon range of complex issues, including race relations between white and black soldiers, the denied humanity of the Vietnamese, and the social consequences of the war for all those involved, often, but not exclusively, from the vantage of an African American soldier. In image driven, tonally complex, blues infused poems, Komunyakaa condensed the ambiguities and contradictions of the war like no other American poet of his generation. Poems like “Camouflaging the Chimera,” “Tunnels,” and “Starlight Scope Myopia” perfectly calibrated the detail and distance of combat reportage with the imagination and emotional immediacy of lyric witness, often moving in the beat of the heart between private experience and shared history. In the poem “Tu Do Street,” for instance, cross-racial tension and camaraderie between American soldiers play out unpredictably in the segregated bars and nightclubs of Saigon “as black & white / soldiers touch the same lovers / minutes apart” (29). Elsewhere, indifference and empathy for the Vietnamese are brought into hauntingly vivid focus in poems like “Starlight Scope Myopia.” The poem’s speaker peers through the nightscope of his M-16 as “Smoke-colored // Viet Cong / move under our eyelids” and down the barrel of his memory “years after this scene // ends” (9). In an empathic gesture at end of the poem, Komunyakaa cuts across lines of historical, racial, and political division:

Caught in the infrared,
what are they saying?
Are they talking about women
or calling Americans

beaucoup dien cai dau?
One of them is laughing.
You want to place a finger
to his lips & say “shhhh.”
You try reading ghost talk

on their lips. They say
“up-up we go,” lifting as one.
This one, old, bowlegged,

you feel you could reach out
& take him into your arms. You

peer down the sights of your M-16,
seeing the full moon
loaded on an oxcart. (8-9)

All the more haunting for its uncertainties and paradoxes, Komunyakaa’s fractured vision of humanity is seen by his proxy soldier through a weapon of war (“Making night work for us, / the starlight scope brings / men into killing range”), after all, and is further refracted by the literary devices of the lyric poem, which compresses a complex past into the emergency of an immediate present and implicates “You”—soldier, poet, and reader alike—in the scene of human conflict unfolding before our eyes (8). Intense, intimate, and deeply unsettling, Komunyakaa achieves a unified but fleeting vision of our shared, though often tragically myopic, humanity here, and elsewhere, in Dien Cai Dau.

Critics have tended to interpret Komunyakaa’s poems in Dien Cai Dau on the whole, and the poem “Facing It” in particular, as redemptive and offering closure to the war. The critic Tony Barnstone, for instance, suggests in his interview with Komunyakaa that as a collection Dien Cai Dau “seems to end surprisingly upbeat.” According to Barnstone, “the book is moving toward
some kind of resolution through emotion, affection, maybe even forgetting” (Clytus 118). Komunyakaa quickly responds by saying, “No, not really. It wasn’t an erasure [referring to the gesture at the end of “Facing It”]. It was an attempt to gain a certain clarity, because I wanted to understand the experience…” (Clytus 118). We can suspend the question of whether or not Barnstone is correct to detect “some kind of resolution.” Nevertheless he raises the important question of the overall effect of the narrative trajectory or arc of the collection, in which “Facing It” occupies a privileged position as the last poem. Referring to the poem “Boat People,” Barnstone may be right to speculate on how that poem might offer a particularly redemptive move or moment, but I do not think the same can be said about the poem “Facing It” or Dien Cai Dau taken as a whole. The critic Vincent Gotera also gives a redemptive interpretation to the collection when he sees in Komunyakaa’s poetry the potential of a “salvific poetic vision which might unify past and present, anguish and affirmation.” Gotera goes so far as to suggest that Komunyakaa “fulfills this promise in Dien Cai Dau”; Komunyakaa’s singular achievement, for Gotera, “points to the possibility and actuality of self-renewal and solace in poetry by Vietnam veterans” (316).

In contrast to Barnstone and Gotera, I would argue that Komunyakaa’s war poetry may offer the possibility of closure, but more often than not, resists reconciliatory closure. These redemptive readings of Komunyakaa misinterpret the poems and do not take seriously Komunyakaa’s own stated poetics, which resist closure and emphasize open-endedness, process, revision, and improvisation. The same critics have also tended to separate the influences of blues and jazz from Komunyakaa’s war poetry, when in fact they should be discussed together. As Ralph Ellison says about the works of Richard Wright, Komunyakaa’s war poetry resembles the blues in “its refusal to offer solutions” (74). Because the blues fragments individual and cultural
identity through a historical consciousness of racial violence, the blues impulse in
Komunyakaa’s war poetry, I want to suggest, highlights how and why his poetry is so
ambivalent to forms of consolation and reconciliation,

    Attending to the speaker of Komunyakaa’s poems reveals one of the primary ways Dien
Cai Dau revises Vietnam War representation. In a 1994 interview with Muna Asali for The New
England Review, Komunyakaa elaborates on the soldier in Dien Cai Dau:

    That elusive black soldier? I don’t know, but perhaps he isn’t different from all
those other black faces half-hidden in history. Hardly any different from Simon
Congo or Big Manual brought from the Dutch West India Company to Colonial
Manhattan. He is maybe a descendent of someone who fell in the shadow of
Estevan, Crispus Attucks, York, Du Sable, or Stagecoach Mary. A distant relative
of a Buffalo Soldier or member of the 761 ST, which liberated Buchenwald and
Dachau. He’s just one black face connected to a parade of others who have risked
their lives for this enigma we call America. This black soldier in Vietnam,
however, seems rather uncomfortable with his role. Maybe the agent of freewill
lurks like a specter in his psyche. Or perhaps he feels guilty, because he has a
sense of history and he knows that he’s merely a cog in the whole contradictory
machinery some might call democracy or even manifest destiny. (Clytus 76-77)

Komunyakaa’s “elusive black soldier” functions as a kind of composite figure who belongs to a
long history of racial inequality and injustice. By invoking a parade of names of black soldiers in
American history, Komunyakaa endows the nameless black soldier in Dien Cai Dau with a
greater legacy. “Black American participation in combat,” as Komunyakaa reiterates in an
interview with William Baer, “goes back to the Revolutionary War,” a half-hidden history we
will later see him take up poignantly in a poem from his 1998 collection Thieves of Paradise
(Clytus 96). Intellectually and psychologically equipped then with “a sense of history,”
Komunyakaa’s universal black soldier thus carries a critical knowledge that provokes a rejection
of the “contradictory machinery” of certain master narratives of democracy and manifest destiny,
which were strategically repurposed during the Cold War as the U.S. foreign policy of
containment and the Truman Doctrine. This critical knowledge also prompts a recognition of his fraught position within the overwhelming circumstances of conflict, present and past, at home and abroad.23 “[U]ncomfortable with his role,” Komunyakaa’s black veteran represents an irreconcilable figure within the logic of a conciliatory post-Vietnam America that posits a unified and cohesive national identity and whose sense of history is short and selective.

The speaker of Komunyakaa’s poems might be described as a composite of African American soldiers in Vietnam. This poetic persona of the black GI allows Komunyakaa to appeal to his own authority as a black man in the Vietnam War and to also take on the greater responsibility of giving voice to the shared experiences of other black GIs. “The silence etched into their skin // is also mine,” Komunyakaa writes in “Report from the Skull’s Diorama” about seeing a platoon of black GIs return from night patrol to discover the news about the death of Martin Luther King, Jr (47). At the same time, Komunyakaa is still able to deploy a more general perspective as a combatant and witness. Indeed, as we will see, it is important to note how and when racial identity becomes an issue in the poems.

In poems portraying divided selves, Komunyakaa shows how racial conflict and the struggle for Civil Rights followed many black soldiers through their tours of duty in Vietnam. Komunyakaa describes the racial psychological warfare targeted at the black GI in poems such as “Hanoi Hannah,” “Report from the Skull’s Diorama,” and “The One-legged Stool.” The assassination of the Reverend Martin Luther King haunts all three of these poems. In “Hanoi

23 For discussions of race relations during the Vietnam War, see Wallace Terry, Bloods: Black Veterans of the Vietnam War (New York: Random House, 1984); James E. Westheider, Fighting on Two Fronts: African Americans and the Vietnam War (New York: New York UP, 1997). Dien Cai Dau significantly extends, and possibly is indebted to, journalist Terry’s groundbreaking work of oral history, which was first published in 1985, three years before Dien Cai Dau.
Hannah,” a “voice / calls from waist-high grass” to directly address and taunt black soldiers with a reminder of King’s death, a reminder meant to instigate betrayal:

“You know you’re dead men,
Don’t you? You’re dead
as King today in Memphis.
Boys, you’re surrounded by
General Tran Do’s division.”
Here knife-edge song cuts
deep as a sniper’s bullet. (13)

Similarly, as the described in “Report from the Skull’s Diorama,” propagandistic leaflets attempt to drive home the idea that the soldier’s have themselves already been betrayed by their own countrymen:

With chopper blades
Knife-fighting the air,
Yellow leaflets quiver
Back to the ground, clinging to us.
These men have lost their tongues,

But the red-bordered
Leaflets tell us
VC didn’t kill
Dr. Martin Luther King. (47)

The historical trace of King’s death marks the irreconcilable contradictions of fighting for a nation that fails to recognize blacks as equals. According to these poems, the psychological warfare waged by the Viet Cong attempted to ignite race consciousness. The Viet Cong attempted to use King’s death to drive a wedge between white and black GIs and interpellate black GIs as subjugated members of U.S. culture.

Komunyakaa figures racial tension and incomprehension through the trope of communication break-down and failure. When people talk in these poems, they are either being talked at or over. The speaker of the prose monologue, “The One-Legged Stool,” for instance, rejects and resists interrogation techniques that seize upon his racial identity. Again, race is used
to “break” the prisoner, but he asserts his identity as citizen and soldier: “I’m American. (Pause.)
Doctor King, he ain’t dead like you say. Lies. How many times are you trying to kill me?” As he
goes on to say,

You’ve pitted me against them. Against those white troops over there behind the
trees. I only half hear their voices through these bamboo walls. For my good,
huh? You really think I believe that shit? I know how to protect myself, you can
bet your life on that. I also know your games, VC. Anything to break a man,
right? Anything to grind his mind to dust. But I know how to walk out of a
nightmare backwards. I can survive. (41)

The human voice becomes a casualty of war in poems such as “Report from the Skull’s
Diorama.” In “Report,” the speaker of the poem recalls a memory of war while watching the
movie, White Nights (1985). In the poem, the incidental appearance of a photo of Martin Luther
King triggers the speaker’s vivid memory of flying a helicopter to a platoon of black GIs. The
poem takes up the effect of King’s assassination on black soldiers by juxtaposing news of King’s
assassination with the speaker’s memory of a rendezvous with a “platoon of black GIs / back
from night patrol // with five dead” (47). As black GIs fight and die in a far away country, the
leader of the Civil Rights Movement is killed at home.

Dr. King’s photograph
Comes at me from White Nights
Like Hoover’s imagination at work,

Dissolving into a scenario
at Firebase San Juan Hill:
our chopper glides in closer,
down to the platoon of black GIs
back from night patrol

with five dead. (47)

The instruments of war speak: “leaflets tell us / VC didn’t kill / Dr. Martin Luther King” and in
the last stanza, “an AK-47 speaks.” The poem is built around a number of conflicting reports or
claims to truth. From the opening line, the status of “Dr. King’s photograph” remains uncertain
and suspended as the speaker’s memory drifts to “scenario at Fire Base San Juan.” The scene ironizes the knowledge or confirmation of a withheld truth of King’s death, only to be delivered by the “yellow leaflets quiver / back to the ground, clinging to us.” Komunyakaa suspends the inevitable report through the image of the leaflets, presented slowly through a series of progressive images that lead up to the undeniable fact: “Down / into a gold whirl of leaves / dust-deviling the fire base”; “With the chopper blades / knife-fighting the air, / yellow leaflets quiver / back to the ground, clinging to us”; “the red-bordered / leaflets tell us.” At first, the leaflets are merely a “gold whirl of leaves,” a naturalistic image reinforced by the physical description in the subsequent line of “A field of black trees / stakes down the morning sun.” From there, the leaflets await the helicopter and literally attach themselves to the bodies of the speaker and the newly arrived black GIs. The poem closes with a final image: “the leaflets / clinging to the men & stumps, / waving to me across the years.” Unlike the leaflets, the poem refuses to tell us the thoughts of the black GIs and, likewise, the speaker’s “report” remains ambiguous in its recollection. The closest assertion is one of silence beyond language: “These men have lost their tongues”; “the silence etched into their skin is also mine.” The poem points at and passes over the conflicts of racialized identity within and outside the United States, but it ultimately leaves us within a zone of indeterminate meanings and possible closures. The ending of the poem is fundamentally ambiguous and resolves none of the tensions it activates. The last lines read:

The silence etched into their skin

is also mine. Psychological
warfare colors the napalmed hill
gold-yellow. When our gunship
flies out backwards, rising
above the men left below

to blend in with the charred
landscape, an AK-47
The gunship leaves the soldiers behind, both in the immediate sense of the recounted scene and in the metaphorical sense of departure as a form of betrayal. If there is reconciliation, it comes in the form of the relative peace and tranquility of the lyric poem’s quietness, a hard won peace given this memory of war, and, perhaps, a peace full of its own losses. The significance of the men “waving to me across the years” is the door that Komunyakaa leaves ajar, an inconclusive and ambiguous image for the reader to contemplate. It is an elegiac image of leave-taking, a gesture of farewell simultaneously belong to King, the GIs, and the speaker. The poem displays Komunyakaa’s awesome power of suggestion and insinuation through resonating imagery that exceeds the determinations of closure.

As Ira Sadoff reminds us, Komunyakaa’s poetic representations of historic race relations during the Vietnam War are themselves shadowed by the historical changes in U.S. culture and society after the war: “social programs had been mercilessly cut; the policies of the Reagan administration dramatically increased the gap between rich and poor; the promises of Martin Luther King and the Black Panthers had become more ghostly” (82). Such historical changes, Sadoff suggests, provide the backdrop and contextually frame poems like “Report from the Skull’s Diorama” and “Tu Do Street.” Komunyakaa’s representations of the black GI in these and other poems from Dien Cai Dau activate a historical consciousness of racialized violence inside and outside of the U.S. that post-war projects of national recovery and reconciliation fail to fully acknowledge or account for. In so doing, Komunyakaa effectively offers a critical revision and thereby raises the stakes for post-Vietnam War representations of reconciliation by witnessing and paying tribute to black veterans of the Vietnam War. At stake in representing
reconciliation, Komunyakaa’s poems suggest, is a deeper historical consciousness of human conflict and social inequality. A sense of history—both a sense of long history and a sense of responsibility to respond to the history of war unfolding in the present tense—continues to matter for Komunyakaa and provoke his poetics of revision and improvisation.

Though Dien Cai Dau quickly became canonized and is often read as the definitive poetic response to the Vietnam War, the book was not Komunyakaa’s final word on the war. The rest of this chapter will focus on Komunyakaa’s subsequent returns—physical, psychological, and imaginative—to Vietnam as a crossroads of history and violence in poems from two of his lesser-known, but no less important, collections, first the “Debriefing Ghosts” section of Thieves of Paradise (1998), then his more recent collection, Warhorses (2008). The very existence of these poems and collections, spread across ten-year intervals and entangled with contemporary wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, assert, in a fundamental way, how Komunyakaa is “still negotiating those images” from his experience in Vietnam. For Komunyakaa, public history and private memory are always intertwined. From the lyric poems of Dien Cai Dau to the meditative prose poems of “Debriefing Ghosts” and the longer, looser lines of the dramatic monologue at the center of Warhorses, his revisionary reconciliation involves formal modifications and experiments as well.

“Debriefing Ghosts,” Debriefing Vietnam

The specters of the war in Vietnam continue to haunt “Debriefing Ghosts,” the section of fifteen prose poems in Komunyakaa’s 1998 volume Thieves of Paradise. While writing the poems of Dien Cai Dau represented an “emotional and creative ‘return to Vietnam’” for Komunyakaa, as Angela Salas notes, it was not until 1990 that Komunyakaa actually returned to
the country, some twenty years after he witnessed the war as an Army combat reporter (119). His 1990 return was prompted by the William Joiner Center Institute for the Study of War and Social Consequences in Boston, which invited Komunyakaa and five other veterans to return to Vietnam to meet members of the Vietnamese Writers’ Association (Hanshaw xxvii). This literal return offered Komunyakaa an extraordinary opportunity to re-see and reprocess the personal and public meanings of the war in Vietnam not only for American veterans like himself, but also for Vietnamese veterans and civilians. Komunyakaa describes what it was like going back to Vietnam in an interview with William Baer: “when we landed in Hanoi, I was quite shaken. I’d never before considered the possibility of actually being in Hanoi, and, for a while, I realized I didn’t feel safe. But, eventually, when I began to talk with the people and make friends, I felt more relaxed” (97); “I was very affected by how forgiving the typical Vietnamese happens to be toward Americans—especially toward American veterans, for some reason. It’s still difficult for me to fully understand that special connection, but I think it has to do with the idea of the ‘shared experience,’ even if that experience was horrific and negative” (Clytus 97-98). The poems in “Debriefing Ghosts” reveal a poet “still negotiating [the] images” from the war and “still dealing with” its social and emotional toll, as Komunyakaa remarks in an interview with William Baer that appeared in Kenyon Review the same year Thieves Of Paradise was published (Clytus 98).

Through the symbolic act of “Debriefing Ghosts,” Komunyakaa reopens a personal and historical case on the Vietnam War and in doing so represents reconciliation as an ongoing, open-ended process of poetic inquiry continually interrupted by the ghostlier qualities of traumatic history. Referring to the military term for questioning someone about a completed mission or undertaking, I read “debriefing” in the section title as an organizing metaphor for the process of coming to terms with the war and the reevaluation of its personal and public
significance. If “debriefing” suggests a communicative process that attempts to record and produce knowledge through an exchange of information, then the ghostly subjects invoked in the second term of the section’s title ironize and undermine the rational objectives of such instrumental documents as briefs and reports. “Debriefing Ghosts” maps an emotional shift from the unsettling feelings of fear and anxiety about going back to Vietnam, as expressed by Komunyakaa in the above interview, towards a more sympathetic recognition of the “special connection” between American and Vietnamese veterans grounded in a “shared experience” of the war. Indicative of the American literature of reconciliation surrounding the war in Vietnam, Komunyakaa’s literal and creative return to Vietnam, represented in “Debriefing Ghosts,” seeks an enlarged perspective on the war, in part, by focusing more attention on the impact of the war on the country and people of Vietnam. Like Larry Heinemann’s return to Vietnam, Komunyakaa’s return becomes a vehicle for reconciliation, made possible through transnational institutional collaboration between the Joiner Center and the Vietnam Writers’ Association, which is expressive of his own identificatory investment in the country and people of Vietnam. In this way, at least, “Debriefing Ghosts” conforms to some of the generic aspects of reconciliation literature examined in this study.

Yet, as I hope to also show, “Debriefing Ghosts” complicates and deepens our understanding of the literature of reconciliation by enacting a poetics of revision that disrupts and reevaluates the past from the standpoint of a changing historical present. Komunyakaa “reprocesses his particular experience and sees both its specific contexts and its more universal elements,” as Salas rightly argues; “Debriefing Ghosts” shows Komunyakaa’s “ever-deepening processesing of the hurts and legacies of the war in Vietnam” (127), and includes the reminder that “many of the harshest costs of the warfare in Vietnam are still paid by the people, including
the children, of that nation (122). In “Debriefing Ghosts,” Komunyakaa broadens the historical and cultural perspectives on the war in Vietnam in a way that is suggestive of his poetry’s ever broadening commentary on war and human conflict in general.

For readers familiar with *Dien Cai Dau*, many of the prose poems in “Debriefing Ghosts” revisit and revise themes and motifs that initially appeared in the earlier, seminal collection. These poems enact what I would call an intertextual return to *Dien Cai Dau*, not only to remind American readers about the costs of the war in Vietnam, particularly for the Vietnamese, but also to reevaluate the personal and historical significance of the war within changed historical and political circumstances. The first three poems of “Debriefing Ghosts,” for instance, depict ordinary scenes set in the United States that are disrupted by painful reminders of the war. In the scene of sexual foreplay depicted in the first poem of the section, “Nude Interrogation,” a woman undresses and “interrogates” the poet-veteran about his combat experience: “Did you kill anyone over there?” she asks in the first line and follows with a battery of related questions (Komunyakaa 71). In this poem, Vietnam remains “over there” and at a deceptive geographic and historical distance, prone to the seductive manipulations of the here and now. “Nude Interrogation” calls to my mind *Dien Cai Dau’s* “One-Legged Stool.” Both poems represent individuals in the process of being interrogated, the former in a time of love, or rather lust, and the latter during a time of war. “One-legged Stool” dramatizes an interrogation of a black POW by a North Vietnamese, whereas “Nude Interrogation” involves the seduction of a veteran returned from war by a woman. In the second poem in “Debriefing Ghosts,” “The Poplars,” the poet walks through a college campus on a quiet Sunday morning—it could be the morning after the scene depicted in “Nude Interrogation”—and suddenly says to himself, “Is it safe to go back to Chu Lai? She’s brought me halfway home again, away from the head floating down into my
out-stretched hands” (72). The mention here of “Chu Lai” alludes to the U.S. Marine Corps base where Komunyakaa was first stationed as a combat reporter during his tour of duty and also raises the question of whether or not it is emotionally and psychologically “safe” for the speaker to return to Vietnam. This poem and the next are full of images of the war, disquieting images that disrupt the otherwise serene backdrop of a generic American college campus during springtime: “I can hear the car’s automatic locks click, sliding like bullets into the chamber of a gun”; “I stop beneath an elm and clutch a half-dead branch. Momentarily, there’s an old silence thick as memory. Claymores pop. Rifles and mortars answer, and then that silence again.”

Triggered by unexpected encounters, Komunyakaa presents these images as if they suddenly surface from a reservoir of buried memories. The opening three poems represent the way in which memories from the war “return” to the individual psyche as repressed images and associations.

If “Debriefing Ghosts” consisted only of poems like the first three, Komunyakaa might stand to be criticized for simply replaying the role of traumatized Vietnam veteran. However, the first three poems can be read as setting up the remainder of “Debriefing Ghosts,” which mostly concerns a literal return to Vietnam and centers on a narrative persona more interested in understanding the effects of the war on Vietnamese society than on the affects of the war on the individual American veteran and author. The poems that occupy the literal and figurative center of “Debriefing Ghosts” represent Komunyakaa’s actual return to Vietnam in 1990. As suggested by their titles, “A Summer Night in Hanoi,” “A Reed Boat,” “The Hanoi Market,” and “Shrines,” all of the poems locate the speaker within a Vietnamese cultural geography. Throughout these poems of return, we follow the poet as he journeys back and finds traces of the past in a postwar Vietnam that is otherwise dramatically different. In “The Hanoi Market,” for instance, the poet
peruses the busy market and pauses at a table of toys to discover the recycled relics of the war:
“What was meant to tear off a leg or arm twenty years ago, now is a child’s toy I can’t stop touching”; and during “A Summer Night in Hanoi,” he watches a film and wonders “How many eyes are on me, clustered in the hum of this dark theatre?” (78).

Komunyakaa continues this exploration of cultural translation in the poem “Frontispeace” from *Thieves of Paradise*. In “Frontispeace,” Komunyakaa shows American and Vietnamese veterans and writers navigating the new set of relations governed by post-war reconciliation as they visit historical destinations in the U.S. marked by past conflict. The country of Vietnam is not the site of return in this poem, but rather the United States is, and those on the journey toward peace and reconciliation are not just Americans, but also Vietnamese. Komunyakaa recounts his experience of hosting three Vietnamese writer-veterans and taking them to various national historical sites around New England such as Walden Pond and the Battle of Concord. Named within the poem, the three Vietnamese visitors are fellow writer-veterans, poets Huu Thinh and Nguyen Quang Thieu, and the novelist Le Minh Khue (whom we met earlier through Wayne Karlin). In a way, they embody another ghostly presence in the postwar text. Here are the first three verse paragraphs of the poem:

Walden Pond’s crowded this Saturday afternoon, cars backed up to the main highway. There’s an airshow overhead. The Blue Angels zoom and zigzag prankish patterns across the flyway.

With a sharp U-turn, we’re heading to where the Redcoats first fell in Concord. I can already see rows of stone the militia hid behind, like teeth grinning up from the ground.

A blond boy poses with a minuteman in a triangular hat. His father aims the camera. Can the three Vietnamese visitors see how our black hair makes the boy cower from something he reads in the father’s face? The minuteman is dressed in garb the color of low hills. Before he retells the battle here, he says he received two Silver Stars in Danang. The Vietnamese take turns wearing the minuteman’s hat and aiming his musket. A thread of smoke ties trees to sky, and when
Blue Angels break the sound barrier we duck and cover our heads with our hands.

This poem, too, can be read as an imaginative return and reenvisioning of a poem from *Dien Cai Dau* due to its exploration of individual and collective history around a national site of commemoration and memorialization. Calling to mind Komunyakaa’s meditation on the Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial in “Facing It,” the speaker in “Fontispeace” also meditates on the significance of cultural memory at national sites of history and tourism. The poems echo each other through intertextual motifs. Similar to “Facing It,” jets “zoom and zigzag” in “Frontispeace” across the flyway of the poem’s signifiers. Not unlike the jets, Komunyakaa seems to be weaving his own “prankish patterns,” as he sketches lines of historical convergence between the American war for Independence against Britain and the Vietnamese war of “liberation” against the Americans. Komunyakaa sketches a scene of American tourism where the airshow’s military power and technology is on full “prankish” display, which perhaps is an allusion to the poet’s own play of intertextuality. Tour guide, fellow poet, and veteran, Komunyakaa takes the three Vietnamese visitors to see a site of national historical significance, “where the Redcoats first fell in Concord,” where the War of Independence against the colonial powers of England was waged. In the poem, a dialogic space is created in which certain phrases and images are loaded and overloaded with historical and cultural meaning. For example, the father “aims the camera” at his son posing with the minuteman; the visitors and veterans “duck and cover” as jets break the sound barrier. At the same time, the poem raises questions about the nature of referentiality in which a centuries old historical moment can be reenacted with certain props—the period dress of the minuteman, replete with triangular hat and musket. The true “authenticity” and authority of this minuteman seems to be in his own self-reference to his Vietnam War experience, as if receiving “two Silver Stars in Danang” not only represent enough
soldierly “credentials” but also construct him as a living embodiment of a certain fighting American spirit.

“Frontispiece” also re-activates the question of race that made *Dien Cai Dau* such an explosive and important text. Komunyakaa wants to draw lines of affiliation between himself and the Vietnamese. Against the identity formed around the blond boy and his father, Komunyakaa identifies himself and the Vietnamese visitors through their black hair. Yet, a parallelism is set up between the vacationing father-son pair and the Vietnamese veterans, who take turns putting on the minuteman’s hat and aiming his musket. Are they the flesh and blood embodiment of liberation and freedom? Who are the true minutemen in this picture? The “ghost” of racial hatred and violence appears elsewhere in “Debriefing Ghosts,” most notably in “A Summer Night in Hanoi.” In “Frontispiece,” however, the spectral history of racism in the U.S. represents the irreconcilable matter of the historical record of freedom. Komunyakaa’s deliberate insertion of the historical text and its frontispiece also allows us to reframe *Dien Cai Dau* within and against a larger history of blacks in the military.

In a final act of his own interpretive insurrection, Komunyakaa attempts to wrest America’s revolutionary legacy away from the stand-in “Minuteman” and toward Jordan Freeman, and to implicitly align the struggles of these three Vietnamese with the history of African American struggle for freedom and equality. Soon, it becomes apparent that such a gesture is compromised from the beginning, since the sign of that struggle is retrieved from a gift shop.

At the souvenir shop, I buy *The Negro in the American Revolution* and give it to Thieu. His eyes dart from the book’s frontispiece to my face: Jordan Freeman’s killing Major William Montgomery at the Battle of Groton Heights. Huu Thinh studies the image also, and says that the American poets he likes best are Langston Hughes and Whitman. (83)
Within and against a particular narrative of the nation, Komunyakaa offers his three Vietnamese guests a counter-memory of African American service in combat. The man reenacting the minuteman also lays claim to a national narrative, grounding his authority of mimicry as minuteman in his actual involvement in the Vietnam War: “Before he retells the battle here, he says he received two Silver Stars in Danang.” The Vietnam War is not only part of the larger cultural landscape in which all these individuals exist, but also—and this is what seems so problematic for Komunyakaa—a now familiarized and neutralized part of that history.

In Komunyakaa’s description of the unlikely scene, the historical presence of the black soldier is constituted and reconstituted in the mutual gazes of the three Vietnamese. The first person to look at the photo, whose “eyes dart from the book’s frontispiece to my face,” effectively links Komunyakaa’s face with “Jordan Freeman’s killing Major William Montgomery at the Battle of Groton Heights.” Is this a scene of recognition and identification or misrecognition? The identification of Komunyakaa with Freeman is stitched together, as Thieu’s “eyes dart” from frontispiece to the poet’s face. A second person, Huu Thinh, offers a different response. Huu Thinh’s response to the image—“that the American poets he likes best are Langston Hughes and Whitman”—is another attempt at identification, this time at the level of poetry. The Vietnamese in the poem, at least Nguyen Quang Thieu and Huu Thinh, make linkages between *Negro in the American Revolution* and the black soldiers in the Vietnam War. Sealed in the name of Jordan Freeman is a complex, contradictory history of racial violence and of freedom. Here, the common ground seems unsettled by a problem of interpreting the significance of the image within the contemporary scene of reconciliation. It asserts the cultural and historical particularity over and against universalizing rhetoric of reconciliation. There are
attempts at understanding—connecting Freeman with Komunyakaa, the references to poets of national democracy, Whitman and Langston Hughes.

In the end, I want to suggest the ways in which “Frontispiece” dramatizes how the literature of reconciliation becomes entangled with the politics of memory. More specifically, it reactivates the question of racial subjects within an ideology of the nation through the ghost of “Freeman,” and the question of freedom. This poem is important because it shows how the road to genuine understanding, empathy and solidarity can be blocked. There is a cultural memory—embodied by the figure of Jordan Freeman—that simply does not translate or fails to communicate. Reversing the roles, imagine American veteran poets traveling in Vietnam and the cultural scripts they might unknowingly follow.

**Poetry in the Time of War: Komunyakaa’s Warhorses**

Twenty years after the individual and collective soul searching of *Dien Cai Dau* (1988), ten years after “Debriefing Ghosts” in *Thieves of Paradise* (1998), and amidst the fog of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Komunyakaa continues to address the wounds of a divided self and society in his 2008 collection *Warhorses*. *Warhorses* deepens and extends Komunyakaa’s ongoing project of representing war and its social consequences, in *Dien Cai Dau* and “Debriefing Ghosts,” both by exploring the long history of war and addressing current wars, and also by using the poetic persona of a white veteran of the Vietnam War to continue a dialogue on reconciliation. If *Dien Cai Dau* dropped the reader *in medias res*, the bulk of *Warhorses* hovers above the sites of conflict. Where the earlier poems zoom-in, the new poems zoom-out. The poems gallop from mytho-historical past to contemporary crises, from Gilgamesh to Abu Ghraib. The book’s first two sections, “Love in the Time of War” and “Heavy Metal,” picture their subjects of love and war through the wide lens of history and myth. The cast of mythical and
historical figures and allusions in Warhorses is legion. Samson, Gilgamesh, Odysseus and Penelope, Cain and Abel, Mercury, Achilles, Cyclops, Daedalus, Cortez, and the Aztecs are all mobilized. The scale is inevitably larger and vaster, the pacing faster. At times, the sweeping, panoramic effects of the poems miss the messy details of close range lyric. In one sonnet, Komunyakaa refers to the plotting suitors in the myth of Odysseus as “the old masters of Shock & Awe” who “huddle in the war room, talking iron, / fire & sand, alloy & nomenclature” and ask what happens to the “new” masters of Shock & Awe (5). While both may be driven by the old human desires of greed and glory, Komunyakaa’s analogy too easily yokes two entirely different sets of historical circumstances. The poems are more powerful and effective when Komunyakaa relies less on such direct statements and instead draws on his power of suggestion and insinuation through metaphor and imagery, and when he allows his elusive speakers room to improvise.

At the center of Warhorses is Komunyakaa’s “Autobiography of My Alter Ego,” the hypnotic dramatic monologue that takes up the second half of collection, and is also its most ambitious and accomplished poem. Komunyakaa’s double, or other I, is a white bartender who is also a Vietnam vet. He is a phantasmagoria who speaks to us not so much across Yeats’ breakfast table, but across the bar:

You see these eyes?
You see this tongue?
You see these ears?
They may detect a quiver
in the grass, an octave
higher or lower—
a little different, an iota,
but they’re no different
than your eyes & ears. (45)

So begins “Autobiography of My Alter-Ego.” Pushing toward the right margin and switching-back to the left, the cascading half-lines offer a visual correlative of the dialectical tension between personal and public feelings about war and violence at the heart of Komunyakaa’s poetry. As the lines suggest, the poem makes our shared humanity visible, audible, and tangible. Like the low blue note of the upright bass, this is the common theme that keeps tempo. In this long poem, Komunyakaa restages the question of the lyric self and the autobiographical lyric in which the “other I” is constitutive of the first person I. Komunyakaa reveals the fissures of selfhood and self-making in a poem that thematizes reconciliation as a dialogic process of conversation and forgiveness as an act of poetic creation. For Komunyakaa, the poem is a space of tension and of improvised of symmetry, and the self is always already divided and haunted by others: “Do you know how it feels / to have your tongue shaped / from a dead man’s name?” (64).

In his essay on poetry as autobiography for the anthology After Confession (2001), Komunyakaa suggests that the autobiographical “I” is an “archive of metaphor, imagery, and innuendo.” Discussing the speaker behind “Autobiography of My Alter Ego,” Komunyakaa describes how:

the ideas and feelings the personal experiences rise out of a certain privileged position based on his white skin. The speaker in the poem disrobes his psyche, but I wanted a tone that authenticates him, that parallels the artist: a tone shaped by decorum and aesthetics—an observer as artist who happens to be a bartender, a veteran. He is not a character who impersonates the artist for the social moment or a stage, nor a performance artists who has fallen in love with the mike, but a character who has been wounded by his observations. (147)

A modern-day Philoctetes physically and psychologically “wounded by his observations,” Komunyakaa’s alter ego possesses an extraordinary power or gift: “You see these hands? / They
know enough to save us.” One of the book’s titular warhorses, he has lived through and seen firsthand a few things in his lifetime. In the course of poem’s twenty-eight untitled sections we learn: the speaker grew up in a multiracial environment, in which his father was a cover-artist; like many of his generation, especially the ones without deferment, he was drafted and fought in Vietnam; his identity was melted down, remolded and shaped in the crucible of the war; he returned to the U.S. but was haunted; and he manages and bartends the club his father once owned. And the club, appropriately named the “Chimera Club,” is where we find Komunyakaa’s unnamed speaker. “Chimera,” a place of meeting and mixture, dreams and illusions, is one of those keywords in Komunyakaa’s argot. There’s otherworldliness to the Chimera Club, a creeping feeling that its real location is not here, but the underworld, or, in the subterranean depths of a psyche. He is not a man speaking to other men then, but a shade speaking to men, including his other self, the living one named Yusef Komunyakaa. The name also suggests the chimera of closure, the elusive desire for resolution sought by individuals and cultures after times of duress.

Komunyakaa endows his double, or other I, with a biography, psychology, aesthetics, and politics. The titular “Alter Ego” speaks with a candidness, directness and earnestness. “Okay, let’s talk about loneliness,” he says suddenly in the poem. He is also a philosophical bartender, world-wise, chatty, and not afraid to tell it like it is: “Iraq? Well, as I said before: / If you start me talking, I’ll tell you everything I know”; “Ah. Abu Ghraib. / Guantanamo. Lord.” He is prone to digression and rambling and the give-and-take of conversation. He is also quite the rhetorician, capable of aphorism: “You can’t / talk to God & kill a man / in the same breath”; of metaphysical flights: “a whispered shadow in the trees / is the collective mind / of insects, birds & animals / witnessing what we do to ourselves” (45). Throughout, Komunyakaa’s alter ego
speaks with eloquence and verbal dexterity, as well as an emotional rawness that creates a space of empathy and possibility for response. “Autobiography” is constructed on and around scenes of human communication, in the form of the poem itself, a dramatic monologue. All of the constitutive moments in the speaker’s “Autobiography” involve the remembered presence of others: the sound of his mother’s voice as she read to him and his learning to read and coming into speech through reading to his dog.

The poem dramatizes the process of reconciliation as dialogue—between individuals with their alter-egos, between separate individuals, and between individuals and their communities. The call-and-response of dialogue offers the most viable form for reconciliation and forgiveness. Komunyakaa’s “Alter Ego” continually draws attention to the scene of address, the dialogue. He gestures to the scene of the conversation through deictic forms: “You see these eyes? / You see this tongue? / You see these ears?” (45); “here at the Chimera Club” (46); “The reason I drag / my leg this way” (59); “I hope you don’t / feel like this weather / is holding you prisoner. / But I tell you, I’m happy / to have you here” (70). Not only does the speaker continually remind us of the dialogic nature of his “Autobiography,” which is also a kind of dramatic monologue, but many of the stories, events, and memories he relates offer images of communication, connection, and community. What’s more, there’s a kind of civility in Komunyakaa’s metaphor of dialogue and communication. It features the voice of the citizen speaking to another citizen. It is simultaneously the “private” thoughts of a ruminating mind, but also the “public” concerns of the neighbor, citizen, or neighborhood bartender. Empathy becomes the prime connective tissue here: “It’s more of an empathy for the other, and that empathy is what makes us complete. Sometimes, there is a merger of opposites that can save us from ourselves” (79).
In the end, the poem calls for a response—and responsibility—of forgiveness. The final section of “Autobiography of My Alter Ego” consists of a long litany of forgiveness: “Forgive the brightly colored / viper on the footpath, / guarding a forgotten shrine […] Forgive the stormy century / of crows calling to death. Forgive / the one who conjures a god / out of spit & clay / so she may seek redemption. / Forgive the elephant’s memory…” and so on (85). The indeterminacy of who and what receives forgiveness—individual people or human actions are largely absent from the catalogue—as well as the self-conscious poetic images underscores the difficulty and creative nature of acts of forgiveness. Instead of offering the conciliatory closure that forgiveness would seem to entail, these lines retain a sense of mystery and elusiveness because the acts of forgiveness are nearly all directed towards non-human creatures or inanimate objects. Furthermore, the speaker expresses an increasing ambivalence towards the power of words to heal wounds. As Komunyakaa suggests, this ambivalence is associated with poetry itself: “This pale gauze of words. / This gauze for hidden wounds / unraveled this rainy night” (84). Rather than closing and healing wounds, the words spoken by the speaker and written by the poet are figured as “unraveling,” and images suggesting the ways in which any honest confrontation with personal and public feelings about loss and violence will reveal, expose, and reopen the wounds of traumatic past:

You see,

the maps & grids flow together
till light equals darkness:
an eye, a nose, an ear, a mouth
telling a forbidden story,
saying, Sir, here’s the skin
growing over a wound,
& this is flesh interrogating a stone. (85)
Komunyakaa’s triptych of war poetry—*Dien Cai Dau*, “Autobiography of My Alter Ego” and *Warhorses*—offers a vital poetic reminder that one of the enduring capacities of a poetry is to give witness, to continue “telling a forbidden story” that is half-hidden in received narratives. For Komunyakaa, these forbidden stories include the history of black soldiers in the Vietnam War, the history of desire behind the lines and off the battlefield, and a century of violence. Literature as reconciliation, Komunyakaa’s poetry teaches us, must persist with the difficult knowledge that resolution in poetry is a chimera at best, and a dangerous one when certain voices and histories are forbidden. Like few other poets today, Komunyakaa sings our forbidden and forgotten history of violence, even if it’s in a voice that is not always entirely his own.

**Reconciliation as Re-Vision**

The poetic trajectory of Komunyakaa’s three volumes would at first seem to suggest the logical trajectory associated with coming to terms with trauma and reconciliation as a process and dialogue. I do not want to foreclose that trajectory, but I also see these volumes as tracing a more specific movement in terms of the works’ dealing with memory, collective politics, and interiority over time that intersects with the trajectory of this study. The recycling of images, which become displaced over time, and even scenarios, such as interrogation, that first appeared in *Dien Cai Dau* suggest once again how Komunyakaa is “still negotiating those images” (Clytus 98). From one volume to the next, there is a detectable opening out of perspectives and deepening of history, as Komunyakaa explores war from multiples angles and cultural perspectives, a strategy of revision that ultimately rejects closure through its open-ended inquiry. As recorded and enacted in “Frontispiece,” which also offers images of multiples paths, individual and national identities are self-consciously performed across encounters and
contestations in a way that foregrounds the shaping force of audience. His “Alter Ego” not only reflects Komunyakaa’s continuing examination of race, but also shows how we are always in relation to others, as our self-revisions show.

The arc of the volumes of his war poetry shows how Komunyakaa uses the authority of his personal experience, like the voice in “Autobiography of My Alter Ego,” to speak to contemporary wars and reflect on the nature of human conflict in general. Komunyakaa’s poetry offers an unexpected extension of Adrienne Rich’s feminist vision of the politically engaged artist and intellectual. As Rich writes in her influential essay, “Writing as Re-Vision”:

Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. (18)

Similarly, Komunyakaa’s revisionary poetics attempts to understand the racial, cultural, and ideological assumptions behind the long history of American wars and violence. In writing reconciliation as re-vision, Komunyakaa offers a critique of American imperialism and revivifies a humanistic relation to self and others.
CHAPTER 3

Those Born Later:
The Children of Vietnam Veterans
And Their Legacy Narratives

You who will emerge from the flood
In which we have gone under
Remember
When you speak of our failings
The dark time too
Which you have escaped

—Bertolt Brecht

Brecht’s “To Those Born Later” finds an unlikely addressee in the children of Vietnam veterans who were born or grew up after the war. As the Vietnam War recedes from us in time, those born later can tell us about the changing private and public meanings of the Vietnam War. This chapter focuses on what I call Vietnam “legacy narratives,” works that explore the cultural memory of the war from the perspective of the second-generation children of Vietnam veterans. Because of their generational and familial proximity to individuals with experience and memories of the war, the children of Vietnam veterans can be seen to occupy a unique position from which to speak about the war and its legacy. But the second generation’s emotional attachment to the Vietnam War, as illustrated in the works of fiction and memoir discussed in this chapter, might be described as something other than a strictly historical relationship to the past. For whatever their subjective attachment to the war’s legacy and ability to produce compelling literary works of inheritance, the second generation cannot lay claim to a first-hand experience of war.
Those born after the Vietnam War then would seem to occupy a space somewhere between memory and history, and also, though differently, between memory and forgetting. In *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (1997), Marianne Hirsch offers the term “postmemory” to describe “second generation memories of cultural or collective traumatic events and experience” (22). Developing her notion in relation to children of Holocaust survivors, Hirsch characterizes postmemory as “the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated” (22). Postmemory, for Hirsch, is distinguished from memory by generation distance and from history by deep personal connection. She sees postmemory as a powerful and particular form of memory “precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation” (22). Hirsch’s concept of postmemory offers a useful and suggestive, if limited and problematic, critical touchstone for beginning to think about the particularities of the second generation’s relation to the Vietnam War through the family frame she proposes. The Vietnam legacy narratives discussed in this chapter likewise frame what has been viewed as the national trauma of the Vietnam War within various family crisis narratives and, relatedly, coming-of-age narratives of self-discovery.

24 Critics of Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory” call attention to the problems of appropriation, definition, and over-identification in her model. See, for example, Ernest van Alphen 486-488; Mark M. Anderson 141-145; Bos 58-60. Alphen objects to Hirsch’s use of “memory” in her formulation of postmemory: “By arguing for a relative instead of a fundamental difference between memory and postmemory, Hirsch risks confusing the dependency on language and narrative conventions for the expression of memory with views on the fictionality of certain genres” (487). Other critics worry that political aspects in the literary productions of the “second generation” may be overlooked. Along these lines, Mark M. Anderson wonders “whether Hirsch’s…description of postmemory is not too generous a category, which all but erases the historical subjectivity of different viewers” (142) and does not adequately account for “the continuing ideological force of the original event for present viewers” (142). Discussing positionality and personal investment in relation postmemory, Bos discusses the difference between “familial and non-familial (extra-familial or cultural) postmemory” in Hirsch’s formulation as one of degree: “both involve processes of identification and imagination with a history not experienced first-hand, and in both cases one may find instances of over-appropriation and over-identification” (59).
Moreover, Vietnam legacy narratives often thematize the imaginative investment and creation mediating the second generation’s relation to cultural memory about the war and their father’s stories. Bobbie Ann Mason’s novel *In Country* (1985), the first legacy narrative discussed in this chapter, explores Sam Hughes’ quest to learn more about her father who was killed in the war. As we shall see, the extreme degree of the teenage daughter’s imaginative investment in her unknown father’s irrevocable experience becomes problematic through her close attachments to surviving vets and self-destructive attempts to reenact his personal war experience. Generational distance, in this case and others, in the drive to know the unknown, takes a back seat to personal connection and its concomitant risks.

Concerned with the responsibility of such acts of inheritance, Eva Hoffman emphasizes the critical mediations of the second generation. In *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History, and the Legacy of the Holocaust*, Hoffman writes: “[t]he second generation is the hinge generation in which received, transferred knowledge of events is being transmuted into history, or into myth” (xv). For Hoffman, the powerful and undeniable forms of personal connection experienced by the second-generation nevertheless risk “over-identification and self-indulgence” as well as the replication of “unquestioning tribal attachments and received ideas” (144). Such uncritical forms of identification and investment are problematic for Hoffman because they obstruct an “enlarged comprehension of history” (196). The second generation’s constitutive generational and historical distance can, and should, instead be leveraged to create new critical perspectives on the past and present. She urges those who come after to “use our own generational vantage point [...] to review a history whose interpretations have all too often been frozen at the point of greatest trauma” (143). Vietnam War legacy narratives likewise function as a “hinge” for the transmission of the war’s legacy for American culture at large. Following Hoffman, I submit that
the task of Vietnam legacy narratives hinges on their capacity to transform potent family narratives into an informed and enlarged understanding of history. Vietnam legacy narratives matter for the issues of reconciliation discussed in my study because they dramatize the many forms of mediation—generational, historical, ideological, cultural, and representational—shaping the meaning and understanding of the war in Vietnam; they are also important to this study because, through the various struggles of their second-generation characters and narrators to understand the memory and history of the war in Vietnam, legacy narratives draw attention to the forms of authority, authenticity, and legitimacy that can affect reconciliation for competing ends.

Attentive to these forms of mediation and authority, and taking “post-memory” and “second-generation” as problem and paradigm, I argue that Vietnam legacy narratives stage ambivalent and inconclusive forms of testimony in which the second generation acts as a proxy witness for the war and postwar narratives, which most often belong to their fathers. But given the generational and historical remove that defines them as proxy and proximate, the second generation must also negotiate the public discourse surrounding the Vietnam War, including its representations in popular culture, history, and literature. This is why many of the legacy narratives in this chapter, for instance, often foreground or incorporate the second generation’s interactions with the Vietnam War in cultural memory. Thus Vietnam War legacy narratives can be said to enter “a field of contested meanings” about the war, and interact with received private and public narratives to produce concepts of nation and to articulate their second-generation speakers as subjects (Sturken, 3). Vietnam legacy narratives can be read as allegories of reception that not only perform acts of inheritance through proxy witness but that also raise more
general questions about the generational transmission of trauma and the social consequences of war.

By negotiating the tension between historical distance and subjective proximity in instructive ways, the writers discussed in the chapter devise various formal and narrative strategies for witnessing by proxy. The strategies include: Bobbie Ann Mason’s emplotment of the war’s legacy in her 1985 novel *In Country*, through the novel’s central coming-of-age narrative about a daughter whose father was killed in the war and frame narrative about a family road trip to the national site of the Vietnam Veterans memorial; Danielle Trussoni’s 2006 *Falling Through the Earth*, a contemporary memoir about a daughter’s relationship to her Vietnam veteran father, in which Trussoni visits Vietnam in an attempt to understand the conflicts in her family; Tom Bissell’s 2004 essay for *Harper’s*, “War Wounds,” about traveling to Vietnam with his Vietnam veteran father; and Andrew X. Pham’s 2008 *Under the Eaves of Heaven*, a father’s life story ghostwritten by the son, that attempts to portray the life and times of a man whose fate is bound up with the fate of former Republic of South Vietnam. In diverse and compelling ways, these works show how the legacy of the Vietnam War is partly received, partly modified, and partly created by—and entirely entangled in—the politics of remembrance.

The family frames of these legacy narratives present both risks and possibilities for an enlarged and more complex comprehension of the memory, history, and legacy of the Vietnam War. That is, the history of social upheaval and the potential for political engagement in their acts of proxy witnessing risk becoming reconciled by the recuperation of the family narrative. Vietnam legacy narratives also possess the capacity to transform powerful family narratives into testimonial articulations of the personal and social damages that have been and continue to be done in the name of familiar myths, narratives, and histories. In their proxy testimonials, legacy
narratives thus must find ways to live with the possibility of betraying the structures and fractures of national and cultural identity.

Witnessing by Proxy in Bobbie Ann Mason’s In Country

To illustrate how the second generation acts as a proxy witness, I turn to Bobbie Ann Mason’s novel, In Country. First published in 1985, In Country represents one of the earliest, and still most extended, fictional treatments of the impact of the war on the children of American Vietnam vets. The presence of the second generation in Vietnam War literature from the mid-1980s to late 1990s is important to understand because, as I hope to show, questions regarding the history and legacy of the war are anticipated and dramatized through the figure of the children of Vietnam vets. The central character of the novel is a seventeen-year-old named Samantha Hughes, whose father, Dwayne, was killed in the Vietnam War before she was born. Set during the summer of 1984, In Country is essentially a coming-of-age tale in which Sam Hughes not only grapples with the familiar challenges of late adolescence—college admissions, relationship break-up, and family problems—but also and most significantly confronts her increasing desire to know more about what happened to her father. Partly prompting Sam’s spiritual quest that summer is her growing concern over her uncle Emmett, who she fears was exposed to Agent Orange during his tour of duty in Vietnam. The novel’s frame narrative—in

25 For another fictional exploration of a second generation character, see O’Brien. One of the most well known and most taught of works of fiction from the Vietnam War, Tim O’Brien’s The Things They Carried also featured in its diverse cast of characters effected by the war in Vietnam, the character of Kathleen, the fictionalized daughter of O’Brien’s narrator in the stories, “Field Trip” and “Ambush.” Like In Country’s Sam Hughes, Kathleen is also full of difficult questions about her father and the war. Unlike Sam, Kathleen’s father is alive and therefore open to her questionings. Skeptical, active, participatory, Kathleen, in many ways, functions as a projection of O’Brien’s imagined reader of his postmodern war stories. She questions the truth-value of her father’s story, disrupts her father’s reconciliatory desire, and calls attention to enduring cultural difference. She also functions as a stand-in for readers who have not experienced the Vietnam War. As fictionalized characters, Mason’s Sam Hughes and O’Brien’s Kathleen should be distinguished, however, from the narrators of legacy narratives written by children of Vietnam veterans, such as Danielle Trussoni and Tom Bissell.
which Sam, her uncle Emmett, and grandmother embark on a road trip to see the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.—intertwines inner and outer journeys with public history. Shuttling between Sam Hughes’ personal struggle of self-understanding and the nation’s collective struggle to come to terms with the war, Mason’s novel can be read as a prototypical legacy narrative in which the daughter of a Vietnam veteran becomes the witness of the fraught legacy of the war for other Americans, especially for those living at an increasing generational and historical remove from the various conflicts—military, ideological, cultural, and social—that defined Vietnam-era history. By narrating Hughes’ individual struggle to understand Vietnam within a familial and cultural context of competing perspectives, Mason’s novel of irreconciled legacy suggests how, during the 1980s, America itself remained ambivalent about the history of its recent involvement in Vietnam, despite or because of Ronald Reagan’s diagnosis of the “Vietnam Syndrome” crippling American foreign policy and national identity.

Increasingly preoccupied by her quest to understand her father through Vietnam, Sam Hughes seems to invest and adopt the memories and experiences of the previous generation as her own. “[Sam] started thinking about war,” Mason writes near the beginning of In Country, “and it stayed on her mind all summer” (23). Much of the novel narrates Sam’s struggle to negotiate her growing interest in understanding what happened in Vietnam with the difficulties of gaining access to what she perceives to be more immediate and transparent forms of

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26 For a thoughtful reflection on teaching Mason’s novel in the context of a undergraduate course on the history of the Vietnam War and the antiwar movement, see Susan Zeiger, “Daughters, Fathers, and Vietnam: Reflections on Teaching the War at a Women’s College,” Women’s Studies Quarterly (1995), 155-169. Zeiger writes, “In many ways Sam’s story mirrors the experience of the students in my course on the United States in the 1960s […] For all students the Vietnam War can be an important vehicle for raising issues of social class, generation, and gender, as well as nationalism and international power relations. But for many students in the course the war is also an encounter with family history, with personal as well as national trauma” (155).
knowledge and experience about the war her father died fighting. For critic Lisa Hinrichsen, *In Country* offers an exemplary narrative of what Marianne Hirsch calls “post-memory” because the novel explores the “lack” or loss of immediacy and access that defines the second-generation, which is why Sam “adopts, mimics, and prizes the structures of belatedness that mark trauma” (238). Sam actively seeks out first-hand knowledge and experiences that she thinks approximate what the war was like. She continually asks her uncle Emmett questions about the war; she entertains romantic feelings toward an older man and veteran named Tom; she spends a night in the swamp and imagines her father in the jungle. Alarmed by Sam’s growing obsession, Emmett cautions Sam: “Don’t fret too much over this Vietnam thing, Sam. You shouldn’t feel bad about any of it. It had nothing to do with you” (57). Emmett sees Sam’s identification with “this Vietnam thing” as dangerous and unwarranted. While his admonition wisely cautions against her over-identification and obsessive behavior, he also seems to misunderstand the ways in which the war indirectly yet powerfully affects Sam. In particular, her re-enactment fantasy represents an extreme example of how powerful the past is:

Here she was in a swamp where an old outlaw had died, and someone was stalking her. In her head, the Kinks were singing, “There’s a little green man in my head,” their song about paranoia. But this was real. A curious pleasure stole over her. This terror was what the soldiers felt every minute. They lived with the possibility of unseen eyes of snipers. They crept along, pointing the way with their rifles, alert to land mines, listening, always listening. They were completely alive, every nerve on edge, and sleep, when it came, was like catnapping. No nightmares in the jungle. Just silent terror. During the night, she had stayed awake in the dark swamp, watching and waiting. She could make out faint rings of lights and winking lightning bugs. She put herself in Moon Pie’s place. In Emmett’s place. She had fantasized Tom there with her in her sleeping bag, the way father had tried to imagine her mother. But Tom floated away. She was in her father’s place, in a foxhole in the jungle, with a bunch of buddies, all breathing quietly, daring to smoke in their quiet holes, eating their C-rations silently, their cold beans. She remembered Emmett eating cold split-pea soup from the can. She felt

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27 For a relevant discussion of how Sam’s access to knowledge of the war is mediated by her gendered identity as a young woman, see Jeffords. As Susan Jeffords rightly points out in her brief reading of Mason’s novel in *The Remasculinization of America*, Sam is “constantly denied real knowledge of the war because she is a woman” (63).
more like a cat than anything, small and fragile and very alert to movement, her whiskers flicking and her pupils widening in the dark. It was a new way of seeing. (217-18)

Sam’s fantasy depends upon a number of imagined substitutions: the swamp for the jungle, the present for the past, and Sam herself “[i]n Emmett’s place,” then “in her father’s place.” Here, we might pause and recall those critics of Hirsch who thought that the term “post-memory” did not adequately guard against a “retrospective witnessing by adoption.” Neither personal memory nor historical discourse captures the species of knowledge that suffuses Sam’s life.

Mason scatters references to Vietnam in U.S. popular culture throughout her novel, the overall effect being to cast Sam Hughes’ struggle within and against a larger backdrop of a culture seeking closure on the war. Given the culture of reconciliation and political re-inscription of Vietnam in the U.S. in the early to mid-1980s, when the novel was set and published, representations of Vietnam in U.S. popular culture form an initial basis for Sam’s understanding of Vietnam. For instance, Sam enthusiastically tells her friend Dawn that the title song of the “new Springsteen album” is “about a vet”: “In the song, his brother gets killed over there, and then the guy gets in a lot of trouble when he gets back home. He can’t get a job, and he ends up in jail. It’s a great song” (42). Increasingly worried about her uncle Emmett, moreover, “Sam had been thinking she would encourage him to talk more about the war, the way he used to when she was little […] It would be good for him to talk about it more, she told Lonnie—the way Dr. Sidney Freedman on M*A*S*H got his patients to talk out their anxieties” (45). Sam’s belief in helping her uncle Emmett talk through his potentially traumatic experience is partly informed by her personal knowledge of him and partly mediated by her reception of popular culture.

Though these representations of Vietnam in popular culture initially help Sam to connect to the past, they are ultimately still too removed from what happened “over there” for Sam to
fully embrace them as legitimate forms of knowledge. Even the history books about the Vietnam War become unsatisfactory sources of knowledge, especially because of Sam’s access to her uncle Emmett and her increased contact with his friends who are also Vietnam vets. “They’re just dull history books,” she says in the company of her uncle Emmett’s Vietnam veteran friends, because the “books didn’t say what it was like to be at war over there” (48). For Sam, only those who fought in the war and survived can tell her what it was really like to be “in country,” the slang used by American soldiers for active duty in Vietnam. Hence, she demands that her uncle Emmett to tell her everything about the war, in effect to offer his personal testimony: “Tell me what you remember most about Vietnam”; “What else? Tell me something that happened. Tell me about the hooch that blew up”; “If you don’t tell me, then I’ll just imagine it worse than it was”; “tell me more about that hooch” (54). Sam’s insistent demands for her Uncle Emmett to tell her about his experience and memories during the war both underscore her lack of knowledge, but also highlight the mediated way in which the novel itself represents the war and its aftermath. Within the novel, Sam functions as a kind of catalyst and vehicle for her uncle Emmett’s reluctant testimonies of his experience in Vietnam, which are scattered throughout the novel as fragments of memory. In situating Emmett as the storyteller and herself as the audience, Sam Hughes seeks to actively play her role as part of what Eva Hoffman calls the “hinge generation.” At stake in the hinge generation, as Hoffman suggests, is whether the knowledge of past events becomes re-scripted into familiar narratives of self-identity or its transfer restores complexity to the historical record. In Mason’s novel, Sam Hughes’ journey of self-discovery hinges on her critical awareness of the larger cultural and historical forces mediating her understanding of herself, her father, and Vietnam.
Against Sam’s more inward and subjective preoccupations with the war, Mason also narrates a more outward and political movement for Sam Hughes’ journey. Therefore, Sam’s struggle to understand her father and herself can be read as struggle between an obsessive attachment and over identification with Vietnam and a necessary separation and distance from the, sometimes overwhelming, force of that past. In the novel, this separation for Sam importantly involves a growing awareness of the significance of the war’s legacy for the greater national and cultural imaginary. As Sinéad McDermott argues, “Mason’s narrative suggests that it is not only the daughter of a victim but American society more broadly that must come to terms with the legacy of the Vietnam War” (6). She reads this through Sam’s desire to identify with her lost father. According to McDermott, identification for Sam Hughes fails because it involves identifying with a father who is seen as not just a victim of war but also a perpetrator of war crimes. McDermott sees a critical outcome in Sam’s failure to identify with her father: the aim of postmemory in this case is not simply identification; paradoxically, the success of Sam’s postmemorial project (her ability to know ‘what it was like’) depends upon her failing to identify with her father at this point. For Sam to know who her father was, it is necessary for her to deconstruct the ‘country boy’ image of him that circulates within the family narrative and, ultimately, to repudiate what he did in the war (15).

But from what standpoint must Sam reject the family narrative and repudiate her father’s actions in the war? This rejection and repudiation would seem to pit Sam’s identity as daughter against her identity as citizen, that is, to relinquish a personal and subjective identification for a more impersonal and objective moral stance. In this way, Sam is faced with the task that Eva Hoffman ascribes for the second generation: “we may need to attain in the moral and intellectual sphere separation from unquestioning tribal attachments and received ideas” (144).

Sam comes closest to attaining a critical distance and perspective when she visits the national site of commemoration and remembrance of the war. In the novel’s frame narrative, the
personal and private acts of reconciliation become associated with a national narrative of healing and recovery at the site of the national memorial. The road trip to the new national memorial in Washington, D.C. literalizes Sam’s metaphorical journey throughout the novel and connects her individual struggle to understand the war’s legacy with the nation’s own struggle to come to terms with the war. The frame narrative also seeks to contain—structurally and symbolically—Sam’s potentially disturbing and disruptive knowledge of the very limits to her knowledge of herself, her father, and society. Searching for her father’s name in the directory, Sam happens upon her own name:

She flips through the directly and finds “Hughes.” She runs down the row of Hughes names. There were so many Hughes boys killed, names she doesn’t know. His name is there, and she gazes at it for a moment. Then suddenly her own name leaps out at her.

SAM ALAN HUGHES PFC AR 02 MAR
49 02 FEB 67 HOUSTON TX 14E 104

Her heart pounding, she rushes to panel 14E, and after racing her eyes over the string of names for a moment, she locates her own name. (244)

In this dramatic moment, Sam’s conflict of identity is literally and symbolically resolved in a form of national belonging. That Sam happens to find her own name inscribed on the wall dramatizes the way in which her interaction and identification is shaped in advance by the form of the Memorial. “The black stone creates a reflective surface,” as Marita Sturken notes, “one that echoes the reflecting pool of the Lincoln Memorial and allows viewers to participate in the memorial; seeing their own image reflected in the names, they are implicated in the listing of the dead” (46). In other words, like Sam, viewers of Vietnam veteran’s memorial are asked to identify with the dead. In this way, Sam acts as a proxy witness for a nation still coming to terms with the war. Her remembrance of the war’s legacy as her own inheritance stands in for nation.
Despite the reconciliatory gesture of the frame narrative, Mason’s representation of the various interactions with the Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial ultimately evades closure. At first, Sam’s grandmother and Emmett seem to find respective consolation at the Memorial. As her grandmother is reported to say, “Coming up on this wall of a sudden and seeing how black it was, it was so awful, but then I came down in it and saw that white carnation blooming out of that crack and it gave me hope. It made me know he’s watching over us” (245). At first unsettled by the awfulness of the memorial, the grandmother finds solace in the signs of Christian hope and grace. The image of the “white carnation blooming” neutralizes, for Sam’s grandmother, the unsettling image she sees in the marble wall’s “awful” blackness. Emmett on the other hand, in the image that closes the novel, is seen “sitting cross-legged in front of the wall, and slowly his face bursts into a smile like flames” (245), a startling image of contradictory and ambiguous meanings that calls to mind the self-immolating Buddhist monks who protested the war. Even if the historical reference is missed by the reader, the closing image itself of Emmett is far from conclusive and consolatory. While Emmett’s smile may suggest a moment of inner peace, his smile seems simultaneously to reignite the fire of history and its multiply exposed image evokes both peaceful protest and military explosives. As the central living veteran in Mason’s novel, Emmett appropriately gets the last word. But his last word, as it were, is enveloped by silence. Whatever his thoughts and feelings, they are emitted by a cryptic image that ultimately resists closure. By ending with the uncertainty of Emmett’s silence, Mason’s novel further suggests that while the discourse of national trauma and healing surrounds U.S. reconciliation efforts, the individual response to national remembrance remains uneven, ambiguous, and partial.

Because Mason’s objective and physical descriptions of the memorial resist or contradict grand narratives, the legacy of Vietnam remains unresolved at the site of the national memorial.
Her descriptions are interspersed with the reported dialogue of Sam’s family and a narration of the unfolding of events. Mason powerfully describes the wall through Sam’s eyes: “It is massive, a black gash in the hillside, like a vein of coal exposed and then polished with polyurethane. A crowd is filing by slowly, staring at it solemnly” (239); “The memorial cuts a V in the ground, like the wings of an abstract bird, huge and headless. Overhead, a jet plane angles upward, taking off” (239):

Sam stands in the center of the V, deep in the pit. The V is like the white wings of the shopping center in Paducah. The Washington Monument is reflected at the center line. If she moves slightly to the left, she sees the monument, and if she moves the other way she sees a reflection of the flag opposite the memorial. Both the monument and the flag seem like arrogant gestures, like the country is giving the finger to the dead boys, flung in this hole in the ground. Sam doesn’t understand what she is feeling, but it is something so strong, it is like a tornado moving in her, something massive and overpowering. It feels like giving birth to this wall. (240)

Sam’s relation to the monumentality of national identity seems very different from the scene in which she finds her own name. Here her relation to the national monument and national identity seems uneasy and inarticulate. The wall and the various monuments attempt to position her as viewing subject and political subject in advance. Imagining “the dead boys” as so many bodies “flung in this hole in the ground,” which I see as an image of a mass grave or burial, Sam’s visceral response offers a counter narrative or counter memory to the monumentality of the Washington Monument and national symbol of the flag. It is an image of death, materiality, immobility, and fixity that sits uneasily within the novel’s own plot development, spiritual fulfillment, the frame narrative’s physical journey, and the national culture of reconciliation that frames and backgrounds the novel. In the end, what Sam identifies with is her father and the nation’s ambivalence.
The purpose of Sam Hughes’ journey to adulthood is intimately tied to her recognition of national belonging and recovery of a national identity at the site of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in D.C. In Mason’s novel, as I have argued, the second-generation protagonist embodied by Sam Hughes is a proxy for an imagined ambivalent national identity still coming to terms with the legacy of the Vietnam War during the changing cultural and political climate of 1980s. By focusing on the impact of the war on the second-generation, and not on the veterans of war who fought on the front lines or veterans of peace who protested behind the lines, Mason depicts the contest over the cultural memory of the war as an internal struggle and domestic conflict that nonetheless is symbolic of a national struggle to heal the wounds of the past. What Mason’s popular 1984 novel suggests, then, about America’s reengagement with the national trauma of Vietnam is that the legacy of the war during the historical changes of Reagan era was caught up in an ongoing ideological struggle over the political and cultural direction of the United States. As John Borneman observes, “reconciliation [for the U.S.]—actively pursued or spontaneous—has been framed largely as an internal affair—internal to itself […] Hence U.S. efforts at reconciliation are largely an attempt to rehabilitate not the Vietnamese but the U.S. government as a moral interlocutor whom one can trust” (204). In Country remains an important and instructive early exploration of the Vietnam War’s impact on American individuals and society because Mason documents the recuperative impulse behind national reconciliation efforts while attempting to realistically represent the unanswered questions and concerns about the war’s legacy from the symbolic perspective of the second-generation.

Contrasting Mason with writer-veterans such as fiction writer Tim O’Brien and poet W.D. Ehrhart, critic Mark A. Heberle suggests that the ability to acknowledge and achieve imaginative healing of a national trauma “may depend crucially on the removal of its author, if
The implication of Heberle’s claim seems particularly suggestive for Vietnam legacy narratives. On the one hand, in Heberle’s analysis, the combat trauma represented in and enacted by the fiction and poetry written by Vietnam writer-veterans (exemplified for Heberle by Tim O’Brien as “trauma artist”) is seen as unhealable wound. On the other hand, the national trauma of the war in Vietnam, figured in literature written by authors who did not participate in the war (Bobbie Ann Mason did not fight any more than her character Sam Hughes did), is seen as something that can be overcome through symbolic closure. The historical, generational, and emotional remove of the second generation, to extend Heberle’s observation, offers an essential distance from traumatic experience and a critical perspective on the past. How does this “removal” of the second generation place them in a better position, so to speak, to come to terms with the past? Whose past are we speaking of? Why might such a reconciliatory project be taken up by the second generation? What does this retrospective and indirect form of witnessing by proxy suggest about the cultural memory of the war’s legacy? Guided by these questions, for the remainder of this chapter, I consider Vietnam legacy narratives written by the actual sons and daughters of Vietnam veterans, now adults and authors themselves, whose generational experience is imaginatively anticipated by Bobbie Ann Mason’s fictionalized character, Sam Hughes, but whose various quests for self-identity and knowledge about the war’s legacy are given first-person voice through varying imaginative means and are written from the changed U.S. historical context.
“I gave that war to you”:
Danielle Trussoni’s *Falling Through the Earth*
and the Work of Inheritance

Writing from the remove of the second-generation is Danielle Trussoni, whose 2006 memoir *Falling Through the Earth* explores the elusive yet profound legacy of the Vietnam war for the children of Vietnam vets. Trussoni’s father, Dan Trussoni, arrived in Vietnam in February of 1968, during the Tet Offensive. He was assigned to the Twenty-fifth Infantry Division in Cu Chi, and tasked the duty of a tunnel rat. His experience in Vietnam would continue to haunt him long after the war, and as his daughter’s memoir of familial and foreign conflicts attests, it also haunted his family.

“I gave that war to you” (93), Trussoni’s father tells her at one point in her memoir, a statement that succinctly captures how the guardianship of the war’s legacy is being passed from one generation to the next and dryly states the enormous difficulty awaiting whoever inherits a war and what it signifies. That Trussoni’s father, just before saying this, also expresses his wish to forget Vietnam (“I don’t want to keep none of that war with me”) points to the greater complexities and confounding contradictions facing both generations (92). Whereas her father wants to forget about his painful past, Danielle Trussoni wants him to remember, in part because, as she notes, “[i]t was painful for me to see that my father did not realize how much the war had damaged him” (92). The daughter sees what the father remains blind to or turns away from, an insight borne at once from familial intimacy and generational distance. By the first-generation’s passing on the war’s painful legacy in this way—that is, by also refusing to confront the past—

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28 Born Danielle Anne Trussoni in La Crosse, Wisconsin in 1973, Trussoni was named after her father Dan Trussoni. She graduated from the English the University of Wisconsin-Madison with a BA in History and English in 1996; and from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, where she received an MFA in Fiction Writing in 2002. *Falling Through the Earth: A Memoir* is her first book, and was published in 2006 by Henry Holt and Company. Trussoni turned to fiction with her second book, the novel *Angelology*, published in 2010 by Viking Press.
the task of coming to terms with the war and its aftermath, as exemplified in Trussoni’s case, falls to the second-generation.

A moving memoir of the interpersonal and social consequences of modern war, Trussoni’s *Falling Through the Earth* artfully cuts back and forth in time between her childhood relationship with her father, her father’s recounted memories of his experience in Vietnam as a tunnel rat, and the trip she took to Vietnam to visit the tunnels herself as a young woman. The memoir begins with Trussoni’s recount of going down with a tour guide into one of the Tunnels of Cu Chi, and she uses her visit to Vietnam as a structural framing device and controlling metaphor for accessing the “hidden narrative” of not only her father’s buried past as a soldier, but also, to an equal if not greater and more graceful degree, her own subterranean path through family drama and towards self-discovery.29 The family narrative at the heart of Trussoni’s memoir centers on the divorce of her parents and her strong bonds to her father, reflected in Trussoni’s decision to follow her father to the rougher North Side of town even though her mother had gained custody of all three children in the family. Living with her father, which also meant spending a lot of time at the neighborhood dive bar, and witnessing his destructive behavior and dead end love affairs, Trussoni eventually comes to the belief that the source of the conflicts at home is her father’s experience in Vietnam.

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29 *Falling Through the Earth* offers a salient example of the contemporary memoir as examined by Sven Birkerts. In *The Art of Time in Memoir: Then, Again* (Graywolf, 2008), Birkerts claims that the best contemporary memoirists “use the vantage point of the present to gain access to what might be called the hidden narrative of the past” (8); “This manipulation of the double vantage point is the memoirist’s single most powerful and adaptable technique, allowing for a complex temporal access” (17). In her generally positive review of Trussoni’s memoir for the *The New York Times*, Kathryn Harrison points to the risks of the multiple time perspectives and narrative threads in the contemporary memoir: “Narratives composed of two or more strands present the risk that one will emerge as more gracefully and completely realized, and thus more compelling to the reader. In this case, despite life-and-death stakes, war takes a back seat to family drama, at least in part because the author can report viscerally and intimately only on what she has experienced herself” (2006). Owing to this critical perspective on Trussoni’s Vietnam legacy narrative, Harrison’s review is aptly titled “The War at Home.”
Early on in *Falling Through the Earth*, Trussoni recalls the moment when her moral compass was shattered by a disturbing discovery about her father’s unspoken experience as a soldier in Vietnam. She remembers when she once snuck down into the basement of her childhood home, crawled into the bunker of her father’s office, and rifled through his photos and private possessions. Her surreptitious act reenacts her father’s dangerous missions as a “tunnel rat,” whose duty involved clearing the tunnels dug by Viet Cong and North Vietnamese soldiers. Of course, there is also much symbolic resonance to the domestic site of Trussoni’s act—the basement here being the literal and symbolic storehouse of a person and family’s secret and hidden memories. At first, what she saw was nothing unusual: “taped to the unpainted concrete-block wall, was a photograph. I leaned close, to get a better look, and saw my father and Tommy Goodman standing side by side in the middle of a field, two tired-eyed boys with M-16s in their hands” (19). The story behind this photograph—her father’s friendship with Tommy Goodman and his tragic death while saving Dan Trussoni’s life—had already been told to Trussoni by her father. But that day Trussoni would discover photographs that fit nowhere into the narrative about her father and threatened to dramatically alter a worldview in which her father embodied goodness and moral authority. For up above her head, on a wobbly make shift bookshelf, young Trussoni spotted a box whose contents were a mystery. As she reaches up to retrieve the box, it falls off the shelf and spills out its dark contents:

My father’s war pictures snowed around me. I sorted through them, flipping images onto the floor (a hooch, a Huey, an army jeep, a rice paddy) as if playing solitaire. My hand stopped on a photograph of a Vietnamese soldier, who appeared to be about fourteen years old, on a bed of elephant grass. Bullet holes peppered his chest, each one dime-sized, blood-ringed. For a long time I looked at each picture, until the image lifted from the paper and embedded itself in my memory. Who is this boy, I wondered, this body full of holes? I knew, even then, that my father had killed this person and that I was gazing upon the trophy photo of his kill, one no different for Dad than the photo in our living room of him with the twelve-point buck he’d shot the previous winter. Suddenly, I was terrified of
what I saw before me. My father had killed—his photographs told me that much. What I did not understand, as I looked at the death my father had inflicted, was why. (19)

Trussoni’s presentation of the basement scene artfully flirts with transgression, her father’s and her own, shuttling between the incriminating evidence of her father’s photos and the circumstantial knowledge of her own belated implication. As graphic evidence of acts committed by a man once familiar and now unrecognizable, her father’s secreted “trophy photo” of the dead Vietnamese soldier radically disrupts and ultimately displaces the familiar and familial narratives of male bonding and sport hunting cited in Trussoni’s text. But the unsettling counter-narrative opened up by her father’s Vietnam War kill photo raises more questions than it answers. Trussoni’s telling depiction of herself gazing intently at each photo “until the image lifted itself from the paper and embedded itself in [her] memory” assigns both a haunting materiality to the “lifted” images and subtly encodes her activity as an illicit and posterior form of memory-making. The images become “embedded” in her own memory, as if whatever dark content they may hold has been neurologically copied and transmitted into her own brain tissue. Trussoni “lifts” her father’s photos in the multiple senses of the word, for she breaks into her father’s private belongings and, thinking that the objects she finds—the kill photo, the human skull—contain secret knowledge about her father, she steals away with them.

“Sure [she] had done something terrible,” Trussoni’s transgression in the basement of her father’s house dramatically thematizes the literary acts of adoption and appropriation that define the “post-memoir.” Trussoni’s ethical dilemma of searching for more knowledge about “this boy[...] this body full of holes” is also the representational predicament of what I call the Vietnam War legacy narrative. A founding moment in her own coming-of-age, Trussoni’s shocking discovery of her father’s “kill photos” compels her to confront the private and public
history of violence—a father’s untold past and a nation’s lost war. As her memoir narrates the inwards and outward journey, the photos continue to haunt Trussoni as a young woman and her quest to understand her father leads her to travel to Vietnam; she writes, “[i]n my early twenties, when my father’s photographs would not fade from my memory and I believed that a trip back would help explain the lives we had led, I bought a ticket and flew to Vietnam” (21). Her father’s photos become essential pieces of Trussoni’s inheritance as a child of a Vietnam veteran, and *Falling Through the Earth* represents the work of that inheritance.

Trussoni’s reconciliation by proxy matters not only to her and her father as the central inter-personal and cross-generational crisis represented in her memoir. As a father-daughter memoir interacting with cultural elements surrounding the Vietnam War, Trussoni’s proxy reconciliation performs symbolic work for the nation. By inheriting the legacy of her father’s experience in the Vietnam War, Trussoni shapes the work of inheritance into a memoir read as further communicating, or passing on, that knowledge and experience to a reading public historically and psychologically removed from the national trauma signified by Vietnam. This reconciliation by proxy is most manifest in the return narrative of Trussoni’s memoir. Hoping a literal return will help her father revisit and reconcile with his past, Trussoni invites her father to accompany her to Vietnam. He ultimately refuses and she eventually travels there alone. As she reflects on her initial intentions,

> I had asked my father to come to Vietnam. Thinking that such a trip would help him, I called and offered to book the tickets. We could walk through the village of Tay Ninh, I told him, and go to the ground of the old Twenty-fifth base camp, near the Cu Chi tunnels. As I talked to Dad about the trip, excited about the possibility of seeing the scenes of my father’s war stories up close, he was silent. “No,” he said, finally. “No, I’m not going there. I can’t. Not again.” (137)

Trussoni here articulates the reconciliatory desire of “going back” to Vietnam, which we encountered in the works highlighted in the first chapter. The trip to Vietnam provides one of the
narrative frames of Trussoni’s memoir, which, as noted above, begins at the entrance of one the Cu Chi tunnels. The restorative effect of returning to Vietnam is voiced most strongly by an American veteran named Jim, who Trussoni meets and befriends, along with his wife Patty, while traveling through Vietnam. At the hotel where they are all staying, Jim says, “coming back here can really help. This is my second trip, and I find it very… relieving” (136). Like Trussoni’s father, Jim is a veteran of the war; unlike her father, Jim embraces the opportunity to literally return to Vietnam as a catalyst for emotionally and psychologically revisiting painful memories of the war. A counter image of her father, Jim not only travels to Vietnam, but he offers personal testimony to the therapeutic benefits of return. As a couple, Jim and Patty moreover contrast with Trussoni’s divorced parents, a separation that is at the heart of Trussoni’s own painful recollections of her childhood of growing up in a dysfunctional family. What makes Trussoni’s return narrative stand out is not so much her father’s refusal of return and reconciliation, but her willingness to still carry through with the trip despite her father’s absence. The “trip back” for Trussoni not only entails visiting Vietnam because of the “possibility of seeing the scenes of [her] father’s war stories up close,” but within the framework of the memoir itself, the journey also allows her to revisit, as it were, her own memories of childhood and reflections about her relationship to with her father. Trussoni can symbolically “return” to Vietnam by revisiting her childhood memories because, as her memoir recounts, her father had already brought the war home, as it were, in his stories at Roscoe’s bar, in his erratic behavior, and in his divorce from her mother.

Trussoni’s personal desire to know more about her father’s past compels her to journey to Vietnam, but her father’s refusal to return with her on that literal and metaphorical journey underscores what I read as one of the central symbolic actions of Vietnam legacy narratives: by
revisiting the site and subject of Vietnam, members of the second generation not only function as catalysts for post-war reconciliation, but oftentimes they serve as symbolic substitutes for the generation who fought and witnessed the war first-hand. Trussoni clearly did not suffer through war or commit acts of violence, but her father’s experience, and his blindness to its damaging effects, deeply informs her own life and psyche. Herein lie the paradoxes of the belated and indirect knowledge that can haunt the lives of those who grew up after the war: your life is profoundly shaped by events that preceded you, events you did not see, live through, or experience directly. This highly mediated form of knowledge is what characterizes the “secondariness” of the literal second generation. The literature of the second-generation is not so much written from memory, as it is writing about memory.

Vietnam legacy narratives devise different ways of representing the positionality of the second-generation in relation to the personal history of the war as children of veterans and the broader public history within American culture. Conforming to the generic conventions of the contemporary memoir, Danielle Trussoni represents the war’s legacy within the overlapping narratives of family crisis, father-daughter relations, and coming-of-age. As a daughter of a veteran still haunted by the war, Trussoni narrates the legacy of Vietnam as both a familial story and personal story in which she struggles to decipher the silences, gaps, and absences in her father’s war stories. Despite Trussoni’s eventual recognition of the pitfalls of her familial connection to the history of the war in Vietnam, the “lines of relation and identification” between Trussoni, her father, and Vietnam remain largely unexplored and foregrounded in ways that allow “context, specificity, responsibility, history” to become blurred in her memoir (Hirsch 17). If these forms of mediation are incorporated into the complexly woven narrative strands of Trussoni’s memoir, then they constitute the undigested material of Tom Bissell’s *The Father of*
All Things: A Marine, His Son, and the Legacy of the Vietnam War (2007), a hybrid work of memoir and history about Bissell’s father and the Vietnam War. Bissell’s sprawling book, at the heart of which is his story of returning to Vietnam with his veteran father, foregrounds issues of identification, mediation, and imagination shaping his confrontation with not only his father’s war stories but also with representations of the Vietnam War in popular culture, literature, and history. The more Bissell knows about his father and Vietnam, the more difficult it becomes for him to assimilate the particular familial, personal, and cultural strands of these histories into a cohesive narrative.

Tom Bissell and the Second Generation’s “War Wounds”

In the December 2004 issue, Harper’s Magazine featured an article entitled “War Wounds” that presented readers with a searching autobiographical examination of the legacy of the Vietnam War through the eyes of a Vietnam veteran’s son. The article was written by Tom Bissell, a young writer, whose first book, Chasing the Sea (2003), a digressive travelogue about his journey through the ecological and cultural devastation of post-Soviet Uzbekistan, displayed the author’s talent for effectively blending memoir, reportage and history. Bissell draws on these same technical resources in “War Wounds,” but here he uses them to explore a scarred landscape much closer to home: the legacy of the Vietnam War for the generation born in its wake and a portrait of a father struggling to come to terms with his painful past. Part memoir and part travelogue, Bissell’s article alternates between his recollections of and reflections on

growing up as a child of a Vietnam veteran and his present-day account of the trip to Viet Nam that he took with his father in November of 2003. Subtitled “A father and son return to Vietnam,” Bissell’s essay travels through the landscape and memory of Vietnam in order to narrate two mutually impacting journeys of reconciliation. For the father, John Bissell, the return to Viet Nam is deeply unsettling and unearths buried memories as he revisits the sites of his war wounds: the beach in Qui Nhon in central Viet Nam, where he landed in 1965 as a Marine to cheering and welcoming crowds of Vietnamese; and the village of Tuy Phuoc, where he was severely wounded in battle. For the son, Tom Bissell, the trip to Vietnam constitutes a “return” not in any literal sense, but in the symbolic or performative sense of reenactment.

Born in 1974, Tom Bissell does not have memories of Vietnam, but continues to live with its aftereffects: the divorce of his parents when he was three, which he attributes to the domestic conflict between his mother’s defensive embrace of the mythology of the war hero who returns home bearing his wounds stoically and his father’s ultimate inability to do so; the stories about his father’s war-time experience that he was made the reluctant recipient of during his father’s late-night drunken confessions to his then ten-year old son; and his ongoing attempts as an adult, son, and writer “to approximate something of what my father went through” (61). Recalling a favorite photo of his father from basic training before the war, for instance, Bissell describes and muses: “BISSELL is stenciled across his left breast. Friendly Virginia greenery hovers behind him. He looks a little like a young Harrison Ford and is smiling, holding his rifle, his yes unaccountably soft. I wanted to find that man. I believed I could find him in Vietnam, where he had been made and unmade, killed and resurrected.” For Bissell, twenty-nine years old at the time of the Harper’s article, the trip to Viet Nam represents an extraordinary opportunity to better understand his father. Like Danielle Trussoni, Bissell’s personal investment in Vietnam
is initially grounded his familial connection to that history as a son of a Marine veteran. Unlike Trussoni, however, Bissell is much more self-conscious about his positionality as a member of the second-generation writing about the legacy of the war.

Tom Bissell’s attempts to “approximate something” of what his father went through in Vietnam suggest the dangers of identification for the second-generation. “I have become a writer greatly interested in sites of human suffering,” Bissell tells the reader at one point, “And lately it occurs to me that this has been my own attempt to approximate something of what my father went through” (61).Bissell’s frank disclosure about his interests as writer is not only revealing but is also potentially problematic. Bissell reveals the highly personal motives behind his interests as a writer in the more public “sites of human suffering.” Bissell’s ambivalent form of witnessing can be most clearly discussed with this admission. Throughout Bissell’s essay, and much more so in his larger book project, The Father of All Things, an irresolvable ambiguity between public and private, collective history and individual memory defines his relationship to his father’s war experience and his own representational projects, either as a correspondent or in the essay.

Problems arise when these ambiguities are presented as identities. For instance, Bissell goes on to relate a personal anecdote about one of those sites: “During the war in Afghanistan, I got stuck in Mazar-i-Sharif with dangerously low funds and one friend, Michael, a Danish journalist I had followed into the war.” Afraid he would remain “stuck” in Afghanistan, Bissell borrows a satellite phone from an Associated Press journalist, calls his father in Michigan, and tries to explain his emergency situation. “Dad, please listen because I don’t have much time. I’m stuck in Afghanistan. I don’t have any money. I may need you to make some calls.” Bissell’s father, who has no idea his son is in Afghanistan in the first place, misinterprets his son’s
emergency request—fearing the worst, he thinks his son is being held captive. For Bissell, this results in the following realization: “the unimaginable had become my life, not his. I was him, and he was me” (62). This reversal of roles seems to enact what Bissell earlier calls his “own attempt to approximate something of what [his] father went through.” But where does approximation end and appropriation begin? How and when do the father’s “war wounds” become the son’s?

Part of the difficulty of better understanding the past involves the levels of fable, myth, memory and history that are entangled in the second-generation. Though it is clear he has no memory or lived experience of the war, Bissell nonetheless describes his life as deeply impacted by the legacy of Vietnam. As evident from the opening paragraph of the article, his specific relationship to the Vietnam War is defined by generational difference and historical distance, and the mediated forms of knowledge that have shaped his reception of it:

In the beginning was the war. Many children of Vietnam veterans, when they look back on their adolescence, feel this with appropriately biblical conviction. In the beginning was the war. It sits there, in our fathers’ pasts, a dying star that annihilates anything that strays too close. For the growing-up children of many vets the war’s remoteness was all but impossible to gauge because it had happened pre-you, before you had come to grasp the sheer accident of your own placement in time, before you recognized that your reality—your bedroom, your toys and comic books—had nothing to do with the reality of your father. Despite its remoteness, however, the war’s aftereffects were inescapably intimate. At every meal Vietnam sat down, invisibly, with our families. (57)

Uncannily, like an unwelcome guest or mysterious ghost, the legacy of Vietnam insinuates itself into the lives of those born after the war. Bissell offers an important précis here on the paradoxes of inheritance for the children of Vietnam war veterans like himself: the war is immeasurably distant and remote yet “inescapably intimate” and close; the war underscores “the sheer accident” of historical contingency while marking “the beginning” of a narratological teleology;
the war’s presence is at once ordinary, everyday and earthly, something or someone that sits down with the family at every meal, and at the same time, extraordinary, singular, and otherworldly, a dense dark matter destructive in the force of its gravitational pull. For Bissell, the dynamics of cross-generational transmission and communication between him and his father are thus radically mediated, indirect and oblique, yet ineluctably powerful. In what may be the essay’s clearest expression of the lessons that can be drawn from the paradoxical situation of those born later, Bissell writes: “War senselessly wounds everyone right down the line.” What Bissell then effectively narrates in “War Wounds,” whose title I read as a suspension between compound noun and declarative sentence, is the grammatical transposition and psychological transmission of wounds from one generation to the next. This claim, that war wounds not only the soldiers who fought and civilians who were embroiled in the war, certainly speaks truth to the social consequences of the war. Yet, within the context of the second-generation memory, it also suggests how the second generation claims the suffering of the past for themselves. This is what Eva Hoffman cautioned against because it can lead to self-indulgence if it is not checked by a consciousness that the second-generation, in fact, do not bear the same wounds as the first. At times in his narrative, Bissell can sound very close to claiming his father’s wounds as his own.

Wounded senselessly by war, Bissell presents himself as the troubled but resolute heir to the legacy of Vietnam. That Bissell’s autobiographical essay is carefully and artfully constructed as a work of inheritance is most evident in the form of his narration. Bissell’s decision to write “War Wounds” from the first-person perspective means that we learn about Vietnam and its lasting significance for both father and son through the son’s eyes, and consequently, our understanding is limited to what he perceives, or is unable to perceive. This technique tends to foreground the indirect and mediated forms of both Bissell’s personal reception and narrative
representation of his father’s past memories and present experience. Everything we hear from Bissell’s father necessarily comes in the form of reported speech. Sometimes Bissell treats this inherent limitation with a comedic and self-deprecating touch, making himself look a little like an over-anxious reporter trying to extract a minute-by-minute account of his father’s thoughts and feelings: “So how do you feel?”, “You’re sure you’re up for seeing some of your old stomping grounds!”, “I’m sensing some anxiety here. You’re sweating,” “How do you feel about the Viet-Cong now?” (63). Half of what we hear Bissell say to his father seems to be in the form of a question. At other times, however, his father remains aloof, contemplative, and silent, beyond Bissell’s attempts at comprehension. In a key passage, Bissell and his father comb the beach at Qui Nhon in order to locate the site—“a thin stand of coastline palm trees, unaltered since 1965”—where his father first landed as a Marine. The unchanged landscape, interestingly described by Bissell as if he too had seen it in 1965, intensifies the overall sense of return, and further “hardens his memory into place.” Whose memory hardens into place? If it is Bissell’s father’s, then how does Bissell know? As I read it, the indeterminate pronoun is indicative of Bissell’s continuous desire to approximate—or appropriate—his father’s experience. While Bissell accompanies his father on his journey of return and reconciliation, he can only go so far:

We stand looking out on the endless sea in a black grid of shadows cast by the cranes and scaffolds of the resort being built a few dozen yards away. I begin asking him questions, but very gently he asks if I might not give him a moment. Instantly I realize my error. He cannot talk right now, and he stares out at the ocean in both confusion and recognition. I fall silent. This is where the man I know as my father was born. It is as though he is looking upon himself through a bloody veil of memory. (62)

Whatever Bissell’s father may be thinking or feeling, he chooses not to share it with his son and prefers the privacy of his own response. At critical moments such as this, John Bissell seems to resist his son’s attempts at descriptive interpretation (‘He stares out at the ocean in both
confusion and recognition”) and comprehension (“This is where the man I know as my father was born”), despite the son’s attempts to narrate the return scene as one of reconciliation in which the father confronts the loss and pain of his time in war “through a bloody veil of memory” (62). Here again, Tom Bissell’s identification, it is important to note, is of gendered nature. The war in Vietnam is evoked as a crucible of his father’s identity, ambiguously described in the line, “This is where the man I know as my father was born.” The birth metaphor places John Bissell’s specifically male identity in Vietnam. Throughout the essay, the son seems to be searching for his own male identity vis-à-vis his father. This may partly explain Tom Bissell’s curious and self-confessed obsession for “sites of suffering”—contemporary war zones that he is able to witness. The stakes of Bissell’s identification with his father have everything to do with his sense of authority and self-authorship as a male writer. This over identification is captured when Tom Bissell calls his father: “I was him, he was me” (62). Perhaps the stakes of Bissell’s identification with his father result in a paradox or crisis of authority. Claiming an identity as a son of a Vietnam veteran both allows him to authorize his own narrative of self-discovery and also burdens him with that same history. The burden of this history is most evident in the book that emerged out of the essay, ”War Wounds,” which includes large, undigested quotations and even an annotated bibliography of historical studies on the Vietnam War.

“War Wounds” is just as much about the nature of memory and what it means to be deeply affected by something that you have no personal or direct memory of as it is about the process of finding a form to adequately represent the forms of mediation that structure the position of the second-generation. The first-person, of course, inheres in the literary genre of memoir. A piece of autobiographical writing, though distinct from the comprehensiveness of typical autobiography, a memoir reconstructs an event or series of events lodged in memory and
reflects on the significance of these events. Moreover, especially as marketed by the publishing industry, memoirs typically center on personal crises and struggles, in which the process of writing the memoir itself, with the concomitant emphasis on retrospective understanding and resolution, becomes a therapeutic experience for the memoirist and promises closure for the reader. Given these salient features of conventional memoir, to what degree can Bissell’s “War Wounds” be considered a memoir? If at the root of memoir is memory and lived experience, then how do children of Vietnam veterans give shape and form, as Bissell self-reflexively describes, to an event that is “all but impossible to gauge because it happened pre-you” (57)? Because so much of the article surrounds his father’s war wounds, Bissell’s text is not entirely rooted in his own memory or lived experience. Rather, it seems rooted in something more intimate than history, but less immediate than memory.

An important narrative thread in “War Wounds” challenges the division between Bissell’s version, or copy, of his father’s story and his father’s original story, between remembering and forgetting, lived and imagined experience. The thread entails the father and son’s conflicting and contradictory versions of how John Bissell was severely wounded in the war and how he survived. The details that surround his father’s war wounds, first told to him during his childhood in what he recalls as his father’s frequent and obsessive late-night confessions to his ten-year old self, represent an essential piece of received knowledge for Bissell: “I know what happened. My father was shot—in the back, buttock, arm, and shoulder—at the beginning of a roadside melee and was dragged to safety by a black soldier” (57). This event is actually first alluded to early on in the article (in “The time he was wounded and how a heroic black soldier dragged him to safety”), not necessarily as something Bissell is told by his father, but as one of the “elaborate stories about his father” he would tell to his school friends.
It is not until father and son visit the narrow dirt road in the village of Tuy Phuoc where his father remembers being wounded that Bissell must acknowledge the uncertainty and falsification of his version of the story. For according to Bissell’s father, he never got shot, but was wounded by a roadside bomb blast; he has no recollection of who dragged him to safety, let alone of the man’s race; and lastly, he does not think he ever even told his son the story about his war wounds. Bissell eventually admits to having no memory of listening to the reputed story of his father’s war wounds, only a memory of telling it to others. Not only do their conflicting versions ultimately expose Bissell’s long-held “true” story to be a compensatory childhood tale of heroism and rescue, the episode also reveals him to be an unreliable narrator in a fundamental way. At the very least, it allows us to consider the blurring of fact and fiction, remembrance and forgetting, in the very narrative texture of Bissell’s Vietnam legacy narrative. In a self-reflexive moment toward the end of the essay, Bissell puts these questions to himself: “How much else about him have I gotten wrong? How much of him have I not properly understood? What have I not asked?” (65) These and other questions are also directed at the reader of “War Wounds.” In After Such Knowledge, Eva Hoffman describes a similar kind of discrepancy between her childhood knowledge and her parents’ actual memory. Hoffmann writes, “if we insist on fidelity to our childhood knowledge, we may run the risk of being unfaithful to what our parents themselves knew” (194). Hoffman cites how shocked she’d been to discover, several years after her parents’ death, just how impressively coherent their stories actually were as captured in video testimony, how informed and rational—especially when compared with her own childhood memories.

In the penultimate passage of “War Wounds,” and the last that takes place in Vietnam, Bissell narrates a scene of reconciliation between his father and a Vietnamese man around his
father’s age. The recounted scene, I should also note, immediately follows the questions Bissell asks above. Still in the village of Tuy Phuoc after visiting the place where his father was wounded, Bissell relates how “At last, a lone Vietnamese man shoelessly wanders over to say hello” (65). The sudden appearance of this shoeless Vietnamese man is nothing short of dramatic, like a new and nameless character entering stage right for the closing scene. Once again, Bissell is left on the margins, listening and observing to the momentous exchange:

I listen to my father and his new Vietnamese friend talk respectfully around the small matter of having taken up arms against each other as young men: Yes, my father has been to Vietnam before; no, the Vietnamese man did not always live in the south. Their conversation slides into a respectful silence, and they nod and look at each other. With a smile, the man suddenly asks my father what brings him to Tuy Phuoc, since it is so far away from anything of note. For a long time my father thinks about how to answer, looking up at the low gray clouds, a few small trapezoids of blue showing through. To Hien he finally says, ‘Tell him…tell him that, a very long time ago, I got hurt here.’ (65)

Did this moving scene of reconciliation actually happen? If so, did it happen the way Bissell narrates it? Might it not represent a compensatory narrative of reconciliation? Such questions are ultimately impossible to answer. But I do want to entertain the possibility that this scene of reconciliation is made up, like the “elaborate stories about [his] father” that the young Bissell used to tell to his school friends. To entertain such a possibility is not to discredit the authenticity or veracity of the scene’s relation to reality per se, but to highlight the narrative structure and artifice that undergirds its representational status. In this culminating scene of reconciliation, Vietnam and the Vietnamese actually seem placed in the foreground. Throughout most of the article’s scenes of return, however, Vietnam and the Vietnamese remained largely in the background. The description of the landscape is thick; the people, when they are seen populating it, are literally and figuratively described as thin. Throughout, Bissell and his father are accompanied by an interpreter named, Hien, whom we know very little of and who talks only
in response to their curious questions. Even in this last scene, the nameless Vietnamese man seems, in my mind, placed there rather too mechanically and conveniently in order to play the reconciliatory role, the figure of the former enemy turned friend. At least from Bissell’s perspective, the central drama is still about his father and him. Despite being one of the most memorable and moving recent texts by the second-generation, “War Wounds” is a still deeply familiar Vietnam text in this way: Vietnam and the Vietnamese serve as the panoramic background to the unfolding drama of American return and recovery between a father, a son, and the wars between them. The Vietnamese man’s question, moreover, suggests a certain naïveté or forgetfulness about the past. Whether the scene is fictionalized or not, Bissell’s representation of the Vietnamese is problematic because the Vietnamese function merely as agents of reconciliation. As interpreter and guide, for instance, Hien serves as a literal mediator for Bissell’s return and reconciliation. The Vietnamese, for the most part, are not presented as having histories of their own or individual identities. While they both travel to Vietnam, both narratives by Bissell and Trussoni foreground the painful experience of American Vietnam veterans, embodied by their respective fathers.

The Vietnamese audience embodied by Hien shapes what Bissell’s father can say about reconciliation. Bissell Sr. re-scripts his own “war wounds” at once as a “hurt” more benign than what his son anticipates but also at a level more comprehensible to his Vietnamese interlocutor. His message is multiply mediated, first through his interpreter, Hien, and then across language and culture. The father’s response is understated and vague, suggesting that the war—not mentioned—is historically distant (“a very long time ago”) and Bissell’s father is now emotionally more distant from what happened to him. Tom Bissell stages this scene of reconciliation through an ambivalent form of witness. In the end, he stands by and reports his
father’s words, and the way in which those words are transmitted—from the father, to the interpreter, to the unnamed man, then recorded by Bissell—highlight the notion of transmission. Its unstated and simple message leaves the listener with more questions than answers. On the one hand, the deliberate simplicity is an expression of the father’s stoicism; it explains nothing and is wrapped in a protective silence. On the other hand, the understated address is an ironic expression for those people—like the son, the Vietnamese audience, or the reader—who know better.

_Ghostwriting A Life in Three Wars:_
**Andrew X. Pham’s _The Eaves of Heaven_**

Despite their marked differences, each of the three legacy narratives discussed so far draw attention to the mediation, belatedness, and incommensurability that attend to the post-war second-generation. The memory, history, and legacy of the war are mediated in these narratives by numerous channels, be they familial, cultural or textual. The narratives recount how, in their search to better understand Vietnam and their fathers, members of the second-generation watch movies, read books, misremember stories, travel to Vietnam, and fashion, or sometimes fabricate, false memories or alternative stories. To different degrees, the second-generation’s legacy narratives foreground their mediated position to the war’s legacy vis-à-vis their father’s stories and memories. Whereas Danielle Trussoni assimilates her mediated position to the particular history of Vietnam within a tightly woven first-person memoir, Tom Bissell self-consciously foregrounds issues of mediation shaping his own representation of the war’s legacy. Departing from both approaches, the writer Andrew X. Pham represents one of the more interesting and provocative cases of a second-generation writer whose work about the war’s legacy does not take up these issues.
Born in Saigon, Vietnam in 1967, Andrew X. Pham moved to California with his family after the war. In his first book, *Catfish and Mandala*, published in 2000, Pham narrates the legacy of the war from his own embattled perspective as a Vietnamese American of the “1.5 Generation.” With his second book, *The Eaves of Heaven*, Pham takes a different approach by narrating not his own, but rather his father’s life in three wars. In both books, Pham positions himself as a vessel or conduit through which history and memory pass, first by narrating his own personal journey and second by giving voice to his father’s story. In two separate scenes in *Catfish and Mandala*, for instance, Pham recalls meeting an American veteran in New Mexico and a one-legged veteran in Vietnam. “Tell them about me […] Tell him I’m sorry,” the American veteran says when Pham shares his plans about returning to Vietnam (9). Serving as a cultural intermediary and messenger, Pham is called upon to take on a dutiful role as a storyteller and an agent of reconciliation. Pham continues this project in *The Eaves of Heaven* by telling his father’s life story.

Presented entirely in the first-person of the father’s voice, *The Eaves of Heaven* is essentially the memoir of Thong Van Pham’s life in Vietnam as ghostwritten by his son. As suggested by its subtitle, “A Life in Three Wars,” the book invokes and negotiates the genres of memoir or life writing and history writing. The first-person narration of that life creates a sense of the father giving an account of his life or writing his own memoirs; that is, it is meant to read as if written from memory. As he states in author’s note, Pham’s act of invisible narration is a kind of faithful ventriloquism: “I have lent his life stories my words. The perspectives and sentiments within are his” (xv). Pham has *authored* his father’s “life stories,” but at the same time the words we are reading, he assures us, have been authorized and authenticated by his father’s own “perspectives and sentiments” (xv). As author and son, Andrew X. Pham renders
his position as interlocutor and inheritor of his father’s life stories virtually invisible. Unlike the second-generation memoirs by Bissell and Trussoni, Pham calls very little attention to the scene of story telling and transmission between the father and the son. Aspiring toward a level of narrative invisibility, Pham writes as if languages, culture, and temporal distance represented no impediments to his act of faithful and filial transcription. Written with his father, Pham’s collaboration produces a seamless, smoothed out, and flattened story in the voice of his father. At the heart of such a narrative technique is a notion not only of language as transparent, but also of memories as contained and self-sufficient.

In this way, The Eaves of Heaven offers a moving but problematic attempt to fulfill an ethical responsibility as a second-generation storyteller enjoined to represent the life and history of the Vietnamese diaspora. Vietnamese diasporic critics have called on writers, artists, and intellectuals to perform such projects of mourning and recovery to address the forgotten and invisible legacies of the war, especially related to the former South Vietnam. As a ghostwriter of his father’s story, Andrew X. Pham performs precisely the role that Yen Lê Espiritu prescribes for diasporic writers when she argues that they “have to be willing to become tellers of ghost stories” (xix). Taking up this task, The Eaves of Heaven presents the lost subjects of history in the Vietnam War, namely the South Vietnamese, as embodied by his father. The book alternates between Thong’s memories of growing up in the countryside in the North and his memories of working as a teacher in the South. For instance, the first chapter is entitled “Leaving Home” and is marked as “The South, May 1956.” The concluding dates, of course, correspond with the seismic upheavals: the partition of the country in 1954, which lead, amongst other things, to the mass internal migration of peoples across the parallel; in particular a migration of Vietnamese Catholics from northern Vietnam to the South. The dates also correspond with the mass exodus
of people associated with the fall of Saigon or the liberation of the South. In its structure, as well as its form of narration, *The Eaves of Heaven* suggests circularity and continuity, a sense of redeeming a lost time and place. *The Eaves of Heaven* represents what the discourse of reconciliation surrounding the war in Vietnam often fails to adequately address and redress: the historical agency and suffering of southern Vietnamese.

Exposing the structures and fractures of the Vietnamese family, *The Eaves of Heaven* binds the father’s life story with the fate of civil war between North and South Vietnam. Thong’s most profound statement of this notion comes towards the end of the book: “It was a conflict between brothers. No matter which side won, the family lost” (282). Not surprisingly in a divided nation, Thong views the war through the family frame of domestic conflict and civil war, a trope common, for example, in narratives about the U.S. Civil War. What is being mourned in this ghostwritten autobiography is the loss of the family—a culturally and socially specific Vietnamese family, which is an essentially patriarchal structure. From beginning to end, the book is concerned with family, filiations, and generations. The Prologue, titled “Ancestors,” firmly establishes the concept of generations as the organizing trope of the book. It expresses a desire to recover roots. “So it went from generation to generation, both land and titles pass as birthrights from fathers to the firstborn sons” (2). Through the family saga centered on the figure of the father, the memoir seeks to recover and represent an image of the family. One of the recurring themes of the book is the erosion of values represented by a specifically Vietnamese structure of familial relations. Various forces—political, social and cultural—threaten the family in *The Eaves of Heaven*. From early on, the image of the family seems under erasure or questioned, not by communism, but by forces of capitalism and colonialism and modernity: the father lives and works in the city, separated from his family and mother who all stay on the wealthy estate in the
countryside; the father’s infidelity is marked by rumors that he has a mistress in the city. At the same time that these familial divisions are recounted, the story offers up praise of the mother’s sacrifice and obligation to the family. The father loses his inheritance of land and property and social standing, which is more-or-less feudal in nature. In the very basic sense, then, the book mourns the loss of the possibility of inheritance given the obsolescence of the social structures that would insure and facilitate the passing on of capital—through family name—from one generation to the next, from one son to another.

Such attachment and fidelity, like Andrew X. Pham’s, to the powerful stories passed on to the second-generation by their parents runs the risk of an uncritical reception of the constructed past. By ghost writing his father’s life story, Pham would seem to enact what Lisa Lowe questioningly refers to as the “unmediated vertical transmission of culture from one generation to another” (65). Lowe warns against interpreting Asian-American culture through narratives of generational conflict because she sees other “conflicts” of social location—racial, class, and gender—being evaded in the paradigmatic generational story. Similarly, to recall Eva Hoffman’s warning for the second generation: “In a way, we have needed to separate our voices from the spell binding, significance-laden voices of the survivors, to stop being ventriloquists for our parents” (188). Not unlike Lowe, Hoffman claims that ventriloquism is a kind of uncritical reception and transmission of family narratives that the second generation must be conscious of and possibly resist. While Andrew X. Pham’s narrative filial piety honors and respects the significance of his father’s life story and the history of South Vietnam, *The Eaves of Heaven* as a whole remains uncritical of the patriarchal structures that undergird the story and uncritical of the cultural and political assumptions shaping American foreign policy in Vietnam.
By giving voice to the memory, history, and legacy of his father’s life across through wars within a narrative of civil unrest and domestic conflict, Pham suggests that reconciliation for southern Vietnamese begins from different premises than reconciliation for northern Vietnamese and Americans. For southern Vietnamese, inside Vietnam and living in the diaspora, the process of reconciliation would begin with acknowledging differences and the differing historical injuries, such as forced relocation, imprisonment, and confiscated property, inflicted upon southern Vietnamese under the post-war Communist regime change. The life story of Pham’s father records all of these historical injuries, and in doing so, represents what reconciliation surrounding the war in Vietnam would have to account for it were to live up to its name.

The Vietnam legacy narratives discussed in this chapter offer complex portraits of the second generation’s struggle to comprehend a past that remains unreconciled; they also imaginatively and critically re-familiarize an American public with the legacy of the Vietnam War at particular historical and cultural junctures. The very existence of such narratives, both about and by children of Vietnam veterans, suggests that the war’s legacy still occupies an embattled position within American cultural memory, one that is continuously being received, interpreted, and contested. Legacy narratives variously underscore the generational differences and historical distance mediating the children of Vietnam veterans’ knowledge of the past—its reception, interpretation, and representation—and thereby shaping what specific forms of cultural memory are produced, and who may produce them. As participants in the production of and debate over the cultural memory of the Vietnam War, legacy narratives, then, are not only indicative of but are also responsive to the prevailing politics of memory as historically situated texts written by socially located authors. Written in and from the hinge between generations,
Vietnam legacy narratives are also about the forms of mediation that shape relations to the past and the present, including their own mediated and mediating forms of proxy witness. By reframing its legacy through stories of family dysfunction, personal self-discovery, and social upheaval, Vietnam legacy narratives testify to the lasting interpersonal and social consequences of war on the home front.
CHAPTER FOUR

Not Coming to Terms: Diaspora, Multidirectional Memory, and Limits of Reconciliation

In previous chapters, I examined the literature of reconciliation mainly by reading recent works by American and Vietnamese writers representing the respective U.S. and North Vietnamese historical and cultural perspectives on the war. I attempted to draw attention to the politics of representation in these works by pointing to the identificatory investments and differing stakes of return and reconciliation for the writers. The politics of representing reconciliation are further complicated in the remainder of this study, which turns towards diasporic Vietnamese poets, Phan Nhien Hao and Linh Dinh, whose various forms of poetic intervention and interference help foreground the limits of reconciliation and suggest the potential work of irreconciliation for an enlarged view of the past and the present. This chapter considers the case of contemporary Vietnamese poet Phan Nhien Hao to argue that his diasporic poetics perform a counterpublic witness to the multilayered memories and conflicting ideologies of Vietnamese diaspora, a self-conscious articulation of irreconciliation that I suggest is also an unacknowledged problem and possibility for reconciliation.

Poet, critic, essayist, and translator, Phan Nhien Hao, is the author of two collections of poems in Vietnamese, Thiên Đường Chuông Giấy [Paradise of Paper Bells] and Chế Tạo Thơ Ca 99-04 [Manufacturing Poetry 99-04]. By combining surrealist imagery with a deceptively plain-spoken voice, his poetry digs up the psychic debris left in the wake of war and immigration. His poems are shot-through with veiled allusions to personal memories and larger histories, and the two are, more often than not, entangled. His is a nocturnal poetry, by turns
dreamlike and nightmarish, quiet and disquieting, ironic and dead serious, sometimes melancholic, often introspective, and ever vigilant. Night is the secret province of Phan’s poetry, and is emblematic of a limited, limiting freedom. His poems tell the open secrets of Vietnam’s postwar history of loss, imprisonment, displacement, and cultural amnesia. As a Vietnamese poet working overseas, he remains unpublished and un publishable in Vietnam.

**The Unreconciled Witness**

Phan Nhien Hao’s life and work capture part of the predicament of writing in, to, and from the Vietnamese diaspora. Growing up in Vietnam during the immediate postwar years, Phan faced the harsh realities of cultural amnesia that denied historical agency to South Vietnam, which can be summed up by the designation of South Vietnamese as “puppets” of the Americans. Set against the scarred cultural and political landscape of postwar Vietnam, Phan’s childhood memories greatly impacted his consciousness. Border wars, food shortages, social marginalization, boat people and immigration, cultural amnesia and regimes of censorship are just some of the things that a young Phan witnessed and experienced first-hand before his immigration at the age of 21.

Phan’s partisan poetics of diaspora continues to take sides on the war and to block reconciliation, while also articulating the multidirectionality of diasporic memory through a counterpublic witness. I read Phan’s work, then, partly as an enactment of Yen Le Espiritu’s call for Vietnamese American writers to “become tellers of ghost stories” by drawing attention to “what modern history has rendered ghostly” (xix). Similarly, Phan’s diasporic poetics articulates historical and cultural perspectives on the war and its aftermath that have been missing from prevailing Vietnamese homeland and U.S. representations of reconciliation, namely the lives of
Vietnamese from former South Vietnam and the experience of displacement. By thus “writing outside of the nation,” to use Azade Seyhan’s conception of diasporic writing, Phan’s poetry represents a “a conscious effort to transmit a linguistic and cultural heritage that is articulated through acts of personal and collective memory” (12). The selection of poetry and prose work in this chapter follows Phan’s attempts to articulate the alternative voices and histories of the Vietnamese diaspora, to remember the dead and lost subjects of the war and its aftermath, and to explore his own hybrid identity between homeland and diaspora, past and present.

Yet, despite the necessary intervention represented by these conscious efforts, through a model that reinforces a “competitive memory” model, Phan’s work also shows how these acts of cultural transmission are limited and limiting. In what I take as a caution against a tendency to uphold positions and representational modes given in advance, Isabelle Thuy Pelaud argues that the study of Vietnamese American literature and history should bear in mind “how one can study the external forces that shape Vietnamese American identity and articulate this identity while acknowledging the impossibility of fully encapsulating it, and while recognizing the imperfect nature of generalizations” (2). Pelaud outlines a flexible strategy of diasporic Vietnamese writing that “works with, against, or aside from normative narratives of the Viet Nam War and its aftermath” (58). By extending the implications of this flexible strategy for my study, I consider the ways in which Phan’s writing can be read as accommodating, resisting, and eluding normative narratives of the war and its legacy.

A number of unresolved contradictions structure Phan Nhien Hao’s diasporic poetics. First, in representing the lost and missing subjects of history, his poems work against one normative narrative of reconciliation and simultaneously with another normative narrative. Specifically, on the one hand his poems offer a warranted critique of Vietnamese homeland
politics of reconciliation, and their attendant master narratives of national reunification and renovation, while on the other hand his poems unnecessarily reinforce familiar U.S. multicultural narratives of refugee plight, anti-Communism, and cultural assimilation. This multidirectional aspect of Phan’s work—working against and with different normative narratives—is connected to another, more figural dimension of his poetry.

Second, his diasporic poetics are engaged in two related, but perhaps conflicting, symbolic actions. On the one hand, his poems tell the “open secrets” of postwar Vietnam. They divulge secrets already widely known, but unacknowledged, by the public—and these secrets happen to be the very things that get left out of the official version of post-war reconciliation. Imprisonment, reeducation, relocation, and refugee flight—these publically unacknowledged histories are the “open secrets” undermining reconciliation for Phan Nhien Hao and his diasporic subjects. On the other hand, his poems keep secret certain private experiences. This process conceals the “identity”—the name, the place, etc.—of the lyric subject with the effect of creating a sense of interiority, autonomy, and hidden meaning. The latter conceals and wraps his speakers and personas in mystery, while the former reveals or uncovers shared experiences of suffering. The two competing impulses—towards telling the open secrets of the Vietnamese diaspora and keeping a private experience secret—structure Phan’s poetry irreconcilably. This unreconciled tension is at the heart of Phan’s work, which offers a representation of reconciliation as asymmetrical, multidirectional, and uneven. Phan is important to my study because he offers an instructive example of a writer from the Vietnamese diaspora whose work appears to evade, if not resist, the thematics of reconciliation present in much of the postwar literature by writers from the U.S., Vietnamese homeland, and diaspora; yet he also produces a unique and engaging body of poetry and non-fiction prose that gives testimony to the historical and cultural
perspectives on the war from the vantage of a southern Vietnamese of the post-war generation now living in the diaspora.

**Portraying Diaspora**

The tensions above play out instructively in the following poem, entitled “Portraits of 3 Overseas Vietnamese (who are not quite patriotic).” In this poem, translated into English by Linh Dinh and included in *Night, Fish and Charlie Parker*, Phan Nhien Hao documents the lived realities of those who have lived through war and displacement. The poem offers a telling, if somewhat conventional, example of representing an emergent diasporic Vietnamese identity formed in large part through a shared history of suffering attributed to post-war communist excesses. Composed of three parts, “Portraits” depicts the lives of four different Vietnamese living in the diaspora: part one is a portrait of a former refugee named Ms. Ly who fled Vietnam by boat; part two is a portrait of an older Vietnamese couple who were able to immigrate to the U.S. through the Humanitarian Operation program set up for former South Vietnamese who were affiliated with the prior Saigon government or worked for the U.S.; and part three is ostensibly a self-portrait of the poet. The title frames these “portraits” within the discourse of Vietnamese diaspora, or more specifically, within the specific cultural frame of reference invoked by the Vietnamese term “Việt kiều.” Recall my earlier discussion in Chapter One of Nguyễn Duy’s poem “To the Vietnamese Living in Foreign Lands,” where I argued that Nguyễn Duy’s poem emptied Vietnamese diaspora of its historical and political content in order to secure his conciliatory call for “Vietnamese Living in Foreign Lands” to return to a Vietnam which his

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31 The poem was originally published online in the Australia-based Vietnamese webzine, Tiền Vệ, on July 9, 2004. It is not included in either of Phan Nhienie Hao’s two books of poetry published in Vietnamese, which were published in 1998 and 2004 respectively.
poem imagined in a pre-war vision of pastoral nostalgia. Just as soon as the diasporic subjects of Phan Nhien Hao’s poem are invoked, the title’s parenthetical qualification about their questionable patriotism preemptively counters the potential interpretation, or rather, interpellation of the diasporic subject within the center-periphery model and exile-return telos promoted by Nguyễn Duy. The title’s parenthetical description of these Vietnamese, “who are not quite patriotic,” functions as an ironic aside aimed at the rhetoric surrounding Việt kiều, or overseas Vietnamese, and captures the ambivalence of the diasporic connection to not only one’s former homeland but also adopted country.32 Here are the first two “Portraits”:

I

Ms. Ly lived for more than two decades in Colorado
where there were few Vietnamese and Winter was harsh
she was once a worker in a shoe factory
a packer in a meat plant
a caregiver in a retirement home
now 66 years old she has returned to warm California
she receives 610 dollars in social security a month
this small amount makes everything too expensive for her
when encountering a strange English word on the streets
she writes it down to look up in a dictionary at home
she said: “Only words are free.”

Escaping by sea, in the Gulf of Thailand, she had to take it all.

II

Their hairs are completely white
the wife wears ao dais and the husband out of habit a suit

32 A humorous example of this ambivalence toward Việt kiều, as well as the multiple meanings of the term, can be found in Andrew Lam’s *Perfume Dreams: Reflections on the Vietnamese Diaspora* (New York: Heyday Book, 2005). According to a Vietnamese motorcycle taxi driver Andrew Lam talks to during his return trip, there are at least four kinds of Việt kiều. They include: “Viet kieu dom: fake Viet Kieus,” “Viet kieu moi di da ve: those who recently left and have already returned,” “Viet kieu chin cong: the real Viet Kieu,” and finally the Viet kieu in question, “Viet kieu yeu nuoc: patriotic Vietnamese expats” (116). Lam relates his driver’s humorous and revealing interpretation of the meaning of patriotic Vietnamese expats: “It’s what the government calls all returning Vietnamese from abroad—essentially giving a theme to those who return, no matter what their reasons may be. In my honest opinion, Brother, these people don’t exist. If they really are patriotic, why would they escape in the first place? I myself wouldn’t fit this category had I left and come back. I am not patriotic and I haven’t even left.”
as when he was a judge in Saigon
they came to the US 15 years ago in the H.O. program
all of the husband’s strength and youth were buried in the ground
along with manioc roots on the Hoang Lien Son mountains
in 1978 when he was in reeducation camp
the wife at home twice had to borrow money to buy insecticide
to cook a last meal for herself and their four children
a difficult period, no one had money to lend.

Even now her hand trembles each time she seasons while cooking. (57)

Formally and stylistically, a number of things should be immediately noticeable upon reading the first two parts or portraits: the detachment between the speaker and his eponymous diasporic subject produced by the third-person perspective of the poem; the prosaic not poetic style of the biographical sketch of the diasporic subject; the ambivalent identities of the subjects as diasporic subjects; and lastly, the tension between private memory and collective history. These first two portraits reference different historical experiences of escape and immigration for Vietnamese overseas. In the first portrait of Bà Lý, we learn that she “escap[ed] by sea” [vượt biên] in the Gulf of Thailand. In the second portrait of the older couple, we learn that “they came to the US 15 years ago in the H.O. program.” These references historicize and politicize Phan Nhien Hao’s representation of Vietnamese diaspora by alluding to harsh post-war Communist policies such as “reeducation camps.” In Vietnamese, the politically charged word, “vượt biên,” for instance, signifies the mass exodus of Vietnamese boat people escaping from Communist governed Vietnam; the “H.O. program” alludes to the U.S. policy of immigration. Such biographical details deliberately connect the particular experiences of these individuals to a collective identity borne through a shared experience of suffering and maintained through a narrative of that experience. As a juxtaposition of multiple portraits, Phan Nhien Hao represents the “3 Vietnamese overseas” through a collective memory about the homeland. Here, they are depicted as “victims” of communist excess. Serving a representational and symbolic function, they stand-
in for the countless other Vietnamese lives in the diaspora which the poem cannot possibly account for. Indeed, the first two sections of “Portraits” are written mostly in a style that calls to mind the prosaic, non-fictional forms of journalism and sociology.

In these portraits of diasporic subjects, Phan Nhien Hao invokes the biographical and realist forms of representation that are very much in keeping with multicultural narratives of refugee flight from Vietnam and cultural assimilation in the U.S. As a point of comparison, consider the first person accounts of trauma in Sucheng Chan’s *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation*, an oral history of what the subtitle refers to as “Stories of War, Revolution, Flight, and New Beginnings.” Working at the intersection of Asian American Studies, History and U.S. Ethnic Studies, Chan’s pioneering study combines personal narratives from her former Vietnamese American students with her own contextualizing historical overviews. Describing the first person accounts, Chan writes: “They are eyewitness accounts of a war, a Communist revolution, and a refugee outflow seared into the memories of both Vietnamese and Americans. They document at an intimate personal level momentous events of great historical interest” (xi). For Chan, the value of these Vietnamese diasporic life stories lies in the way in which they scale down the geopolitical “events of great historical experience” to the smaller scale of individual experience (xi). In other words, they form a constellation of representative narratives. Returning to Phan Nhien Hao’s “Portraits,” we can better see how the first two sections of this poem in particular are in keeping with the type of first-person accounts of trauma in Chan’s book. They are straightforwardly transparent representations of immigrant suffering due to communist excess and very much in keeping with literary works that are the stock in trade of multiculturalism. In short, they resist the normative narrative associated with Nguyen Duy’s call to Vietnamese overseas to return to a reunified and renovated Vietnam, but Phan Nhien Hao’s
“Portraits” also reinforces the normative narrative associated with the master narrative of American benevolence towards Vietnamese refugees. The specter of violence, alienation, and melancholy in Phan Nhien Hao’s poetry marks his resistance to national re-assimilation and reconciliation and represents an emergent and traumatized diasporic identity.

The representational mode of the final lines departs from the previous lines by representing trauma through more familiarly poetic means of image, linguistic compression, and semantic insinuation. With the force of a sonnet’s concluding couplet, each of the concluding lines in Phan Nhien Hao’s “Portraits” contain poetic images that invoke a subjective experience beyond that captured by the preceding modes of representation, or what I have been referring to as their prosaic and sociological mode of representing the lives of these diasporic subjects. The biographical sketch of Bà Lý, for instance, focuses mainly on the external outlines of her life since arriving in the U.S.—over two decades living in Colorado, numerous wage-labor jobs, and retirement in California—but ends with a glimpse of her internal life as a woman and immigrant still struggling with cultural, linguistic and psychic dislocation. Similarly, the second portrait records painful events of the past—the husband’s time in reeducation camp and the wife’s trials to survive. The concluding lines of the second portrait, which allude to an interim period of regime change in which Bà Lý’s husband was punished for collaborating with the U.S. and Bà Lý herself was twice on the brink of murder/suicide through the act of “seasoning” her and her children’s food with insecticide, document the way in which the war lives on in the bodies and minds of those Vietnamese who had cooperated with the American-sponsored regime in the south. “Even now her hand trembles each time she seasons while cooking” is a devastating line in its evocation of historic injury lived through the ordinariness of everyday life.
Given the preceding discussion, do the final lines continue to reinforce the normative narrative of refugee suffering but through other means? Part of the difficulty of answering this question is that the poetic figures of the final lines forestall ready interpretation. Instead, they confront us with a number of questions: If “her hand trembles each time she seasons while cooking,” who possesses the knowledge that her trembling hand is an embodied manifestation of enduring trauma? Do the portrait and its final line suggest that she possesses this self-knowledge—the secret source of her trembling—or is it something that the poet and narrator knows? And if it is in fact the poet and narrator who possess this knowledge, how did they access it? Compared with the prosaic and objective mode of representing diaspora exemplified by Chan’s *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation* and offered in the main of “Portraits,” the concluding poetic images signify unspoken and sometimes unspeakable private experience. While those experiences seem traumatic in nature, their very representational indeterminacy resists complete assimilation in the normative, biographical narrative of the rest of the poem. Written with greater verbal compression and poetic imagery, the final lines gesture to unreconciled private experiences not available to those earlier modes of representation.

This anti-absorptive quality carries over into the third and final section. While the first two sections present fairly conventional and recognizable “Portraits” of immigrant suffering, the third and final section curiously deforms those representational strategies and, I would argue, notably evade a coherent narrative of diasporic identity. In the third and final portrait, the poet appears to attempt a self-portrait of himself as a diasporic subject. Like the first two parts, the third self-portrait begins in the same manner or mode of biographical sketch, but then quickly abandons the predominantly realist mode of the first two portraits for a surrealist self-portrait of the poet as a Vietnamese overseas:
This young man is thirty years old
in 1975 he lost his father and an album filled with photos of happiness
in his own homeland he was branded an enemy
on causes he did not contribute to
this young man came to the US by swimming across the Pacific
for more than a decade he swam during the day and rested on the bottom at night
arriving, one of his lungs has turned into a gill, one into a leaf
of a dead tree
from then on he lived in a glass house
next to jars of insecticide.

In the next life he will come back as a boat.(58)

The poem begins in a similarly prosaic fashion as the first two portraits of Vietnamese overseas
by briefly sketching the biographical outlines of someone who belongs to a younger post-war
generation. Mid-way through this last portrait, the surrealist mode of representation takes over in
the line, “this young man came to the US by swimming across the Pacific / for more than a
decade he swam during the day and rested on the bottom at night” (58) The surrealist turn in the
poem resists the realism of a history of diaspora and asserts an irreducible, irreconcilable
difference. At the very least, it offers a last reminder of the mediation of the Vietnamese
diaspora. Does the final portrait ultimately deflect any claim to determinant reading of self-
representation? If the not quite patriotic overseas Vietnamese of the final portrait resembles the
autobiographical outlines of the writing self, then that determination is ironized by the third-
person perspective. The third and final aesthetic subject must be read and written in relation to
the first two. And the intertextuality of the “jars of insecticide” intimately connect him to the
woman who bought insecticide to prepare a last meal for her and her children. The insecticide, of
course, is an over-determined signifier; it is a reference not only to the unspoken historical agent
of Agent Orange, but it is also an emblem of global corporate trade, the modernization of
agriculture, and, possibly, a common means of deliberate self-poisoning. If the portraits are
about the transmissibility of the secret or the secret transmission of memory, then the presence of
the insecticide in the poem speaks to the deadly, sinister and evil ways in which the war literally reproduces itself in bodies.

**Secret Testimonies**

As conveyed by “Portraits,” Phan Nhien Hao’s diasporic poetics attempt to make visible their respective diasporic subjects’ post-war experiences of communist excesses and make their private suffering palpable. Written with care for telling details, poems such as “Portraits” evince an intimate knowledge and imaginative empathy for their diasporic subjects and offer examples of what critic Svetlana Boym calls “diasporic intimacy.” For Boym, diasporic intimacy “can be approached only through indirection and intimation, through stories and secrets. It is spoken in a foreign language that reveals the inadequacies of translation. Diasporic intimacy does not promise an unmediated emotional fusion, only a precarious affection—no less deep, yet aware of its transience” (252-53). By rendering the pain and suffering of these individuals as representative of the diaspora, Phan Nhien Hao’s “Portraits” show the political dimensions of his diasporic poetics. As Espiritu states, such representations of the haunting presences of history are necessarily political (xix). But they also offer a limited and limiting practice of diaspora in that they risk absorption within the grand narrative of immigration and assimilation into American life, while at the same time they offer a necessary critique of post-war Vietnamese politics. In this way, “Portraits” illustrates the difficulties of representing diasporic identity through abjection and alienation, and suggests the ambiguities of the category of diaspora itself.

Drawing on the resources of the conventional lyric in poems such as “Portraits” and “Meeting,” Phan Nhien Hao uses secrecy as a means of asserting an impenetrable and inviolable subjectivity. The word “secret,” as well as related forms of secrecy, such as invisibility, silence,
and remoteness, pervade his poems. At a literal level, the Vietnamese word for “secret” [bí mật] appears throughout Phan Nhien Hao’s poems of exile and diaspora, as well as in his prose statements. In these and other poems, the existence of secrets is referred to, but the actual content or substance of those secrets are not necessarily divulged or revealed. The insomniac voice of “Night’s Dawn,” offers an example:

Those are the invited secrets
in the middle of the night towards dawn
you tap the face of the clock with a hammer
the ceiling fan rotates beneath the moon
breathing in the smells of the city the way it was (11)

The poem continues with a sequence of other surreal images; the poet also speaks of missed opportunities and alternative routes—“There is another way to step out of / the blinding roars / of the poisonous night / but you rejected it”; “There is another way to stop / halfway between two asphyxiations / but still you swim towards the sea / towards the secrets of the kelp” (11).

Although other ways of escape from “the poisonous night” and “two asphyxiations” exist, the poet maintains a stubborn, militant, and even painful fidelity to this unnamed way he has taken. The synesthesiac image—“blinding roars”—underscores the disorientation that seems to endanger the very existence of the poet. Finding himself “halfway between two asphyxiations,” the poet is nevertheless committed to a kind of endless task of “swim[ming] towards the sea / towards the secrets of the kelp” (11). The poem’s set of images challenge and thwart interpretation. The poetic language and images attempt to give expression to the void of secrets and the sea. In another poem, secrets are the object of a restless search: “We live inside odd-shaped submarines / chasing after secrets and the darkness of the ocean” (“Inside Submarines”). In these lines, secrets are submerged in the watery realm of mystery. In “Autumn Song,” the speaker seems to be in possession of a secret knowledge that he nevertheless is unable to keep: “I am not
garrulous, it’s just that I can’t keep a secret / The hopelessness of unions makes me want to hear /
Sounds of leaves falling on a chest / Of a man lying under a tree / With a hand grenade inside his pants pockets.” The final image, as I will show later, conceals one of the secret subjects of Phan Nhien Hao’s poetry in the figure of a dead soldier. In yet another poem, “To X. and I,” “it is the beloved addressee of the lyric—herself a figure of secrecy marked by “X”—who possesses the knowledge to secret meanings: and in “To X. and I,” “If I am an immoral sadness / then you are the old direction / maintaining the night flights / I walk on bridges connecting two alien shores / my hand holding an enduring curse / then you are a small dictionary / defining secret words for me” (15). All of these poems guard their secrets tightly in a private archive of image, metaphor, and allusion. The tropes of secrets and secrecy that pervade his poetry are the most striking private expressions of an antagonistic relationship to a post-war society in both Vietnam and the U.S. that deprives diasporic subjects of agency and access to public history and discourse.

The critical literature on secrets and open secrets describes their role within power relations, ideological mystifications, and unclaimed experience. As D. A. Miller writes in “Secret Subjects, Open Secrets”:

In a world where the explicit exposure of the subject would manifest how thoroughly he has been inscribed within a socially given totality, secrecy would be the spiritual exercise by which the subject is allowed to conceive of himself as a resistance: a friction in the smooth functioning of the social order, a margin to which its far-reaching discourses does not reach. Secrecy would thus be the subjective practice in which the oppositions of private/public, inside/outside/subject/object are established, and the sanctity of their first term kept inviolate. (207)

Miller understands the “spiritual exercise” and “subjective practice” of secrecy as the performance of a resistant subjectivity. His secret subjects recognize, to a degree, how their identities are socially and politically inscribed. Drawing inspiration from D. A. Miller, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explored the workings of secrets and secrecy in *Epistemology of the Closet,*
where she powerfully dissected what she called the “regime of the open secret” and the structures of knowing and not-knowing that can claustrophobically surround the experience and possibility of gay identity. Sedgwick regarded “open secrets” as conservative modes of communication that reveal to insiders what they simultaneously hide from outsiders. Thus, she speaks of the “willful ignorance” (4) with which heterosexuality claims a right to go on not knowing or pretending not to see. Ideological approaches to the open secret emphasize the way in which consensus and subjects are formed imperceptivity through a power that hides its force. As Anne-Lise François observes in *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience*: “In post-Marxist, psychoanalytically informed ideology theory, the ‘open secret’ becomes a trope for the implicit workings of ideology itself—for the way in which the ideological gains not only ascent without show of force and polices imagination without explicit censorship, but occupies the space of the blank page from which it can produce consensus that no actually written document could ever yield” (5).

Associated as it is with silence and suppression, the trope of secrecy is critical to an understanding of literature produced from and responding to marginal social locations such as exile and diaspora. Asian Americanist scholar Elaine H. Kim, for example, uses the trope of secrecy to discuss racial formation in the United States. In *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to Their Writings and Social Context*, she considers the hidden history, banned language, and suppressed cultural tradition of South Korea, first under the colonial occupation of Japan, then as part of the diaspora in the United States. Reading Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee* as an exemplary text, Kim points to the “difficulty of communicating beyond the polarizing and obscuring veil of imposed and silencing secrecy” (12). Reflecting on her own difficult experience of immigration, Kim further describes her racialized sense of being a
perpetual foreigner in the United States as “a secret life we lived, always in America but never of it” (5). Against the imposition of silence and invisibility, Kim attempts to regain agency through the act of keeping secrets. Here, the emphasis is on the custodial act of keeping or protecting a secret—which can be historical memory or collective identity. Similarly, Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen argues in *Voyage of Hope: Vietnamese Australian Women’s Voices* that Vietnamese living in the diaspora guard their memories with silence: “The memories of Vietnamese refugees have been molded by their experience of diaspora, and many guard these memories with silence, a silence that relates not only to the departure from Vietnam and the exodus itself, but also to the impact of loss and grief on individual family members” (5). Like kept secrets, these guarded memories have an unspoken way of insinuating themselves into the damaged life of those who hold them. In these ways, Kim and Nguyen’s understanding of secrets allows us to read secrets not only as imposed by external impersonal forces, but as ambivalent and melancholic forms of agency.

If diasporic literature is figured as a suppressed and secreted literature, then the act of reading such writing can feel like eavesdropping on a private conversation. At least that is the way John Schafer, a scholar on Vietnamese literature, suggestively describes his experience of reading exile writer Võ Phiền, a well-established writer from former South Vietnam before 1975 who, unlike many of his contemporaries, continued to write influential works after his arrival in the United States in 1975. In his fascinating monograph on *Võ Phiền and the Sadness of Exile*, Schafer writes:

> When Võ Phiền came to America, however, he did not heed his own advice to write what Americans wanted to read; he always wrote for Vietnamese, and so when someone like myself reads his works it is like eavesdropping on a private conversation […] Reading them you feel as if you are perusing a bundle of old letters found in the attic. When you discover that the people talking in the letters
are talking about you—about Americans—the strangeness of your situation increases, but, of course, so does your curiosity (14-15)

Schafer’s feeling of intruding on a private communication lends the situation a sense of secrecy within the act of translation. Later in the same passage, Schafer extends his metaphor of eavesdropping by situating the scene of secretive reception not on living speech but on written speech like “a bundle of old letters found in the attic.” Fallen on silence, such old letters are written as if to be discovered in the future. For Rodrigo Lazo, the found letters of diasporic literature belong to what he calls “migrant archives”: “Migrant archives reside in obscurity and are always at the edge of annihilation. They are texts of the past that have not been written into the official spaces of archivization” (37). Similarly, for Schafer, the “indeterminate status” of Vietnamese writers who live in the United States but write in Vietnamese “may prevent them from showing up on the conceptual radar screens of American scholars and publishers” (13). Schafer’s reflection on his encounter with the work of a Vietnamese exile writer is similar to Elaine H. Kim’s notion of secrets because of his attention to specific historical and material contexts. It is critical to note how both Kim and Schafer highlight the disciplinary, institutional, and discursive formations that mediate the sense of secrecy produced by these various diasporic and exiled writers. To understand secrecy this way is to listen for the alternative voices and histories amongst us.

The very existence of secrets and secrecy—and I would further argue both open and closed—poses a threat to the project of reconciliation. As the post-war literature by American and Vietnamese writers and veterans shows, reconciliation is premised on narrative acts of disclosure and testimony. Consequently, secrets and secrecy trouble the fundamental desire for transparency in projects of reconciliation. While secrets are associated with the private space, testimony is associated with the public space. Understood as the opposite of publicity, secrecy
here does not mean so much a failure or resistance of communication, but more its suppression and silencing. If reconciliation necessarily privileges communication, then secrets trouble those communicative ideals precisely because they suggest that something has not yet been effectively communicated or has been intentionally withheld. Indeed, as John Borneman discusses, reconciliation in the context of Vietnam and the repression of war-related issues in Vietnam transforms aspects of the past into “public secrets.” Borneman writes, in Vietnam there appears to be a repression of war-related issues at different levels. Victim groups, especially in the south, still have no political power to obtain redress, and this lack of redress continues to sour relations between north and south. Any attempt by southerners to seek redress for injury is understood by the Party not as a demand for justice but merely as a bid for more political power. The Party prohibits the media coverage (and hence public discussion) of certain issues and historical injuries, a tactic that may transform aspects of the past into “public secrets”—but does not make them go away. They fester, as Robert has found, in the political unconscious. There they operate like unsubstantiated but irrepressible rumor, continuously dissimulating reality and therefore never able to reach the status of either truth or lie. Trust under these circumstances makes no sense, sociality appears fictitious, and dissimulation offers the best ruling strategy. (208)

Phan Nhien Hao’s poetic use of the politically-charged trope of secrets can help us to understand not only the repressive dimensions of the official narrative of reconciliation, but also to locate the expressive work of diasporic writing that, prohibited from public discussion, seeks counterpublic forms to give voice to the past and repair historical injuries.

Eschewing the political rhetoric of reconciliation, Phan Nhien Hao makes a tactical retreat into the secrecy of the lyric. That is, his poems seem to be articulated in the privacy of an enclosed space. The notion that the lyric as gives voice to a speaker in a dramatic monologue still dominates modern and contemporary understanding of the lyric, as Jonathan Culler and others point out. Closely connected to his idea of the lyric as dramatic monologue is the more general definition of the lyric as a short, nonnarrative poem representing the subjective experience of a
speaker. Given the conventional understanding of the lyric, the lyric poem itself is often discussed in terms of a kind of secret interiority.\textsuperscript{33} John Stuart Mills’ famous description of the lyric poem is “overheard.” This conception of the lyric pictures the poet as expressing a private subjectivity that is then overheard. In his essay “On Lyric Poetry and Society” in Notes to Literature, Theodor Adorno offers a dialectical thesis of the modern lyric as “always the subjective expression of an social antagonism” (45). At the center of these different conceptions of lyric poetry is the notion of “subjective expression” or “subjective experience.” Conforming to such definitions of the lyric, Phan Nhien Hao’s poems are short, often no more than a single page, non-narrative works written in the first-person singular. Deeply private and introspective, his poems also produce the effect of overheard conversation—of the poet speaking or thinking to himself or to an absent but intimate addressee. Lyric poetry, then, offers a diasporic poet like Phan a particularly useful form for the making or remaking of self.

His “retreat” is tactical in the military sense of a withdrawal that provisionally concedes ground in order to regroup and fight another day, as well as the more ordinary sense of the word as a place of security, tranquility, and restoration. Or to approach it another way, Eva Hoffman talks about how “upheaval and dislocation can sometimes produce some rather more conservative impulses of self-defense and self-preservation” (54). The same conservative impulse—in the root sense of the word—is evident in Phan Nhien Hao’s poetry. The lyric, with its specific production of voice, temporality, and subjectivity, offers precisely the formal means of “self-defense and self-preservation” for the diasporic poet needs to re-articulate and re-affirm the senses of self and agency that have otherwise been silenced or neutralized in the poet’s

\textsuperscript{33} Criticism on lyric poetry is rich and complex. For a touchstone collection of essays on the lyric, see Hosek, Chaviva, and Patricia Parker, eds. Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism. For new lyric studies, see Virginia Jackson’s Dickinson’s Misery. Jonathan Culler’s essay on “Apostrophe,” in The Pursuit of Sings (1981), remains a useful essay as well.
homeland and host country. As he writes in the poem “Excavations,” “At sunrise, I have gathered”:

   The breakages of a child growing up during war,
   a contempt of ostentatious games, the enduring loneliness
   of a wandering exile, a half Western-half Vietnamese knowledge. (21)

Phan Nhien Hao’s “half Vietnamese and half English knowledge” does not represent a liability, but rather a source of new poetic material. The assertion of self is most directly articulated in Phan Nhien Hao’s poem “Sketch for a Self-Portrait.” The poem affirms the autonomy of the writing self and the written self. It begins:

   This is my life: not beautiful but with some meaning.
   This is my mother: also the mother of the sea.
   This is my father: a dead man, the rifle next to his body still loaded.
   This is my brother: an impotent and loud man.
   This is my big sister: half belonging to her husband, half to her underwear.
   This is my little sister: squashed by history and money.
   This is my wife: my only friend.
   This is my daughter: from the darkness of her mother’s womb she brought light. (53)

The entire poem follows this formal and grammatical structure. The deictic marker and the possessive form firmly establish the poet’s claim to the aesthetic project of self-representation indicated by the “self-portrait.” At the same time, as a “sketch,” this representational project is preliminary, in progress and incomplete. As the opening lines suggest, the self-portrait outlines a set of familial relations and filiations. The outlines of the self of the self-portrait are drawn only in the interpersonal and intersubjective relation to others. The “self” being sketched in the opening lines is not autonomous but is instead presented in relation to others. In this way, the poem is not a self-portrait but a group portrait, or it is a self-portrait that breaks the frame of the self-referentiality of the autobiographical subject. The descriptions of each person assert an identity or correspondence between, to take one example, “my father,” and the poet’s description
of the father as “a dead man, the rifle next to his body still loaded.” This individual and group identity, however, is problematized in the succeeding lines of the poem.

This is my language: half-underwater, half on the shore.
This is my people: all hatched from eggs.
This is my country: which country? I asked.
This is my enemy: identical to me, tired and rail thin. (53)

These lines begin to question and perhaps undermine the project of self-representation by suggesting that the language and medium of self-representation possess an element of concealment, “half underwater, half on the shore”; the origin myth or creation myth of a “people” is challenged by the uncertainty of “which country” the poet belongs to; and finally the troubling recognition of the identity between “enemy” and friend—these lines suggest that any claim to a clear or self-apparent identity is always under the threat of erasure. The poem ends with a forceful statement of the poet’s own stance, “This is my life: not for sale.” This life and its partial and provisional representations are “not for sale,” not to be sold and consumed within any totalizing economy, be it the politics of reconciliation or cultural identity.

Phan Nhien Hao’s defiant intent to reclaim the past and affirm the self, however, is always exceeded by the poetry itself. Through the irresolutions of the lyric “I,” the ambiguity of poetic tropes, and the instability of its language, his poetry evades certainty about the war and the desire to reclaim the past. The speakers of his poems are called to the witness stand, but their speech often slides into a private language unrecognizable in the public space of testimony. At other times, they speak in a public language only to recognize the absence of an audience. Such poetry offers a melancholic witness for private, cultural and historical legacies. What is mourned as the lost object is not just a suppressed, buried, or erased history—the alternative voices of diaspora as the “lost subjects of history,” though it is also very much that too—but it is also a work of mourning the loss of a public that might receive such a testimony. In the poem “As the
Train Approaches,” for example, the diasporic project of addressing the lost and buried subjects of history is interrupted by the poet’s reflections on language and identity.

Growing up I thought speech could heal
open a wound, disinfect, then re-bandage it. I thought…
No, in this silence sometimes I see
memory’s two hands reaching out
to clap violently without making a sound
like the wind, like concealed hatred
of souls buried in a mass grave.
This silence exhausts me
it does not forgive, it’s like ants,
patiently carrying red corpuscles from my body. (40)

The poem’s opening wound and failure of language to open, disinfect, re-bandage that wound offers a corporeal metaphor of a fundamental inability of language to fully recover self and identity. Language is divested of the conciliatory power to “heal,” and the poem itself becomes the figure of an open wound. The opening lines of the stanza suggest that such thoughts belong to the innocence and idealism of childhood, an illusory belief in language’s ability to heal wounds. The poem never identifies the reason behind the speaker’s dramatic change of mind about the power of language. Silence overtakes speech and overwhelms the speaker, as the poem quickly shifts from the past tense of the first two lines to the present tense of the remaining lines, from affirmation to negation. No longer able to affirm the power of language, the speaker is ultimately unable to recover a memory of damaged life or a history of past atrocities. He can only allude to these traces of history. The oblique references to “memory’s two hands” and the “concealed hatred / of souls buried in a mass grave” and the earlier reference to “a coup d’etat” invoke forgotten and repressed histories that await recovery and exhumation. Later, the poet’s own “screaming voice” becomes drowned out as “the train lunges forward sounding a horn like thunders / making a mockery of my efforts” (40). Dominated by silence, concealment, and a sense of powerlessness, the poem reminds us that our acts of representation—whether through
speech or writing—are susceptible to change, shaped by silence, and in the end, unable to fully repair our literal and metaphorical wounds. Wounds, of course, are also a dominant trope in the literature of reconciliation; they are what the literature attempts to address and hopefully heal. The silences of Phan Nhien Hao’s poem are suggestive of things that disrupt closure, an exhausting and unforgiving silence.

One resounding silence in Phan Nhien Hao’s poetry surrounds the tragic event of his father’s death during the final days of the war. Speaking of the profound effect of the war on his childhood, Phan Nhien Hao tells Linh Dinh in the interview included in Night, Fish and Charlie Parker: “It’s true that in April 1975, I was still very little. But I believe that the most important factors in shaping one’s character are the things one learns in the first years of childhood. April of 1975 also affected my family in a tragic way, and I think this has determined my consciousness” (70). The tragic event he alludes to here is his father’s death during the final days of the war. A soldier in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, his father’s death is not a subject he writes often about in his poetry, or directly. When he does mention his father’s death in his poems, he does so briefly, abruptly, and matter-of-factly, as in the opening stanza to “Trivial Details”:

Inside an old car a heart sat behind a wheel
To circulate along the blood avenues
Where battles and a chaotic retreat occurred
In which my father was killed (28)

—or in the already quoted opening lines to “Sketch for a Self-Portrait”:

This is my life: not beautiful but with some meaning.
This is my mother: also the mother of the sea.
This is my father: a dead man, the rifle next to his body still loaded. (53)

The death of his father ruptures the very surface of his poems with the irrefutable force of its facticity. Phan Nhien Hao refuses to forget his father’s death at the same time he also resists
appropriating and aestheticizing it for the purpose of poetry. For Phan Nhien Hao, his father’s death belongs to the unrecorded or unacknowledged history of the war and, consequently, represents a roadblock to reconciliation.

Phan Nhien Hao’s most direct, extended and moving account his father’s death, and its lasting impact on him, is not to be found in his poetry but in a personal essay entitled, “This Year I Am The Same Age as My Father,” which translate into English. I want to turn to this personal essay, which at times reads like a prose poem, in order to underscore not only the impossibility of reconciliation for Phan Nhien Hao, but also the impossibility of a recovery of the lost and buried subjects of history, here represented by his father’s death. The essay offers a moving remembrance of his father and captures the painful paradoxes of growing up in postwar Vietnam. As we will see, even when Phan Nhien Hao speaks of the dead of Vietnam in the strongest of senses, narrative continues to evade certainty and memory remains elusive. The sense of buried history and reclamation of the lost is forcefully captured in the essay’s last line, “I will always remember my father, though history has betrayed him,” a line that sounds the tension between betrayal and fidelity that reverberates throughout the essay.

The occasion of the piece is the author’s thirty-fifth birthday, the same age his father reached before his life was cut short in the final days of the Vietnam war. The essay opens with a childhood memory recovered from the ashes of war just before his father’s death:

An afternoon in March 1975. The airfield in Kontum burnt by sporadic fire. The ground a patchwork of dead grass. A bruised sun sinks behind the mountain. The sound of artillery rounds continues to explode nearby. Inside a matchbox I carry my black cricket, the sole survivor after many battles waged against other crickets belonging to the neighborhood kids. I open the box, releasing the cricket onto the dry grass. With the ground darkening all around, my cricket disappears in a blink of an eye. Years after I often ask myself why I did what I did then. Perhaps, I tell

34 The autobiographical essay was originally published in the influential overseas literary journal Hop Luu. The essay possesses all of the features of what John C. Schafer calls a “tùy bút narrative essay.” It is worth noting that this is one of the more direct and sustained pieces of autobiographical writing by Phan Nhien Hao.
myself, I didn’t want to keep my little cricket in its prison because I sensed my own childhood coming to an end and the misery that awaited me in days ahead.  

It goes on to recollect his painful years growing up in postwar Vietnam and wartime memories of his childhood with his father. Seared into the poet’s memory, the dateline—“An afternoon in March 1975”—marks the time of day, month, and year in which Phan Nhien Hao would last see his father. As Phan Nhien Hao goes on to describe in scorching detail in the opening three paragraphs of his personal essay, everything about that fateful afternoon in retrospect became imbued with the enduring significance of last looks: the war-torn landscape that surrounded his younger self and returns to his older self in the form of images in the present tense, the scene of departure on the airfield between his father and the rest of his family, including his mother, himself and two younger brothers: “Everyone was lost in the confusion and chaos. With a single suitcase, my mother, my two younger brothers and I boarded a plane […] Our cargo plane lifted off. I can still see the small exhaust flames licking the end of the runway. I don’t remember my father leaving me with any last words at that time, or if I hugged and kissed him farewell either.

What were his careful instructions to my mother? We left’:

He stayed behind, retreating with his troops out of the highlands, and was ambushed and shot dead in a jungle near the Mang Giang pass. A terrifying and bloody retreat. After many years of waiting, this is all my family was able to gather from bits and pieces of scattered talk, our own conjectures and calculations from conflicting sources of information. No one witnessed my father’s last moments. I often imagine him dying at night, his wounds bleeding into darkness. We have never found his remains.

Phan Nhien Hao not only attempts to remember and mourn his father and the tragic circumstances of his death but, through this work of mourning, also recollects his childhood memories of everyday life in Kontum during the war: cricket fights with neighborhood kids, summer trips to his grandparents house in Da Nang, little field trips with his father to the nearby

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35 This and the remaining passages are my translations.
riverbank, life on the base camp with its ominous reminders of war. Reading these vivid childhood memories offers a glimpse of life during the war. The war was part of everyday life in Kontum, a provincial capital located in the central highlands, which saw heavy fighting due in large part because to its location in the tri-border region between Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.

Phan Nhien Hao not only recollects his own childhood during and after the war and his memories of his father, but, just as importantly, his personal essay offers a scathing critique of Vietnam’s postwar cultural amnesia. Towards the end of the essay, Phan Nhien Hao offers a précis of the post-war generation of children of war veterans:

In the many years following 1975, they taught young people like me ways to insult our parents. They wished to plant inside my head the idea that my father was just a fraction of the defeated side, just one number in the grand total of enemy troops that were decimated. And in this way, they wanted young people like me to see the war through dry dialectical eyes, as if our parent’s deaths were a historical necessity. They refused to understand. No historical necessity whatsoever would be able to repair what was shattered in the soul of a youth whose childhood had been robbed. I know I’m not unique. Hundreds of thousands, perhaps even a million, youth from the South lost their fathers all too soon. A generation that grew up amidst the endless conflicts between trying to forget and haunting memories, between a revulsion towards war and the compulsion for violence, between the desire to forgive and hatred.

The memory of his father’s life and death, the post-war culture of forgetting, and the politics of reconciliation—these are the open secrets Phan Nhien Hao wants to tell, remember, and recognize in his own work. Secreted and concealed by the official history, his father’s fate symbolizes the hidden history and enduring legacy of the war: “Even now I still see my father in my dreams from time to time. He […] remains a symbol of the war and the loss that I carry with me throughout my life.” Phan Nhien Hao’s father belongs to Espiritu’s “lost and missing subject of history.” By remembering his father, Phan Nhien Hao resists the unspoken state doctrine of keeping this death secret, unrecognized, and unmourned in the public acts of commemoration.
Refusing to remain silent, Phan Nhien Hao takes possession of an agency to speak the unspeakable, but he must do so as a counterpublic public witness in diaspora.

Yet, in mourning the lost and buried subject of a private and public history, Phan Nhien Hao’s personal essay continually calls attention to its own gaps in knowledge, lapses of memory, and failure of communication: “The image of my father that gloomy afternoon is both clear and obscure in my memory”; “I don’t remember my father leaving me with any last words at that time, or if I hugged and kissed him farewell either. What were his careful instructions to my mother?”; “No one witnessed my father’s last moments. I often imagine him dying at night, his wounds bleeding into darkness. We have never found his remains”—all these moments signal the son’s own painful awareness of his own historicity, his own location in the passage of time between “This year,” when he turns thirty-five, and the year 1975, when his father died, and the silence that surrounds the hidden history of his father’s death. The essay recounts and attempts a reconstruction of the events leading up to and in the aftermath of his father’s death, but what remains is only a partial account of an irrecoverable loss. In a fundamental way, the lost and forgotten subjects of history—in this case the poet’s father—remain irrevocably and irreconcilably lost. “This Year I Am The Same Age As My Father,” it turns out, is as much, or more, about the act of remembering, and the nature of memory, than it is about the poet’s attempt to mourn his father. In this way, Phan Nhien Hao’s personal essay calls to mind second-generation legacy narratives by the sons and daughters of American veterans of the war. Like Tom Bissell and Danielle Trussoni, Phan Nhien Hao’s own legacy narrative is inscribed from within by a generational distance and difference that inescapably thwarts the desire to imagine one’s memory as whole and the lost subject of history as recovered. This is not to say that the irrecoverable subject marks a failure. Phan Nhien Hao’s personal essay
Phan Nhien Hao’s essay itself mounts its own tactical and rhetorical retreat—enclosing and encrypting his father into the symbolic realm of dreams and the imaginative realm of literature. The essay’s narrative techniques of figural concealment and poetic compression hide and protect his father, which I read as a defense mechanism against the contemporary threat of his father and his memory being incorporated into a nationalist agenda of recovery. This anxiety and ambivalence is indicative of the limits of reconciliation and the limits of diasporic literature’s attempt to reclaim and preserve. At the very least, it acknowledges partiality and provisionality as private memories rub up against public histories. By the end of the personal essay, the threat of a forgetful reconciliation activates a renewed commitment and expressed promise to remain faithful to his father’s memory and the larger loss he symbolizes:

My father died when he was just 35. A decent man in a time of war, he acted as all fair and responsible men would have. Now, I am the same age as my father. Though he is not alive to grow older with me, I will not leave him behind. Even now, I still see my father in my dreams from time to time. He’s not only the person who brought me into the world but remains a symbol of the war and the loss I carry with me throughout life. I will always remember my father, though history betrayed him.

History betrays the memory of Phan Nhien Hao’s father by keeping his death hidden, and forbidden, as an open secret. Given the contradiction or gap left by history’s betrayal, Phan Nhien Hao’s commitment to “always remember [his] father” constitutes the kind of open-ended “fidelity to the event” described by Alain Badiou’s “ethic of truths” (42). Phan Nhien Hao indicts history and its agents for forgetting and for the failure to record his father’s death as an event. The melancholy note sounded by Phan Nhien Hao’s promise to “always remember” his father echoes in the oblivion where the remains of that life and death were left behind, unmourned, forgotten and betrayed by history. Here, it is not history that has claim to truth—the material fact of his father’s death—but private memory. Full of historical references and ambivalent forms of
address, the sense of loss is never entirely located in the body and mind of the speaker, but it is also connected to the social and political forces held responsible for that loss. Betrayed by history, Phan Nhien Hao’s promise to “always remember” his father binds him to an impossible task.

The failure of Phan Nhien Hao’s partial recovery meets the ethical challenge of writing in diaspora. Reflecting on the haunting absence of Vietnamese refugee memory, Viet Thanh Nguyen writes: “The ethical challenge for the artist working with and among refugees cast out of their homeland is to suggest memory’s incompleteness, especially in the presence of furious desire, the contradictory yearning to imagine one’s memory as whole or to forget altogether, as is too often the case in any nationalist imagination” (30). Phan Nhien Hao might be seen as an exemplary case of a Vietnamese writer willing to tell ghost stories, to recall Yen Le Espiritu’s words, but one whose stories bear the melancholic mark that remembering the lost subjects of history also means negotiating the uncertainties of memory and limits of language.

What else does the artist do in the face of such dilemma between the impossibility of reconciliation and the impossibility of recovery? I will end this chapter on a discussion of three more poetic examples by Phan Nhien Hao. In my mind, these poems meet the ethical challenge of writing in diaspora by pointing to temporal and cultural disjunctions, rather than smoothing over them, and using adaptive poetic techniques that articulate diasporic consciousness without reinforcing normative narratives.

**Multidirectional Memories of Diaspora**

One of the most poignant examples of incomplete and partial memory is represented by the poem “A Photo from the 60s.” As suggested by the title, the poem takes as its subject a photo
from during the war. The presence of the photo imbues the poem with an archival force, as the poet tries to call to mind the person (a distant relative) in the poem. What makes the poem poignant and suggestive is that the speaker does not claim the power of memory, but he actually relinquishes his claim to knowledge about the subject. Unlike the prose piece about his father, or other poems featuring people, this poem quite explicitly is not about remembering, but it is also not about forgetting. Rather, the poem exists in the imaginative uncertainty of an improvised and incomplete memory. Phan Nhien Hao’s diasporic perspective is everywhere—cut, complicated, and mediated by this belated generational perspective. Reflecting upon the fate of a distant relative pictured in “A Photo from the 60s,” Phan Nhien Hao constructs, through uncertain speaking perspectives and disquieting images, a fragmented portrait of lost time and wasted lives:

Assume this position for a beautiful shot
hand propping up chin, boasting a watch face turned to the front
smile revealing a gold tooth
a blazer borrowed from the studio
(a half portrait,
not showing pants of a different color and plastic flip flops.)

I don’t even remember the name of this distant relative
only know that he died soon after
by a bullet
in the 60s.

In the photo his watch showed 10:05,
in what must have been a beautiful day
the young man solemnly sat in front of the camera.
As the light flashed
from the darkness of the camera lens the war could just make out
a young person to lay waste (68)

In this powerful reflection on the legacy of the war, Phan Nhien Hao discovers in the eponymous “Photo from the 60s” what Roland Barthes calls, in his reflections on photography, the “terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead” (9). The dead, in this particular
poem, the unnamed distant relative, seems to embody and carry with him a secret message into
the present tense—something about time, perspective, forgotten memory, wasted lives. Linh
Dinh’s translation underscores the looming threat of the “shot,” the imminent death that awaits
the young man outside, as it were, the frame of the photo, and outside too, the poet’s frame of
reference as a second generation diasporic Vietnamese. Ultimately, I think the poem keeps that
secret to itself as something irrecoverable and unknown. Father or distant relative, both stand in
for the countless dead who go unnamed and unmourned. The diasporic subject is wounded by
temporality and historicity—the accident of a wristwatch that “showed 10:05.” That the watch
face is “turned to the front” is a detail the poet ironizes and imbues with pathos. It is a
melancholic metonymy for the human face turned not only toward the camera, but also toward
the war front and the front lines. The distant relative, like the poet, becomes exiled on the shores
of time. The concluding lines tell how this moment in time contracts into that other moment, that
final accident: “As the light flashed / from the darkness of the camera lens the war could just
make out / a young person to lay waste” (68). Personifying the war as a sniper hidden in the
mechanism of the camera itself, the concluding lines give little closure and less consolation. In
the name of difficult truths and forgotten histories, Phan Nhien Hao’s poetry explores what it
means to inherit competing, and often contradictory, versions of the past and to forge a future out
of the work of inheritance.

In the next poem, the possible absorption within the normative narrative of immigrant
suffering is partially blocked by the ambivalence of cultural identification in the diaspora. Like
“Portraits,” we encounter another overseas Vietnamese in the shorter lyric “Meeting a Taxi
Driver in New York City.” As suggested by the title, the poem thematizes a memorable meeting
with a New York City taxi driver, who in this case turns out to be a Vietnamese man named Nguyen Van B. It reads:

The yellow taxi runs on roads ripped open
by earthquakes and never closed up
skyscrapers jut over head
Nguyen Van B. has lived in New York for 28 years
he still can’t speak much English
his French is better.

Three times robbed at gunpoint,
B. says: “Anything worth losing I’ve already lost,
country, youth, dreams
Once in Saigon my family had two servants
and one chauffeur
now I am the chauffeur millions of people
In this city you catch a cab by whistling
just wave your hand I’ll run up to you immediately
like a yellow dog called Taxi…

…don’t worry, no need to tip me,
we’re both Vietnamese, after all.”36

The opening lines produce a verbal effect comparable to the technique of the voice-over in film. The rapid succession of filmic images—the iconic yellow taxi, the ripped open road, the mysterious earthquake, the angling skyscrapers of New York—cinematically evoke the poem’s titular scene about “Meeting a Cab Driver in New York.” Maneuvering swiftly and almost imperceptibly from a physical description of the city outside the window of the taxi, the poem locates the reader/viewer in the back seat of the moving taxi as “skyscrapers jut over head.” With the poet/passenger, we sit listening to Nguyen Van B.’s taxi cab testimonial about his life and losses. Nguyen Van B. gives a compressed account of his life story, the outlines of which identify him as part of a specific history of Vietnamese refugee flight and immigrant experience and call to mind the oral testimonies recorded by scholars like Sucheng Chan.

36 The poem was originally published in the 2004 collection Manufacturing Poem 99-04 [Chế Tạo Thơ Ca 99-04]. It is not included Linh Dinh’s edited and translated Night, Fish and Charlie Parker. The translation is mine.
What expresses irresolution in this poem is the speaker’s ambivalence towards the coherent, unified, and undifferentiated cultural identity assumed by the eponymous cab driver. Significantly, Phan Nhien Hao ironizes the diasporic intimacy expressed and embodied by the taxi driver by presenting the taxi driver’s claim to a shared history and cultural identity as reported speech. As I read it, this rhetorical effect importantly distances and differentiates the speaker of the poem from the spoken words of the taxi driver. The diasporic claims of the taxi driver, in other words, are grounded in the assumption of a shared and unquestioned identity as Vietnamese. That Phan Nhien Hao brackets this claim—not only through the technique of reported speech, but also the poem’s tropes of disruption—should signal to his readers a deeper ambivalence and qualification about the more straightforwardly transparent rendering of immigrant suffering due to communist excesses, including his own.

Against what I read as the taxi driver’s unifying and identificatory project of diaspora, the poem itself is thematically and structurally organized around a series of breaks, ruptures, and discontinuities. First, there is the opening image of the earthquake in which the interrupted history of diaspora is figured in the recurring trope of breakage, rupture and disruption. Images of the earthquake and the unrepaired roads are part of a recurring motif of rupture in Phan Nhien Hao’s poetry. As in this poem, these images are often of physical rupture and damage. In one poem, he drills through the earth. In another, black ink spills from beneath his feet. Here, the surrealist image operates as a cloaking device or mechanism of concealment, open to all, but in need of interpretation. The significance of that image is suspended over the entire poem. Given what the taxi driver tells his passenger, poet, and fellow countrymen, the image of the “road ripped open / by earthquakes” takes on a greater private and collective resonances as historical experiences of uprootedness and global dispersion. Concealed within the image of roads
ruptured “by earthquakes never closed up” [từ trận động đất không bao giờ khép lại] is another upheaval: the scattering of Vietnamese across the globe. Though never explicitly acknowledged, the seismic upheaval of diaspora constitutes the unstated but implicit grounds for “Meeting a Taxi Driver in New York City”—that is, both the event of the poem and the event represented by the poem. For the taxi driver, this disruption is constitutive of diaspora as a founding event that continues to bind him to all other Vietnamese. But to read the historical upheaval of diaspora as the hidden referent of the earthquake is to fix a final meaning to the poem. For our poet or speaker, at least, the significance of the disruption is more difficult to pin down. That the poem begins with the figure of the earthquake suggests that the poet’s encounter with this fellow countryman unsettled and disoriented his own representational positionality. A lack of closure and lasting damage are powerfully suggested in the image of the “roads ripped open” by earthquakes that have still not been “closed up.”37 The poem’s subjects—Nguyen Van B. and Phan Nhien Hao both—continue to bear the marks of damaged life.

Second, there is also the shift from the third-person to the first-person through reported speech. Not only is time out of joint, but there is also confusion at the level of the speaker. Phan Nhien Hao’s lyrical voice here is reticent and withdrawn. Though removed from the scenes described and experiences related in the body of the poem, the poet’s presence is nonetheless felt in the particular framing of the poem as he sets the stage, as it were, for the performance of another voice. The distinctiveness and difference of the poem’s other speaker is marked off through its presentation as reported speech. Imagine if the poem had been written entirely as a dramatic monologue spoken by the first-person persona of Nguyen Van B. Phan Nhien Hao’s

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37 My translation “closed up” may be inadequate here. In an early version, I had translated the line as “sutured,” but then I thought that was an even more forceful and limiting interpretation. The sense of the wound and woundedness is more directly evident in the word suture. In the end, I kept the more open-ended, if somewhat vague, parallelism of “ripped open” and “closed up.”
decision to introduce and frame the voice of Nguyen Van B. establishes a dialogic relation between poet and taxi driver; it also calls attention to the forms of representation performed in tandem within the space of the taxi and in the space of the poem.

After all Nguyen Van B. has been through—“country, youth, dreams” declared lost—he is still able to lay claim to being Vietnamese. Whether or not the other Vietnamese in the taxi feels the same way is something the poem leaves unsaid. If the poem’s opening lines disorient, then the final couplet seeks to suture the wounds of diaspora by locating the two within a re-stabilized cultural and national identity. The deterritorialized subjects of the poem are momentarily re-territorialized through Nguyen Van B’s nomination of the two as “both Vietnamese, after all.” While Nguyen Van B. technically receives the last word, those words are already placed in quotes by the poet. The final “after all” carries with it the pathos of their historical situation and an ambiguous temporality in its suspension over the now re-opened wound of history marked by the event horizon of diaspora. If April 1975 is the concealed date of the poem, then Nguyen Van B.’s twenty-eight years place the poem around 2003. Nguyen Van B.’s disclosure of his privileged background in Vietnam stands in marked contrast to his current occupation. The diasporic pathos of the reversal of life story is captured succinctly in his turn of phrase, “once in Saigon my family had two servant and a chauffeur / now I chauffeur millions of people around.” His admission might be read as self-pity or a desire to reveal his true origins, provoked by the encounter with another Vietnamese in the interpersonal space of the taxi cab. The possibility of self-pity, however, seems to be defused by his humorous and self-deprecating comparison of himself to a “yellow dog called Taxi.” (For me, there’s a hidden personal history to the word “taxi.” I read the poem to and with my mother. She told me that the smaller boats used to shuttle escaping refugees to larger boats were sometimes called “taxis.”) Nguyen Van
B.’s self-mocking description of himself as a “yellow dog called Taxi” invokes the over
determined racial category of Asians and Asian Americans. In this way, the nostalgic class
identification—he was a member of the urban elite—becomes displaced by the identification of
economic and racial subordination. It is in this context that Nguyen Van B.’s final remark
attempts to achieve a kind of symbolic coup, recuperating and restoring the severed cultural
nationalist identity. Whether Nguyen Van B. and his interlocutor (Phan Nhien Hao) are “both
Vietnamese, after all” must come with a recognition of the melancholy that pervades such a
claim.

The uncanny meeting between these two fellow countrymen in the global metropolis of
New York unsettles the isolated social location of the exile poet and draws attention to the
representational positionality taken up by the poet. The individualistic subject of exile in
“Meeting a Cab Driver in New York” undergoes what Leo Bersani in *Forms of Being* calls a
“dispersal of subject-hood” whereby “the multiplication of the individual’s positionality in the
universe is, necessarily, a lessoning or even a loss of individuality” (5). The “subject’s dispersal”
comes about in Phan Nhien Hao’s poems through unexpected and contingent encounters with an
other—in this case, somebody else from the diaspora. Bersani writes: “Immanent in every
subject is its similarities with other subject (and other objects)—similitudes that are illuminated,
that ‘shine’ into visibility when those others intersect with the subject’s spatial or temporal
trajectories” (8-9). Those spatial and temporal trajectories are often figured in Phan Nhien Hao’s
poems through his recurring use of place names and dates, as seen in the poems above, but also
in many other poems.

“Meeting a Cab Driver in New York” records and enacts a dispersal of language and
identity through and across a diasporic encounter. The poem Phan Nhien Hao writes is not
monologic, but dialogic; not just the voice of one speaker, but the voice of multiple speakers. What results is a poem of dialogic intersubjectivity. That these voices offer diasporic perspectives forces us to consider the relation of communal memory and interpersonal collectivity. Dispensing with the first-person speaker that characterized many of the poems discussed above, “Meeting a Cab Driver in New York City” is constructed around a more depersonalized and dialogic form of address. The voice we hear in the opening stanza, for instance, differs from the voice quoted in the rest of the poem, but it is a rather neutral and impersonal voice that never speaks from the grammatical position of the first-person subject. Instead, the only “I” we hear is not one identified as the “poet” or Phan Nhien Hao, but rather belongs to the taxi driver named “Nguyen Van B.” And yet the poem is neither a dramatic monologue, spoken and performed only in the voice of the putative poetic persona of Nguyen Van B. This confusion over the real or fictionalized taxi cab testimony of Nguyen Van B. marks the intersubjective mode of being represented by the poem. Subjecthood is dispersed across the encounter. Even before the open quotations of the reported speech, we can already hear the staccato cadences of Nguyen Van B’s voice reverberating in the line—“three times robbed, gun to the head, pockets cleaned out”—that introduces the rest of what “B. says,” which constitutes the rest of the poem, to his fellow countryman, who turns out to be a poet, after all. The diasporic subject—here given the name “Nguyen Van B.”—is mediated through and through by his/its representation as an aesthetic subject and poetic persona within Phan Nhien Hao’s poem “Meeting a Cab Driver in New York City.” By calling attention to the aesthetic mediation of his diasporic subject, Phan Nhien Hao’s poem encourages us to pay closer attention to the forms of representation and knowledge production of contemporary Vietnamese diaspora. “Diasporic writers all have particular subject positions in relation to war politics and war memory in their
writing,” as Mariam Lảm observes, “some embrace the messiness and binary oppositions, others distance themselves from it entirely, and still others channel the painful complexity into the power of their pens” (177). As I read it, Phan Nhien Hao’s own representational positionality vis-à-vis the Vietnamese diaspora, represented here by the figure of Nguyen Van B., is one of ambivalent attachment.

If “Meeting a Taxi Driver in New York City” resulted in an ambivalent form of ethnic and cultural affiliation as diasporic subjects, then “Greyhound, 1992” narrates the poet’s consciousness of the contradictions of citizenship in the U.S. “Greyhound, 1992” recounts the speaker’s memorable and transformative encounter with a diverse array of people, not with other Vietnamese in America, but with other Americans; the eponymous bus represents a microcosm of multicultural America. As the title of the poem suggest, the temporal and spatial trajectories of the poetic subject is foregrounded. “Greyhound, 1992” names a migrant chronotope—Bakhtin’s term for the time-space matrix “materializing time in space” (250)—by which Phan Nhien Hao concretizes his coming-into-consciousness of a multiply-located, racialized identity. What is important to underscore about this chronotope is that it concretizes this emergent identity through its intersection with other subjects.

While still written from the first-person perspective, “Greyhound, 1992” departs from Phan Nhien Hao’s other poems of exile by being more narrative driven and outwardly focused. The cross-country road-trip is narrated from the perspective of a new immigrant. “Greyhound, 1992” recounts the poet’s encounters with segments of multicultural America: “black folks,” “a young white guy,” “an Indian,” “a small Hmong man.” Phan Nhien Hao presents his diverse encounters with Americans in expressly racialized terms, I would suggest, as a way of framing his emerging awareness of his own immigrant subjectivity and racialized self. His self-
consciousness produces an ironic and critical self-reflexivity of a narrative of assimilation and incorporation.

In ‘92 I crossed the country, from Atlanta to Seattle, by bus. I had $300 and about that much English. Over the flat fields of the Midwest I saw cows crowded like ants. The air smelled like shit for miles and miles. The locals were unfazed. Had I lived there long enough, I would not smell anything either I guess.

Many black people rode the bus. Only later did I learn it was the easiest way for poor people to travel from state to state—they have lots of time and little money. In the restroom of a transfer station in Denver a white kid offered me a joint and something else. That was also the first time I saw an Indian not from a movie: he was too drunk to remember what tribe he belonged to. He didn’t carry a gun or bow, but held a big bottle while slumped in a corner. I turned down the joint and something else to avoid becoming a yellow man who exists only in a movie.

I sat beside a Hmong man—shorter than me! This guy drank milk the whole trip. You might have thought he was a loser hoping for a second growth spurt. But I know why he guzzled so much milk: his stomach hurt. I, too, suffered from gastritis once. The result of years of starvation and bitterness from growing up in a dirt poor nation. He clutched the jugs (Made in the USA, 75 cents) like a pair of fake breasts you toss in the trash after sucking. Back then, I felt like an immigrant made from plastic, resilient and resistant to all types of acids.

In 1992, the Greyhound from Atlanta to Seattle only cost $85 for the 2,600 mi. journey. America, you swallowed me down your great throat.
as cheaply as this. (my translation)

The essential thing to take away from this poem is the speaker’s reflections on an emergent awareness or recognition of his own racialized subject position, a recognition that complicates a deracinated claim as a writer in exile. This poem confronts the translator with a number of difficulties, not least of which is the poet’s use of racial and gendered stereotypes. I have tried to translate the poem here, but have failed to fully capture the sense of irony and hyperbole operating in the Vietnamese. In English, the stereotypes come off as just that—stereotypes, when in fact Phan Nhien Hao seems to be mobilizing them in order as a means of identification vis-à-vis his own sense of being “a yellow man” or an “immigrant made from plastic.” The final image of incorporation into the American body politic underscores Phan Nhien Hao’s ambivalent thoughts on assimilation. Settling neither for the cultural nationalism of Nguyen Van B’s identification as “Vietnamese, after all” nor for the assimilationist narrative of incorporation, Phan Nhien Hao calls for an alternative discursive practice. That practice I want to claim next is the practice of diaspora.

In his poetry and prose, Phan Nhien Hao performs a counterpublic witness for the alternative voices and histories of Vietnamese diaspora. By mourning the dead and remembering traumatic history, Phan performs the necessary act of writing cultural memory into the present in a way that assumes the multidirectionality of memories. However, as I hope my readings show, such acts must also remain vigilant against a competitive model of memory that uses the past to justify one’s own identity and accuse others. His work shines a light on the enduring pain of South Vietnamese under the excesses of post-War communist rule in Vietnam. Yet, this single-minded critique can also blind one against the less obvious forces of global capitalism. While his
perspective offers a vital critique of restorative reconciliation, his writing focuses less on the particular relationship between Vietnam and the U.S. He sees reconciliation as forgetting, more than he sees reconciliation as economic normalization. While Phan Nhien Hao’s poetry may inevitably fail as a form of transparent recovery and witnessing of the past, this failure still points forward to the potential work of a multidirectional reconciliation. It reminds us that representation evades certainty about the war and its aftermath and certainty about the historical agency of South Vietnamese. Importantly, his work shows us that reconciliation that does not acknowledge and include the suffering and historical agency of the South Vietnamese cannot be considered genuine reconciliation. And while his poetry and prose may allude to the political expediency and consolidation behind the transnational project of reconciliation, his work does not fully engage contemporary Vietnam or what reconciliation produces. This is neither a fault nor a failure of the work, since very few poets writing in Vietnamese or in English can claim such a vital body of work as Phan Nhien Hao. For a fuller and more entrenched engagement with the present, we must turn elsewhere. In so doing, we will see more clearly how postwar reconciliation between Vietnam and the United States represents a mystification of the real relations of power involved in national reunification and economic normalization, which in effect determines what histories and narratives are produced and circulated, and what other cultural memory and alternative voices must be suppressed or neutralized.
CHAPTER 5

Linh Dinh’s Borderless Bodies:
Global Grotesques and Literature
After Economic Normalization

Visit Ho Chi Minh City these days and eventually you will bump into Colonel Sanders. In January 2008, during a brief hiatus from my graduate studies, I returned to Vietnam with my father. Exploring the city, I found myself stranded on a busy intersection in its congested heart. Across a street streaming with traffic—framed within the familiar red sign on the side of an unusually large two-story Kentucky Fried Chicken—the Colonel’s smiling benevolent face peered out over the noisy vortex of motorbikes and cars careening into the soup of exhaust fumes, human sweat, and hot metal. Sharing the same field of vision with KFC in HCMC was a bright red banner commemorating “30 Years of Progress and Development” that hung on the side of the street lamp in front of me. You could see these commemorative banners all over the city. From my point of view, it was an odd, ironic, and inevitable juxtaposition—the sign of global capitalism together with the sign of national reunification and renovation.

My encounter with KFC in Vietnam allowed me to better understand the following poem called “Eating Fried Chicken” by Linh Dinh, whose poetry is the focus of this fifth and final chapter of my study:

I hate to admit this, brother, but there are times
When I’m eating fried chicken
When I think about nothing else but eating fried chicken,
When I utterly forget about my family, honor and country,
The various blood debts you owe me,
My past humiliations and my future crimes—
Everything, in short, but the crispy skin on my fried chicken.

But I’m not altogether evil, there are also times
When I will refuse to lick or swallow anything

...
That's not generally available to mankind.

(Which is, when you think about it, absolutely nothing at all.)

And no doubt that’s why apples can cause riots,
And meat brings humiliation,
And each gasp of air
Will fill one’s lungs with gun powder and smoke.

I read this poem from Dinh’s 2005 collection *American Tatts* before going to Vietnam, but parts of it eluded me. Why fried chicken? Who is the speaker here? What painful events of the past is the speaker alluding to? I understood the basic drift of the poem: directly addressing a confidant or someone close, the speaker reluctantly admits to the desire for the comfort that comes with imagining reconciliation has taken place. However, and this is the disturbingly funny thing about Dinh’s poem, the speaker forgets all past transgressions *only* when he is eating fried chicken; only then does the speaker entertain the possibility of forgiveness.

Recalling now the big box Kentucky Fried Chicken that I saw in a rapidly changing Ho Chi Minh City, I understand the poem in part as a satirical comment on the conditions, limits, and possibilities of reconciliation in general, with its potentially sly allusion to postwar reconciliation within the specific context of Vietnam. Might the poem’s eponymous fried chicken actually name a particular presence of foreign investment and transnational capital, here called “Kentucky Fried Chicken”? If so, then the speaker’s rather extraordinary and absurd admission about the overpowering force of fried chicken suggests the ways in which the physical comfort and pleasure promised by economic investment can obscure other, more discomforting, issues and allegiances such as the ones catalogued in the poem. The ability to forget and forgive here is an unexpected byproduct of “Eating Fried Chicken.”

As is the case throughout his work, Dinh’s oblique use of cultural references invites socially and historically specific readings such as the one I am suggesting; at the same time, his
work also resists being located within any one interpretative determination. Take away the potential historical and cultural allusion to Kentucky Fried Chicken in Vietnam and the poem still offers a lesson about the short-term satisfactions and distractions of comfort and pleasure. The poem draws on the symbolic resources and cultural significance of food and eating in suggestive ways and links them to contrasting images of plentitude and scarcity, personal gratification and social discontent (“apples can cause riots […] meat brings humiliation”). Dinh invokes a religious understanding of reconciliation as breaking-bread with one’s enemy, but ironizes this reconciliatory scene through the symbolic substitution and act of eating fried chicken. The antic conceit and sardonic tone of the poem contrast dramatically with the gravity, pathos, and seriousness usually associated with a conception of reconciliation premised on truth-telling. The multiplying ambiguities of Dinh’s poem ultimately undermine the speaker’s reconciliatory gesture to redress past injury by deeply troubling the audience’s ability to listen for the actual truth.

Through close readings of Linh Dinh’s parodic postmodern representations of globalization, this final chapter foregrounds the historical context of my dissertation’s argument about the ambiguous results of reconciliation: namely the lifting of the U.S. trade embargo on Vietnam in 1994 and the formalization of diplomatic ties and economic normalization between the two countries in 1995. In much of the literature of reconciliation that proliferated after 1994, the cultural and social consequences of this political and economic change in policy are often treated, if they are treated at all, as peripheral and secondary to the primary drama of coming to terms with the past and making peace in the present. This is not the case for Linh Dinh, whose set of experiences as a Vietnamese immigrant in the U.S., urban resident of Philadelphia, common laborer, and itinerant writer informs much of his writing. As I argue in this chapter,
Dinh’s work as a poet, fiction writer, editor and translator examines what postwar literature of reconciliation tends to silence, ignore, or dismiss: the vested economic and political interests behind the symbolic displays and representations of reconciliation; the contradictions and alienation produced by globalization in the psychic and material lives of the politically marginalized and economically dispossessed; and the aesthetic regimes of reconciliatory texts that reinforce the respective nationalist narratives of, on the one hand, reunification and renovation of national identity for the Vietnamese Communist Party, and on the other hand, rescue and rehabilitation of moral authority for the U.S. government. In short, Dinh’s work exposes globalization and nation building as unacknowledged centers of postwar peace and reconciliation efforts.

My argument draws on and extends a number of critical observations made by readers of Dinh’s work. In their respective readings of his first collection of stories, *Fake House*, Thuy Dinh and Isabelle Thuy Pelaud both situate Dinh’s fictional characters within the new transnational configuration of U.S.-Vietnam relations after economic normalization. As Thuy Dinh observes in her review of *Fake House* for *Raintaxi*:

> In the wake of renewed diplomatic and trade relations between the United States and Vietnam—which have resulted in blind optimism and unrestrained greed on the part of denizens from both countries, Dinh’s fictional characters show that the Vietnam War’s consequences linger on in more variegated, insidious contexts. The central tragedy that still plagues those who have been affected by the war is the inability to forget and forgive. Yet, to forget and forgive would be to erase, to “cosmeticize” the past.

To “‘cosmeticize’ the past” not only involves a dangerous erasure of historical consciousness, but also the deployment of a particular aesthetic and representational project that attempts to cover up, make over, and beautify (so to speak) the ugly side of postwar reconciliation. For Matthew Sharpe, Dinh’s writing “depict[s] a sense of absurdity, confusion, and displacement
peculiar to being a contemporary world citizen […] haunted by the loneliness and terror experienced by the individual in the global economy” (Sharpe 2004). Similarly, Isabelle Thuy Pelaud argues in her essay “Entering Linh Dinh’s Fake House: The Literature of Displacement”: “The dislocations produced by war, colonization and transnationalism […] create contradictions that lead to aberrations where hyper-individualistic human beings are disconnected from one another and, as a result are abused and in turn become perpetrators” (45). Going further, Pelaud pinpoints “transnational capital” as the ever moving and often invisible target of Linh Dinh’s prose. She writes how his “insistence in showing the brutal effects of transnational capital upon society operates like a neon light shed on the corners of a dirty room” (38). For Pelaud, Dinh’s transgressions of essentialist assumptions of identity and rejection of assimilable immigrant narratives make him a “bad subject” in the Althusserian sense of ideological struggle (45). Together, these critics rightly attribute a diagnostic power that calls attention to the ambivalent results, glaring contradictions, and brutal realities of contemporary everyday life in Vietnam and the U.S to Dinh’s fiction.

The leading knife-edge of Dinh’s diagnostic representational practice is formed by his use of postmodernist parody. In ways that differ from his fiction, Dinh’s poetry often employs speakers who espouse and embody limited perspectives on transnational identity in order to ironize not so much the speakers themselves, but rather the assumptions about that identity—for instance, its newness and originality, cultural value and authority—which blind his poetic personae to more enlarged views of a history of the present.\footnote{Linda Hutcheon’s definition of postmodern parody in The Politics of Postmodernism remains relevant (Routledge, 1989). Against the notion of postmodernist representation as value-free, decorative, and de-historicized, Hutcheon argues that “postmodernist parody is a value-problematicizing, de-naturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representation” (94); “through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference” (93).} As I read his poems, Dinh registers
the discursive constructs of the “global” and “transnational” through his use of ironic appropriation and quotation of the various vocabularies, master tropes, and dominant images mediating the discourse of globalization. In the readings that follow, I suggest that these vocabularies, tropes, and images of the global and transnational all converge in Dinh’s representation of the grotesque body of the transnational subject. As the title of his 2005 collection of poems names them, Dinh’s borderless bodies are defined by the negative effects of disgust and an aesthetics of the ugly that produce and foreground the ambivalent results of globalization. Dinh’s “Borderless Bodies” articulate the increasing unease, disgust, anger and alarm of individuals negotiating the transformations of the “runaway world,” to borrow Anthony Giddens’ view of globalization. Dinh’s poetic representations of “the unchosen” subjects and bodies of globalization—to invoke the outcasts, losers, and displaced to whom Dinh dedicated his first book—not only perform a sustained “critical globality”\(^{39}\) but also demonstrate the capacity of poetry to articulate emergent forms of subjectivity, collectivity, and agency (Weinbaum and Edwards 270).

**Questions of Travel**

Part of the “1.5 Generation” of Vietnamese American writers, Linh Dinh was born in Saigon in 1963 and left Vietnam on April 27, 1975. In 1995, he returned to Vietnam for the first time. During this first return trip, he traveled to Hanoi and Saigon and met a number of prominent Vietnamese writers, including Bao Ninh and Nguyen Huy Thiep. Due in part to this initial return, Dinh edited *Night, Again: Contemporary Vietnamese Fiction from Vietnam*, which

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\(^{39}\) For a suggestive discussion “On Critical Globality” as a reading method, see Weinbaum and Edwards. They propose the idea of “critical globality” as a reading method for doing cultural criticism in a US context in an age of globalization. The reading method of critical globality is “self-reflexive about the politics of the language that is used to analyze ‘globalization’ and constitute it as an object” (270). In this way, critical globality names a critical practice that attempts “to subvert the notion of ‘globality’ from the inside—and then displace it […] to think both in the same plane as, and against the grain of [globalization]” (271).
was first published by Seven Stories Press in 1996 and reissued in 2007. *Night, Again* marked an important departure from the overt reconciliatory aims of the literary anthologies being produced during the same period through collaboration projects sponsored by the William Joiner Center and the Vietnamese Writers Association. The stories in *Night, Again*, half of which were translated by Dinh, exhibit the wide range of styles used by contemporary Vietnamese writers to explore selfhood in a rapidly changing society, which often include stark portrayals of contemporary Vietnamese society. As Dinh writes in his editor’s introduction, “[u]nfettered by the exigencies of was and politics, many writers are plumbing their own subjectivity and reinventing the multifaceted self” (xiv). Dinh returned to Vietnam again in 1999, but this time stayed longer and lived in Saigon until 2001. During this second return, he became familiar with Saigon’s cutting-edge underground writers; translated many of the poets into English; and also translated English poetry into Vietnamese. Out of this contact and collaborations came Dinh’s translations of chapbook-length selections of *Three Vietnamese Poets* (2001) and many other translations of Vietnamese poets published in literary journals in the U.S. Later, Tupelo Press published *Night, Fish and Charlie Parker*, a book-length collection of Phan Nhrien Hao’s poetry in translation.

The most dramatic transformation that affected Vietnam in the last thirty years has been the period of liberalization referred to as *Doi Moi* or “Renovation.” In 1986, the Vietnamese Communist Party began implementing a series of open-door economic policies, a Vietnamese version of *perestroika* designed to decentralize the economy and transition the country towards a more market-driven model. Vietnam became one of the fastest-growing economies in the world. From 1990 to 2005, agricultural production nearly doubled, transforming Vietnam from a net food importer to the world’s second-largest exporter of rice. In the cultural sphere, the state
loosened its grip on artists and writers, allowing for a greater degree of creative freedom, and
even encouraging social criticism. No longer officially bound to the aesthetic doctrines of
socialist realism, more poets and writers felt safe and free to explore forms and themes once set
aside as irrelevant or attacked as illegitimate: official corruption, the social consequences of war,
the break-down of traditional values, and personal subjectivity, to name a few.

Dinh’s own fiction and poetry from this transformative period shows a preoccupation
with contemporary issues facing Vietnamese in Vietnam and overseas. To appreciate the wide
range of literary works that Dinh produced as a result of his return to Vietnam in 1999, it might
be worth noting what he did not produce. Despite his returning to live in Vietnam for nearly
three years and his relearning Vietnamese to translate the work of his Vietnamese
contemporaries, Dinh did not produce the kind of first-person narrative centered around his
individual experience of returning to Vietnam, coming to terms with the painful memories of the
past, or searching for cultural identity and roots that Isabelle Thuy Pelaud claims typifies popular
“tales of return” written by many Vietnamese American authors (38). Given the relative success
of memoirs such as Le Ly Hayslip’s When Heaven and Earth Changed Places and Andrew X.
Pham’s Catfish and Mandala, it is not difficult to imagine how Dinh might have used his literary
talents to fashion a narrative of return and reconciliation from the perspective of a former
Vietnamese refugee. Unlike his contemporaries, Dinh’s work from this period rarely foregrounds
his own individual experience. His writing is certainly written from what might be called a
diasporic perspective, but it is not a first-person narrative of his own private journey or need to
come to terms with the past. His writing emerges out of the new social and economic context of
normalized relations, but he does not thematize his own return journey. In digressing from the
thematic structure of return, as Pelaud claims, Dinh’s writing “opens a new transgressive space
that speaks powerfully of dysfunctions produced by postcolonial and transnational conditions across gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality and geographic location” (38). To do so, Dinh’s poems speak from various social positions of dispossession within an increasingly transnational world of immigration, war, migrant labor, and tourism.

Like many of the writers discussed throughout my exploration of the routes of reconciliation, Dinh also draws on the conventions of travel writing to say something about contemporary Vietnam. In a departure from the more conventional modes of travel writing, Dinh’s postmodern parody upends the expectations of travel writing to produce original accounts of unique experiences by slipping into the fictional and the fantastic. “Eight Postcards from Vietnam,” for instance, are written in a shorthand travel writing style, full of cultural observations, accounts of travels, encounters, and curiosities. Dinh’s Vietnam “Postcards” are hybrid essays, mixing travel writing with cultural observation with streetwise journalism with flights of fiction. In “Country Living,” the author’s visit to friends in the town of Chau Doc leads him to a funny observation on the lack of bathroom and abundance of “mam,” or fermented fish, which the town is famous for; “Give Me Money” examines the unexpected intricacies and complexities of begging in Vietnam; “Her Place” visits a Vietnamese nightclub run by a former singer; Vietnamese superstitions in “Magic Realist Country”; “Original Ladies Man” on being a “nacirema” or “backward American”; hanging out at the “Poet’s House”: and the “sampan sex scene” and sex in the water in “Water Sports”; and “Whoredom” on the various places prostitution occurs in Vietnam. Such “postcards” do not offer picturesque images of Vietnam, but they do glimpse the urban underbelly and rough spots of Vietnam. These, too, are part of the tourism industry, off the radar, and off the beaten path.
“Tourism”

Calling attention to the multiple actors and agents involved in the production of “memory tourism” in Vietnam, Linh Dinh explores “Tourism” from the standpoint of a Vietnamese local in a poem of the same name from his second collection, *American Tatts*. Drawing on the conventions of the dramatic monologue, the unnamed speaker of “Tourism” is a gregarious, resourceful, and cynical Vietnamese man who, in the course of the poem’s sixty-nine lines, attempts to keep the attention and perhaps win the favor of his interlocutor, an American tourist visiting Vietnam for the first time. Set in a western-style nightclub in Vietnam (“This bar’s not too bad, actually. It was designed / For folks like you to feel right at home”), the speaker begins his brutally honest and darkly satirical monologue of the unique experiences his country has to offer—and fails to offer—to both its visitors and its own citizens in the new economic and social dispensation of post-*Doi Moi* Vietnam:

> I see you’re getting shit-faced again,  
> What do you want—ganja?  
> To sleep with a hairless boy or girl?  
> To shoot yourself in front of a burnt out tank?  
> The tail of a bomber sticking out of a pond?

But the tanks and planes are all gone, unfortunately,  
Dismantled by our peasants and sold for scraps.  
They also dismantle bombs to sell for scraps.  
Though inept at building things, we’re expert at taking things apart.  
We can dismantle New York City in half an hour and sell it for scraps. (83)

Neither the poem nor its dramatic speaker wastes any time. According to the speaker’s initial queries, sex, drugs, and war are presumably the unofficial attractions of Vietnam. Vietnam-the-country is offered up as a playground where familiar fantasies from Vietnam-the-war can be

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reenacted; all the sexual, violent, and banal content of which Dinh’s speaker slyly captures in the connotations of the verb “to shoot” when he asks, “What do you want […] To shoot yourself in front of a burnt out tank?” Invoking the seedier side of Vietnam’s tourism industry, the speaker wants to know which of these desires the quiet, and decidedly drunk, American seeks from his tour of Vietnam—the unstated implication being that the Vietnamese speaker, a trickster playing the role of the local expert and native guide, can help supply and facilitate such desires. The sex and drugs seem to be in no short supply, as he suggests, but the war—or rather the hulking remnants of the war that would have provided a novel backdrop for pictures and postcards from Vietnam—proves to be more difficult to offer the American tourist as part of the overall Vietnam travel package.41

And it is precisely the war that continues to hold this particular American’s imagination, as the second stanza implies in the speaker’s admission, presented as a response, that “the tanks and planes are all gone, unfortunately”; the war also shapes the man’s identity, despite or because he “missed the war” (Are you sorry you missed the war? / Your life’s meaningless because you’ve never been shot at?” [84]). Dismantled and sold for scraps, the relics of the war have become recycled commodities and sources of much needed income in the postwar economy: “The explosive from a single bomb is worth 450 bucks, / Equal to a year’s salary. / But for that, you have to dig down 40 feet” (83). The poem parodies both the battlefield tourist’s desire “to see, experience, and understand mass destruction and violence in the modern era” (Sturken 286) and war tourism’s transnational investment in the discursive construct of the “Vietnam War.” Unable to help fulfill the American’s wish to have his photo taken amidst an

41 Curiously, the speaker of “Tourism” fails to mention the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, which has been open since September of 1975. Operated by the Vietnamese government, tanks, planes, armaments, and photos of atrocity are on full display inside the museum. This elision could be due to the idea expressed in the poem that a different, ostensibly less curated and mediated experience, is what is desired first and foremost, i.e. finding and photographing pieces of the war in the natural landscape (“The tail of a bomber sticking out of a pond?”)
idyllic landscape scarred by war, the speaker offers instead his insider’s cultural knowledge of Vietnam—

That’s one thing we’re perversely proud of:
Our ability to dig into the ground.
Other nations boast of building up.
We boast of building down. (83)

—and is curious himself to know what Vietnam looks like to an outsider, from the perspective of an American who had “missed the war” and is seeing the country for the first time:

From inside the oval window, from high above,
What were your first impressions flying in?
That our streets are like dug up tunnels?
That our traffic resembles wet worms crawling?
May this plane never land, you started to pray.
May it circle forever over this S-shaped country,
Our interaction would be limited to you dropping CDs and flowers
From high above.

But before you knew it, you were inside our country. (83-84)

As indicated by the sardonic tone here, and throughout the poem, the speaker’s battery of questions is compelled by something other than earnest cross-cultural curiosity. In addition to the questions above, he also asks at different places in the poem: “Were you impressed by our skyscrapers?”; “Are you sorry you missed the war? / Your life’s meaningless because you’ve never been shot at? / Do you want to go to jail just to see what it’s like? / How about buying an M-16 or an AK-47?”/ “Is it true that half of your vets have turned into suicidal psychos?” All of these loaded questions, full of historical and political baggage, challenge the speaker’s American interlocutor to examine the expectations, motivations, and underlying agendas behind his travel to Vietnam, as well as the historical antecedents connected to those questions of travel.
Dinh thus creates a speaker who is caught up in the failures of economic liberalism yet able to cognitively map the dysfunctions of globalization from his local perspective. A living reminder of the history between the two countries, the speaker points out, is also present at the bar: “See the white guy at that table? / From your country, Florida. / He’s lived here for over a decade / And is always talking about his wife ‘Lan,’ / But none of us has even seen her. / We all know the old soldier lives alone” (AT 84). This is nobody’s idea of a vacation. Indeed, as the rest of the poem confirms, the speaker fails extraordinarily at providing the escape of tourism for another quiet American but succeeds rather well at exposing and ridiculing the contradictions of a post-war, post-Renovation Vietnam involved in the practices and processes of modernization. By appealing to all the wrong feelings and striking an antagonistic tone throughout, the speaker proves to be a poor salesman for Vietnam as a tourist destination of the future and of himself as a carefree guide. In keeping with the conventions of the dramatic monologue, we never actually hear what the American says in response. Towards the end of the poem, the American seems to have passed out from over-drinking, boredom, or a mixture of the two (“What’s the matter? Are you falling asleep on me? / How many whiskies have you had?”), begging the question of how awake and attentive he has in fact been throughout the course of the monologue. The American’s sleepiness awakens the rising suspicion that the monologue, after all, is not just about trying to make a business transaction. The monologue, given the American’s growing disinterest, does not seem to be intended solely for the poem’s stated audience of one. The speaker seems just as intent on voicing his deep skepticism, disillusionment, and distrust of American foreign policy and Communist Party rhetoric. The narrator effectively deflates any romanticized ideas of Vietnam sought by Americans as well as reproduced by Vietnamese for Western consumption. The nation-building project of Vietnam comes under attack, as the following stanza makes clear:
Were you impressed by our skyscrapers?
We built a few just to show we’re modern.
But no one lives or works in them.
They don’t have elevators, plumbing or electricity.
There are rumors they don’t exist at all,
Just images projected into the sky by some machine. (84)

Before we take the speaker’s rather fantastic claim as a literal description of “modern” Vietnam and its changing skyline, let us remember the context of economic normalization and liberalization in which the poem is ostensibly set in, emerges from, and responds to. As I read these lines, the speaker ratchets up his ridicule to critical levels in order to expose what he deems as the shaky ideological foundations of Vietnam’s nation-building project, figured symbolically here in the outrageous image of the fake skyscrapers. The lines further extend the speaker’s earlier barbs—“Though inept at building things, we’re expert at taking things apart”; “Other nations boast of building up. / We boast of building down”—into the central motif of the poem (AT 83). In their own strange way, the simulacral skyscrapers, rumored to be “Just images projected into the sky by some machine,” become apt postmodern emblems of the logic of late capitalism that governs contemporary Vietnam. For the narrator of the poem, the signs of modernization in Vietnam are just that: signifiers and projections of national growth and development that do not correspond with reality on the ground and, as mentioned earlier in the poem, a reality where remnants of the war are sought, dismantled and sold by peasants, and where the disillusioned and deeply cynical speaker himself is all but ready to compromise his beliefs and exploit his knowledge for the money that tourism promises. In this recognition of false comforts, the speaker of “Tourism” is akin to the speaker in opening poem “Eating Fried Chicken.” Hyper conscious of the contradictions of post-Renovation Vietnam, the speaker is both highly critical and ultimately complicit.
Dinh’s unnamed speaker is made to perform a ruthless and unsparing critique of “Tourism” in contemporary Vietnam. The speaker functions as a mask or persona behind which we sense the presence of the poet. Given to flights of hyperbole, overstatement, and fiction, the speaker draws attention to the spectacle of his own speech act and consequently highlights the performativity of the voice-driven poem. Like the simulacral skyscrapers of Vietnam’s cityscape, which he derides, the voice we hear and read is also a simulation and a projection of an individual who presents himself as Vietnamese. He is a native Vietnamese who from the very first line—“I see you’re getting shit-faced again”—speaks to us with a disarmingly uncanny American English vernacular. Later, he says, “Glad to have you back, my friend. / I thought you had passed out in the bathroom on me. / How do you like the graffiti over the pisser: / To shoot at something and see it bounce away from you / Is like having your dick reach eternity?” Part of the success of Dinh’s simulated voice is the way in which it is translated into an American idiom. The poem speaks to the captive American audience in their own language and idiom, giving expression to the hidden fantasies and darker motives of a collective unconscious. As readers who are reading the poem in the global language of English, “Tourism” puts us in an uncomfortable position of fielding the same questions directed at the American. In its overall portrayal of post-1994 Vietnam, Dinh’s poem empties the Vietnam-US cross-cultural conversation of its purported ethical and political import under the sign of reconciliation and exposes the economic imperative of globalization under the sign of tourism.

Dinh tracks another globe-trotting figure in “Travelling Man,” a poem from his third collection, *Borderless Bodies*. Like “Tourism,” the poem takes aim at the false signs of globalism from above; that is, it targets the privileged position of the geographically and economically mobile. Unlike the previous poem, which utilizes a first-person monologue,
“Travelling Man” is written from a more distanced and less ambiguous third-person perspective. The poem briefly references Saigon, Vietnam but is more global in its itinerary of cultural allusions. Short and unsparing, Dinh’s poem offers a flash portrait of the world traveler who remains aloof and indifferent to the relations and structures of exploitation and suffering mapped in the poem:

Travelling, he sees nothing. In the windows of Amsterdam’s
Red light district, he doesn’t recognize his plump flesh flashing
Or slouched on a chair. On the streets of Saigon, he doesn’t see
His snotty nose on the face of child beggars. He sniffs and sniffs
Yet smells nothing. He steps on something that gives. In Rome,
He cannot imagine himself a pickpocket or a slave. (51)

Through its quick cuts, prepositional phrases, and stream of images from different corners of the globe, the poem captures something of the space-time compression and the speed of connection experienced by our “Travelling Man.” One sentence he is in “Amsterdam’s / Red light district,” the next “On the streets of Saigon,” then “In Rome.” A consumer of other people’s bodies, Dinh’s “Travelling Man,” possesses a marked uneasiness about the boundaries of his own body. The “Travelling Man” polices the perceptual borders of his body, attempting to erect clear boundaries around himself, and letting nothing in that might disrupt his identity. Hence, “he sees nothing,” “doesn’t recognize,” and “cannot imagine” himself as other. Providing the critical edge of the poem, Dinh’s images work within and against this ideological blind spot, attempting to offer a corrective vision of globalism, or what I referred to earlier as the “critical globality” of Dinh’s global poetics. In this poem, Dinh does this first by superimposing on to body of his global subject the bodies of prostitutes, beggars, pickpockets, and slaves the “Travelling Man” strives to disassociate himself from. Second, Dinh projects onto those bodies various images of bodily secretions (“His snotty nose on the face of child beggars”) and corporeal waste (“He sniffs and sniffs / Yet smells nothing. He steps on something that gives”) that confuse inside and
outside, making it difficult to establish where the body of the “Travelling Man” ‘begins’ and where it ‘ends.’ In effect, Dinh reconnects the “Travelling Man” corporeally to a world he might criss-cross geographically, but nevertheless disconnects from cognitively. Through the unseeing eyes of the “Travelling Man,” Dinh shows us not global connection, but disconnection, indifference, and alienation. Though limited and limiting in this particular example, we can see in this poem Dinh developing a poetic strategy of resistance that practices a self-reflexive, corporeal globality over and against unreflective, disembodied forms of globalism.

You no longer have to be a “Travelling Man,” so to speak, in the age of globalized telecommunications and televised disaster to feel connected, as another one of Dinh’s global subjects attests to in a poem from his fourth collection Jam Alerts (2007) called “My Foreign Policy”:

As soon as the shooting started, I splurged
On a gorgeous, state of the art, plasma screen.
Before this war came on, there was nothing good
To watch on television, I couldn’t focus, evenings
Were wasted on flops and penguins, but now,
My death wish slaked and placated by a fiesta
Of other people’s corpses, my life’s centered. (46)

As in the previous poem, “My Foreign Policy” involves vision and spectatorship, as well as uneasy relations between different kinds of bodies. However, whereas the third-person perspective opened up on “A Traveling Man” provided a critical distance from which Dinh could parry the ideological blind-spot of his subject, in this poem Dinh takes a more intimate or implicated line of approach, parodying the geopolitical position of “My Foreign Policy” from the perspective of a first-person speaker. The speaker of “My Foreign Policy” expresses and embodies a perverse example of global connectivity, where the war just “[comes] on” like a television program. Rather than informing a greater political awareness or social consciousness
on “this war”, such a connection only functions to further disconnect and desensitize the viewer from the event of mass violence. By end, the speaker’s life is centered by gorging vampire-like on the “fiesta / Of other people’s corpses.”

**The Translator as Literary Activist:**
**Dissidence, Diaspora, and the Politics of Translation**

Dinh’s work as a translator and editor of contemporary Vietnamese fiction and poetry extends his own creative work and is in keeping with the political content of his own poetry and prose. Literary advocacy or activism might be a good way to describe Dinh’s partisan work as a translator and editor of Vietnamese writing. His translations of individual poets (such as last chapter’s Phan Nhien Hao) and edited volumes of poetry and fiction spotlight alternative and critical voices that are unpublished and unpublishable in Vietnam as well as unknown and previously untranslated into English, despite being well regarded by Vietnamese writers living inside and outside of Vietnam. The interventionist work of Dinh’s literary translation is forcefully stated in his Introduction to *Three Vietnamese Poets*: “Slandered and excluded from all anthologies, the three poets in this volume [Nguyen Quoc Chanh, Phan Nhien Hao, and Van Cam Hai] represent the fringe and vanguard of Vietnamese poetry. In a less corrupt environment, they would surely be seen as the best, and the most courageous, of their generation.” The writers Dinh translates—Thanh Tam Tuyen, Tran Da Tu, and Tran Vang Sao amongst the older generation of writers active during and before the war, and a younger postwar generation of writers that includes Nguyen Quoc Chanh, Phan Nhien Hao, Ly Doi, among many others—comprise a critical counterweight to the establishment writers most often involved, as discussed in chapters one and two of this dissertation, in the literary exchange programs and translation projects mutually supported by the Vietnamese Writers Association in Hanoi and the William
Joiner Center in Boston. Dinh’s partisan aesthetics and politics makes at least two important interventions for a more complex, nuanced and honest postwar reconsideration of the historical and literary legacies of the war. The first part of his translation efforts constitutes a recovery project of a suppressed canon of Vietnamese literature in the South between 1954-1975. The second part consists in championing and advocating the dissident and diasporic strains in contemporary Vietnamese poetry and fiction.

Part recovery project, Dinh’s translations attempt to revive interest in the reputations of a number of important poets writing in former South Vietnam during the 1960’s and 70’s. These poets include Thanh Tam Tuyen, one of the most influential poets writing in South Vietnam before 1975. Some of the most powerful and original poetic responses to the war, in either Vietnamese or English, belong to Tran Da Tu, another poet translated by Dinh. They are part of a lost generation, whose works have all but literally vanished in Vietnam, where official versions of the national literature erase the literary heritage of the South between 1954-1975, and are virtually invisible to readers in the U.S., where literature written in languages other than English drift into the blind-spot of a literary culture still driven by a monolingual approach to a multilingual reality. Poets and writers from former South Vietnam are rarely, if ever, included in literary anthologies purported to represent all sides of the war or modern and contemporary

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42 By establishment writers I mean those Vietnamese writers most closely associated with the state-sponsored Vietnamese Writers Association and who have received the benefits of such ties, which include publication, recognition, and the ability to collaborate closely with American writers.

43 When it comes to Vietnamese literature and culture, Linh Dinh always takes up an adversarial position to the literature and politics. In one of his few attempts at literary journalism, Linh Dinh reviewed The Other Side of Heaven. In his review, he pointed out the absence of Duong Thu Huong and the politics of translation. In his writings on the internet, as a contributor to widely read (at least in the poetry world) blogs like the Poetry Foundation’s Harriet Blog or the International Poetic Exchange, Dinh would often use the space as a platform to introduce contemporary Vietnamese poets. He could also be found taking to task certain established writers and translators of Vietnamese poetry who Dinh saw as using their literary capital to advance inaccurate representations of Vietnamese culture and society. See the case of John Balaban. Dinh has translated many Vietnamese poets. In print, these include the Three Vietnamese Poets, and Phan Nhien Hao. More recently, he wrote a reflective piece on the 35th anniversary of the fall of Saigon, in which he gave another unsentimental portrait of the end of the war.
Vietnamese literature. For Dinh, the inclusion of writers from former South Vietnam is not only a matter of the politics of representation and recognition, but also a matter of their importance as literary figures and innovators.

Part advocacy of dissident voices, Dinh’s translations of contemporary Vietnamese poets writing outside the literary establishment help circulate cultural memory in the present. The Vietnamese poets Dinh is drawn to and translates are by and large urbanites whose poetry grapples with issues of modern life in Vietnam with a rebellious spirit, sexual candidness, and brutal honesty. Novelist and editor Pham Thi Hoai captures the predicament facing many contemporary Vietnamese writers when she says: “privatization in the field of culture and communication has not advanced as far or as radically as the privatization of toilet paper, dish detergent, liquid soap, shampoo, bath soap, toothpaste and tampons.” Much of the post-Renovation poetry from Vietnam translated by Dinh is awash with references to the new goods, products, images, and ideas inundating Vietnam as the country steers through the transformations of globalization. Almost everywhere you go in Vietnam today, bright billboards and colorful street signs celebrate unprecedented growth and development, commemorate national unity and liberation, promote necessary policies to help curb societal problems, and cast Vietnam as the Asian tourist destination of the future. Not celebratory, but critical, many of the poets translated by Dinh sully the disinfected portrayals of post-Renovation Vietnam. Their poems overflow with disgust, disillusionment, angst, and alienation, tottering dangerously on the edge of violence—in other words, distress signals of a collective unconscious in a moment of cultural crisis.

One of the strongest signals coming from Vietnam has long been transmitted by Saigon poet Nguyen Quoc Chanh. An outspoken critic of the Vietnamese government, Chanh’s poetry

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44 With the exception of Huynh Sang Thong’s *Treasury of Vietnamese Poetry* and the anthology from *All Sides Now*. 
also pushes the limits of form and literary convention. Dinh describes Nguyen Quoc Chanh as the “backbone” of the underground poetry scene in Vietnam. Chanh’s receptive poems detect, as in the following title and lines of one, the “Low Pressure System” affecting Vietnamese society: “I hear cries of a newborn. / A fish crawls out from a bloody hollow. / The woman closes her thighs and a corpse is covered up.” With lines like this, Chanh tested the limits of the open door policy towards Vietnamese writers, with his poetry’s mixture of cultural and literary allusions and contemporary references. Ever since his emergence during the Renovation years, Chanh has been fearless in his criticism of the government and unapologetic in his experimentation with poetic form. In effect, he has found himself and his work slandered and shut out of mainstream literary magazines and state-run publishing houses. Like many poets writing in Vietnamese, Chanh now publishes his work almost exclusively in online literary journals. Consequently, his poetry can be read online by someone in Cabramatta in western Sydney, Australia, but not by someone browsing the poetry shelves in a bookstore in Ho Chi Minh City. Such a stifling atmosphere gives further credence to Pham Thi Hoai’s critical assessment of the impact of Renovation on the Vietnamese literary landscape during the mid-1990 until today. According to Hoai,

The post-Renovation period is indeed one of strange empty spaces, of absent authority, of a train without an engine or an engineer. The old prestige of ideology, of systems of thought and of certain spiritual values, have been abandoned, but the empty spaces have been sealed shut, leaving no opportunity for new sources of prestige or value to take their place.46

45 Chanh’s work can be considered underground in the sense that, not since the publication of his first book, publishing houses in Vietnam, which are all state run, have not published his work. Like many other contemporary Vietnamese writers with little or no access to the public sphere of publication by national presses and newspapers.

These are precisely the “strange empty spaces” Nguyen Quoc Chanh’s poetry seems to evoke and manifest in its complex system of images, allusions, and syntax. Unlike Hoai, Chanh doesn’t see the total absence of authority in post-war, post-Renovation Vietnam. Rather, part of Chanh’s poetic project is to reveal the places where power and authority still reside and hide—in our language, in our bodies and minds, in our relations to others and ourselves—as he provocatively suggests in a more recent poem aptly titled, “Post, Post, but not Post…”:

Straight on: my face’s blank.  
Aslant: my face’s askew.  
Below or above: my face’s equally soiled.  

Next to a Cambodian: I’m gloriously yellow.  
Next to a Westerner: I flatten myself in panic.  
Next to a Chinese. I timidly squint. (34)

At every turn, the political edginess of Nguyen Quoc Chanh’s poems are sharpened by his uncanny ability to invent a poetic language in Vietnamese that can still be heard in the cacophony of official language. His antagonism also manifests itself in his willingness to represent who and what is still unaccounted for in official versions of the past and present, or as he writes in a poem included in Dinh’s *Three Vietnamese Poets*, the poet mourns for the dead who go unmourned: “I carry a cemetery inside my body. / A fist missing a finger” (15)

In Ho Chi Minh City, Dinh also came into contact with and eventually began translating a handful of younger writers, born after the end of the war in 1975, known the *Mo Mieng* or “Open Mouth” poets. With its three leading exponents, Bui Chat, Ly Doi and Lynh Bacardi, the so-called Open Mouth poets (the English elides the command form—“open your mouth” or “open wide”—implied in the Vietnamese) have attracted considerable attention for writing poetry unfit for print. Despite all the shock value initially attached to them, the relevance of the Open Mouth poets rests not in the purportedly sensational and sordid things their poems say about them as
individuals, but what their outspoken poetry illicitly reports, as suggested in this poem of the same title by Bui Chat, on the “Kurrent State” of Vietnamese society from their perspective as younger writers who grew up in post-war, post-Renovation Vietnam—

nothin kan seize me from da hands
a look doesn’t korrespond to da fi fingers
between da rite and left eyes
not da blue runny nose
dis world kannot squeeze me
old images alter me same as new (33)

—and in these lines from Lynh Bacardi’s “Shrink & Stretch”:

outside all living things are in mourning clothes and trampling on each other to reach heaven. I uncouth a building built with virginal blood. feigning an orgasmic moan. sunlight high above weeping inundating the streets. men who become bloodless when overburdened. the obese rain flows hotly. I'm pregnant with coins reeking a burning smell. a mother selling her flow keeping the cultural flow for her brood…today all ideas upset the stomach. (40)

The grossly sexual, scatological, violent, taboo, mundane, and dream life—all make their way into poems by Bui Chat, Ly Doi, and Lynh Bacardi. In their eyes, nothing is too base because everything has been debased. Rejecting social norms and aesthetic forms of authority, the nihilism of the loosely associated Open Mouth poets retaliates against the chaotic and contradictory cohabitation of the Communist regime, Confucian values, and Capitalist materialism in contemporary Vietnam. These three political, social and economic forces are the alternating targets of ridicule in Ly Doi’s prose poems. In “what defiles doi?,” a poem from “Seven Spider Improvisations” written in the form of a mock Confucian text, “doi summoned his remaining disciples and asked them: what defiles us, then [to set himself straight] answered:

47 Ly Doi was born in 1978 in Quang Nam and now lives in Ho Chi Minh City. A member of the Open Mouth group, he has been published widely on webzines and in group samizdat such as “Six-sided Circle” (2002) and “Open Mouth” (2002), and in his own samizdat, “Seven Spider Improvisations” and “Dog-eating Vegetarians” (2005). In Dinh’s description: “A drifter, he makes his living performing odd jobs on the sidewalks. In 2004, Ly Doi and poet Bui Chat were jailed for two days for passing out flyers at a poetry reading cancelled by the police,” “Eight Vietnamese Poets,” trans. Linh Dinh, Sibila
it’s not what goes in but out of the mouth, the mouth is fouler than any other hole on your body and mine also!” In his eponymous poem that parodies the form of the self-help book, Doi slyly states that despite all “The Benefits of Poetry” “unfortunately, writing poetry is also one of the causes of regrettable misunderstandings that can destroy your social contentment, and subvert society.” Using collage to undermine various forms of authority, “Society 3” takes aim at the absurd levels of corruption permeating Vietnamese society:

Today a story appeared in the City Police newspaper about some deputy minister who habitually bought sexual favors [and dispositions] from children and was condemned to death, and here we have a matter worthy of attention that happened on the execution ground:
Since the guy was a master in wheeling and dealing [even selling out the people] he bought off the director/psychological [issues] advisor to the firing squad, to make these guys feel remorseful [as in their conscience shred into pieces] when they take out their guns to perform their duty. He also bought off the entire firing squad... the result: the hail of bullets only hit a soft [but tasty] spot and even the coup de grace, an extremely rare occurrence, only glanced his skin—blood spilling all over... he pretended to faint, then fainted for real, then was revived by a waiting crew of doctors with their equipments... (45)

Literary vandalism might be a better way to describe what this younger off-beat generation of Vietnamese poets are up to—breaking, destroying, and effacing our more precious ideas of poetic form, content, and language. Hence, the hip logic, Vietnamese street-slang of Bui Chat’s vernacular lyrics; the social critique of Ly Doi’s collage poems drawing on newspaper, advertisement and internet sources, and the aleatory swerve of perception in Lynh Bacardi’s prose poems. Their indecorous poems reveal, and to the extent which such conditions offer grounds for creativity, give ambivalent expression to the decay, depravity, and decadence surrounding them.
Globalization and Its Discontents: Linh Dinh’s Borderless Bodies

In the previous sections, I argued that Linh Dinh’s work as an editor, translator and writer eschews the prevailing thematics of return and reconciliation by engaging the politics of translation and exposing the economics of tourism through postmodern parodies of return narratives. In this last section, I want to extend and complicate this discussion by focusing more directly on the question of globalization that arises when we talk about economic normalization. Linh Dinh offers a statement of his own anti-cosmetic poetics in the opening stanza from “A Super Clean Country”: “You (almost) never see it in public so / You have to conjure it up all day long, / Drag it into every conversation, / To flesh out the corporate picture” (59). These lines serve as a compact description of what I read as Dinh’s larger poetic project “to flesh out the corporate picture” of globalization, that is, a discursive construct of “globalization” that produces narratives of transnational belonging on the model of the “global village” and obscures the uneven, ambiguous, and violent results of economic liberalism and translational capital, the failures of globalization. Where the discourse of globalization threatens to dissolve certain bodies, especially laboring bodies and bodies victimized and rejected by society, into a smooth running “global flow” interrupted only by the occasional “turbulence,” as the euphemism goes, Dinh digs up the bloody evidence belonging to the discrepant bodies of globalization where he finds it, which is to say everywhere.

Adorno’s discussion of the ugly in Aesthetic Theory (1998) helps illuminate the unsightly aspects of Dinh’s poetry. Ugliness, for Adorno, is not merely the opposite of beauty, but actually constitutive of it, that uncanny part of the beautiful that was “once feared, which only as a result of this renunciation…became the ugly” (47). Although he discusses it in aesthetic terms, Adorno contends that the “social aspect” for the “admission of the ugly was antifeudal” (48). “Art must
take up the cause of what is prescribed as ugly,” writes Adorno, “in the ugly, art must denounce the world that creates and reproduces the ugly in its own image, even if in this too the possibility persists that sympathy with the degraded will reverse into concurrence with degradation” (49). Adorno endows ugliness with a political and polemical edge: to foster sympathy for the degraded.

This is also the point poet and critic Susan Schultz offers in her perceptive reading of what she calls Dinh’s “poetics of disgust.” For Schultz, what Dinh does in his poetry is “to illustrate how we understand suffering through disgust, rather than through gentler manifestations of feeling, like ‘grief’ or like ‘compassion’ or even ‘anger.’” Though Schultz approaches Dinh’s poetry through the affective category of disgust, rather than Adorno’s aesthetic category of the ugly, Schultz understands the manifestations of disgust in Dinh’s poetry in similarly Adornian terms as “paradoxical expressions of suffering: violence, poverty, degradation, and (in the reader) an odd empathy for those caught up in it.” If disgust severs connection, empathy sutures the wound. I would extend Schultz’s reading of Dinh’s “poetics of disgust” and read disgust as the affective force of disconnection in Dinh’s global poetics. Though central to understanding Dinh’s discomforting poetry, neither Adorno’s discussion of the ugly nor Schultz’s discussion of disgust offers an adequate account of how we might address the representation of the body in Dinh’s poetry. To attempt such a reading, I turn now to the ugly in “The Most Beautiful Word,” from Dinh’s 1998 chapbook Drunkard Boxing.

**Linh Dinh’s Ugly Feelings and “The Most Beautiful Word”**

The analytic of the beautiful and the ugly is precisely what Dinh explores in “The Most Beautiful Word.” First published in Drunkard Boxing, here is the poem in full:

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I think “vesicle” is the most beautiful word in the English language. He was lying face down, his shirt burnt off, back steaming. I myself was bleeding. There was a harvest of vesicles on his back. His body wept. “Yaw” may be the ugliest. Don’t say, “The bullet yawed inside the body.” Say, “The bullet danced inside the body.” Say, “The bullet tumbled forward and upward.” Light slanted down. All the lesser muscles in my face twitched. I flipped my man over gently, like an impatient lover, careful not to fracture his C-spine. Dominoes clanked under crusty skin: Clack! Clack! A collapsed face stared up. There was a pink spray in the air, then a brief rainbow. The mandible was stitched with blue threads to the soul. I extracted a tooth from the tongue. He had swallowed the rest. (27)

Schultz’s reading of the poem glosses over the question of aesthetics raised in the title of the poem and explored throughout the poem itself. I want to complicate her reading of disgust in the poem and in Linh Dinh’s poetry in general by reading the poem through the related, but slightly different lens of the aesthetic of the ugly and by extension, the aesthetic of the beautiful. This will bear upon my general discussion of reconciliation, for it is in the aesthetic of the beautiful that reconciliation is most apparent. The poem itself, I suggest, can be read as a mini-treatise on aesthetics. Partly structured around instructional advice on how to write (“Don’t say…”)

49 Another way of approaching representations of reconciliation is to consider how the literature of reconciliation ultimately privileges or perhaps even depends upon an aesthetics of the beautiful, over and against an aesthetics of the ugly. The aesthetic of the ugly—of which the grotesque image of the body is one of its prime expressions—is the representational mode of the irreconciled, the unconsolable, and the unassimilable. In their forms of closure, works thematizing reconciliation often invoke figures such as “closing the circle.” For instance, as Wayne Karlin writes in his introduction to The Other Side of Heaven: Post-War Fiction by Vietnamese & American Writers, “it seemed a fitting time to close the circle […] What we wanted, we decided was a work of reconciliation that came from a mutual recognition of pain and loss; what we wanted was to open in our readers’ hearts the recognition that had opened in our own” (xii-viii). The sentiments of works of reconciliation are often moving and beautiful, all the more so because of the strong negative emotions, such as rage and anger, grief and sorrow, that mark the subjective experience of the war represented in Vietnam War literature. The ugly, for instance, was in large part the paradigmatic aesthetic and formal representational mode of canonical Vietnam War novels like Larry Heinemann’s Close Quarters (1974) and Paco’s Story (1986). As Heinemann reflects in his 2005 memoir, his earlier novels were written with the same “blunt realism and the frank barracks language of much of the literature to emerge from the Vietnam War” (44). The stories of their respective main characters, Philip Dosier and Paco, variously expose the horror and ugliness of war, with little redemptive force other than perhaps the camaraderie between men. Their rage is Heinemann’s rage, as he writes in Black Virgin Mountain, for his “impulse to tell the story of the war rose out of an undeniable authenticity of exhausted, smothered rage perhaps more bitter than tongue can tell” (46). As I argued earlier, Heinemann’s reconciliatory detour in Black Virgin Mountain attempts to escape from the ugly feelings he experienced during the war and even on his returns to Vietnam, and results in a revelation of the beautiful.
“Say…” “Say…”), the creative writing lesson given by the speaker focuses on diction, the word choices and their order that can make or break a poem. The inventive performance of the poem exhibits a mastery of diction, while simultaneously foregrounding the politics of its own word choices, which is to say the politics of representation. In this way, “The Most Beautiful Word” is partly a meta-poem about the limits and possibilities of representing violence and atrocity through representational modes such as conventional poetry.

The poem begins with beauty or what the speaker regards as “the most beautiful word in the English language.” When we first hear that most beautiful word, “vesicle” is detached and disconnected from the body of evidence in the rest of the poem. It can be considered beautiful in a formal sense, in the particular quality of sound and sense it evokes for the speaker. However, as the poem proceeds the word is quickly, troublingly, and problematically resituated within the world, in particular, within the scene of violence and atrocity. The opening lines and next lines call forth an image or a scene involving a dead body and the speaker, whose relation to it remains dubious at best, guilty at worst. The speaker and the situation resists our attempts at location, but it appears as if the reader is privy to the internal thoughts and feelings of someone in the immediate aftermath of a death. We stumble upon the scene as if in medias res to find the dead corpse with the collapsed face, the speaker’s own body bleeding (“I myself was bleeding”). The poem connects speaker to the dead body through formal means of sound and rhyme. The line “I myself was bleeding” rhymes with the “steaming” body of the corpse, suggesting guilt by associative rhyme. Like a speaker out of a dramatic monologue by Robert Browning, the speaker of Dinh’s poem veils and conceals his complicity and perhaps guilt. Here through the passive voice: “There was a harvest of vesicles on his back. His body wept.” The speaker compares himself to the victim’s intimate, saying that he turned his man over “like an impatient lover.”
The anatomical terms ("vesicle," "mandible," "C-spine") raise the possibility that the speaker could also be a battlefield medic.

In the final image of the upturned face, the poem glimpses at atrocity and glances away. Once the poet/speaker allows the reader/witness to see how a “collapsed face stared up,” in the next line the poem cuts to a highly aestheticized image of violence—"There was a pink spray in the air, then a brief rainbow. The mandible was stitched with blue threads to the soul”—a cinematic image that deflects our gaze from meeting again or for too long the accusatory stare of the collapsed face. Our attention to the question of responsibility for this act of violence and degradation thus suspended if not averted, the poem ends with an image of utter silence, whereby witnessing becomes dangerously close to participating in the violence of suppression: “I extracted a tooth from the tongue. He had swallowed the rest.” Dinh does not need to directly invoke the Vietnam War for its shadow to fall over the final action represented in the poem, for the image of American GI with war trophies and souvenirs like kill photos and necklaces made of teeth have been part of the popular imagination. Dinh reanimates that image here, but with an eerie difference established by manipulation of articles and pronouns in the last two lines. The poem does not read, for instance, “I extracted a tooth from his tongue,” but puts distance between the speaker’s actions and who or what those actions impact. The tooth and tongue are dissociated in language from the body of the victim. He gives us a clinical yet fascinated perspective. The surprising attribution of the action “swallowing the rest,” however, is in the final image given to the silent corpse—a haunting and terrifying image not only of extraction, but also of disappearance and collapse. In the end, the speaker leaves off with the last piece of material evidence, a gruesome token of violence.
The various frames of reference activated by the poem’s multidirectional levels of diction makes it difficult in the end to place the speaker in any one subject position, or obscure the tonal and emotional legibility of the poem. What is clear is that the poem stages an ambivalent encounter with violence, sparing nothing and no one. Dinh calls attention to the aesthetic construction of his “poetry of witness” (as Schultz calls it), except there is no witness really, only the sudden and troubling realization that the person we have been listening to may be witness and perpetrator both. The witness function I discussed in relation to second generation legacy narratives returns here, but more radically ironizes and disrupts a politics of war representation in which the roles—between friend and enemy, victim and perpetrator, self and other—and rules of engagement are given in advance. As a fragmentary image of war, Dinh’s poem produces neither moral lesson nor take home epiphany, but foregrounds the absence of emotional release or catharsis.

Dinh’s “Most Beautiful Word” performs the kind of “politically ambiguous” work Sianne Ngai attributes to the negative affects she calls “ugly feelings”—including envy, anxiety, irritation, and disgust (6). Distinguished from the strong emotions favored by classical political and aesthetic thought, ugly feelings are defined for their passivity and, according to Ngai, characterized as being “explicitly amoral and noncathartic, offering no satisfactions of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release” (6). Taking Melville’s Bartleby as paradigm, Ngai wants to recuperate for noncathartic feelings a diagnostic power for models of subjectivity, collectivity, and agency that are less intentional and object-directed than those said to be activated by strong emotions like anger, fear, pity, sympathy, etc. Of all the ugly feelings explored by Ngai, disgust appears to do the most critical work:

disgust does not so much solve the dilemma of social powerlessness as diagnose it powerfully. But while all the negative affects we have discussed call attention to
this problem, the poetics of disgust seems to have drawn us closer to the domain of political theory, perhaps even political commitment, than these others. In its intense and unambivalent negativity, disgust thus seems to represent an outer limit or threshold of what I have called ugly feelings, preparing us for more instrumental or politically efficacious emotions (353-54).

To return to Dinh’s “poetics of disgust,” as read by Schultz and now with Ngai’s treatment of the aesthetics and politics of ugly feelings, I want to locate more overtly what I see as the diagnostic power of Dinh’s poetry: his poems produce and foreground the failures of economic liberalism and globalization by representing the embodied experiences of individuals whose dysfunctional encounters with forms of economic transnationalism are marked by the negative affect of disgust and the grotesque image of the body.

The body most often invoked by theorists of globalism is not the fleshy, messy body occupying the center and circumference of much of Dinh’s poetry but rather the social-political body of the nation and the contested reports of its varying levels of atrophy, death, spectrality, or resurgence. Critics on competing sides of the globalism debate refer to the economic, political, technological, and cultural dimensions of global transformation said to diminish the nation as the vital organizing force in the world. Arjun Appadurai, to go to a prominent example, talks about the “global cultural flows” (of people, ideas, images, goods, and capital) across the borders of the nation-form (33). Some proponents of globalization, like Kenichi Ohmae, suggest that we are now living in “a borderless world” or “borderless economy.” For critics like Masao Miyashi, however, the so-called “borderless world” raises more problems and questions than it apparently solves, including increased social and economic inequality. This is a schematic description of the highly complex and contested globalism debate. The main idea here is that in a very basic sense, the concept of borderlessness in various forms of being free from, without, or beyond the body of the nation-state is central to the global imaginary. A number of prominent critics situate the body as an important site for thinking through the problems and possibilities of globalism. In a
critical coda to *Modernity at Large*, Arjun Appadurai addressing the geopolitics of the body in his examination of the darker side of globalization in *Fear of Small Numbers*, which maps a “geography of anger” through the proliferation of “large-scale, culturally motivated violence…with [its] various forms of planned degradation of the human body and human dignity” (1-2). In a more clinical, but no less significant assessment of the cultural logic of globalization, Fredric Jameson also foregrounds the body by locating the problematic and possibility of what he calls “global cognitive mapping” in what he sees as the “alarming disjunction point between the body and its built environment” (44), that is, the destruction of the grounds of critical distance, historical consciousness, and political positionality by postmodern hyperspace, now read as “new global space” (49).

At stake then in Linh Dinh’s *Borderless Bodies* is the sense of globalism as a “borderless world” (to use Ohmae’s term) as discussed above. By substituting “world” with “bodies,” Dinh effects an unexpected combination of terms, creating a kind of cognitive dissonance in our habit of thinking of borderlessness and bodies. Social geographer Neil Smith proposes a relevant politics of scale along seven scalar categories: body, home, community, urban, region, nation, global. The logic of Dinh’s metaphors of the borderless body always leads beyond the body’s limited space or into the body’s depths, not only the outward, but also the inner features of the body, more often than not merging them into one. The first two poems of Dinh’s third poetry collection, *Borderless Bodies*, for instance, disorient us by inverting our sense of global scale. The poems, titled “Obsolete Maps” and “Borders” respectively, invoke the global scale associated with map-making and nation-building, but then present us with images of the body. Here are all five lines that make up the collection’s opening poem, “Obsolete Maps”:

There are spots on your body
That are never touched or seen,
Nearly impossible to reach, even
Connoisseurs of the human body
Do not know what to call them. (7)

And the even shorter second poem, “Borders”:

Where bones always nudge
Against the fuzziest skin.
Where inside and outside
Are confused and flushed. (8)

Maps and borders usually refer to larger scales—often, of nation and the world. But the poems above effect an inversion of scale, where the figure of the body is framed by a global scale. Both poems jump scales, so to speak, scaling the global down to the body, or perhaps scaling the body up to the global. In either case, these two short poems which open Borderless Bodies lead us into a body of poetry “Where inside and outside / Are confused and flushed” and our representational projects, our maps, are always obsolete and incomplete. The tension and confusion created by this inversion of scales, as well as the title “borderless bodies,” result from Dinh’s deliberate fusing of what was ordinarily disconnected in discourse: namely, the connection between globalization and the body. The first two poems of the collection establish and propose the scale of the body as a site of thinking through globalization.

“Borderless Body”

Dinh’s grotesque representations of the body reconstitute a stubbornly material body within and against the discourse of globalism. “The grotesque body,” in Bakhtin’s description from Rabelais and his World (1984), “is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body” (317). Following a Bakhtinian logic of the grotesque body, Dinh’s grotesque image of the “Borderless Body”
likewise leaps, or imagines leaping, beyond the body’s boundaries. Conveying a heightened and hyperbolic sense of global connection to far-flung people, places, and things, the poem actually stages the emergence of a global consciousness and the subject’s transformation into the poem’s eponymous “Borderless Body.”

Before, I was a miserly person, dried up, stiff,
Stuck, completely wrung, stuttering, fanatical,

But this morning, my skin felt unusually cool and conscious.
My body tingled. Suddenly I could understand and speak

2,000 languages. My soul blossomed, my breasts budded.
I peeled back my foreskin to scrape clean all of my obsolete

And labored presumptions. My teeth, the gaps in between
My teeth and my breath felt unusually fresh and clean.

I could see very far away. I could sympathize with each
Strand of hair stranded on the skin of each person.

Shuddering, I ejaculated for the first time in life, into life.
I became aware of my miraculous vagina and anus.

Finally, I had been allowed to spread out, to blend into
All humans, animals and things. I just wanted to leap up

To kiss everyone right away. I just wanted to service
And suck everyone right away. I also wanted to be sucked

By everyone on this earth. I was willing to forgive
And apologize to each toe joint on each person.

Naked, I walk through the street as the very first human. (63)

What I find so striking about Dinh’s poem and its aesthetic of the grotesque is the way in which all the adhesive and accretive forces of Bakhtin’s grotesque body take on a global scale. The poem’s catalogue of grotesque images of the body’s protuberances and orifices—the gaping
mouth, the androgynous male and female genitalia, the lower bodily stratum, the infinite strands
of hair—all serve a crucial function of connecting the body to the world. Or, as Bakhtin puts it,
“[a]ll these convexities and orifices have a common characteristic…it is within them that the
confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome” (317). But at the
same time, these semi-permeable borders of the body reveal the material and physical limits
imposed by the flesh on the global imaginary. Indeed, Dinh’s global subject imagines an
impossible corporeality, underscored in repetition near the end of the speaker’s expressed but
ultimately unfulfilled desires—“I just wanted to leap up…I just wanted to service…”

True to what Bakhtin sees as the “deep ambivalence of the grotesque” rather than its
treatment as “merely a negation, an exaggeration pursuing narrowly satirical aims,” Dinh’s
representation of the grotesque “Borderless Body” produces a highly ambivalent picture of
globalism (304). Making visible its speaker’s own repressive strategies and practices of global
connection, the poems hints at the violence and coercion of the “borderless body” through a
narrative of globalizing transformation. The fairly conventional, stock image of lyric subjectivity
as organic growth—“My soul blossomed, my breasts budded”—becomes exaggerated, mutating
into the speaker’s all-encompassing desire to “leap up / To kiss everyone right away,” and
expands even further into global dimensions (“to spread out,” “blend into,” and “leap up) and
finally occupies nothing less than “All humans, animals and things.” In the end, the result of the
speaker’s global vision of a “Borderless Body” appears to enact nothing less than a violence of
global scale, absorbing and annihilating the bodies of “each person” and everything in its wake
in order to birth this new identity arriving in the present tense of the poem’s last line: “Naked, I
walk through the street as the very first human.” The coercive character of this expansiveness is
revealed in the evasive passivity of the line: “Finally, I had been allowed to spread out, to blend
into / All humans, animals and things.” The only passive construction in the entire poem also contains the poems’ most destructive matter.

“Borderless Bodies” also unsettles the affective charge of global connection. In what would be the poem’s moments of greatest global connection, Dinh continually disrupts the objects of the poem’s most connective verbs—to sympathize, to forgive, to apologize—and thereby disarticulates too easy expressions of sympathy, empathy, and reconciliation of global distance and difference. Moreover, the use of strand as a noun (in “strand of hair”) and stranded as verb (in “stranded on the skin”) troubles the desire for sympathetic connection between persons. Dinh reveals the grounds of sympathy not as a shared connection, so much as a shared state of the disconnection, that is, the strandedness and isolation of alienation. In the end, the route from the ugly and grotesque to sympathy, or from disgust to empathy, or in my less elegant terms, from disconnection back to connection remains difficult and full of obstacles, especially when local alienation shadows global connection. The “Borderless Body” of Dinh’s imagined global subject would seem here to result in a self-parody of its own sudden transformation and claims to newness, singularity, and value. Ending with the “very first human,” Dinh thus installs and ironizes a speaker who we might say narrates the fantasy of a global village to the singular extreme.

The emergence of new identities and collectivities is both the promise and problem of a transnationalism that is cultural and economic. “Borderless Bodies” performs the spectacle of a transnational cultural identity freed from the realities on the ground. Those less spectacular realities are explored by Dinh in poems that foreground the ambiguous results of globalization, especially in nations involved in the practices and processes of modernization. Like “Borderless Bodies,” the next two poems are also about change and transformation at the levels of self and
society, but the bodies and subjects represented in them are bound up in and bounded by failed investments, both economic and emotional. I read them as psychological portraits of some of the economic and social losers of globalization. I want to end on these poems, both from *All Around What Empties Out* (2003) in particular because the people, places, and situations in them are evocative of Vietnam after economic normalization.

In the first poem, Dinh adopts the speaking position of, as the title announces, “A Hardworking Peasant from the Idyllic Countryside.” Here is the poem in its entirety:

I was illiterate until yesterday. All these squiggly lines—tattooed on every available surface, all around me, all my life—suddenly started to make sense yesterday. Until yesterday I did not know that the invectives and commands constantly swarming around me were actually made of words. I thought they were mosquitoes, or dust, or flecks of paint, each one leaving a prickling sensation on my thin, almost transparent skin. Yesterday someone said something in my vicinity and I finally decided to write it down, a phonetic transcription, to the best of my abilities: FUAK YOW MOFTHEARFUAKIER.

I wrote that down with a blue pen on a yellow piece of paper. I finally wrote, I thought, now I’m a writer. If I had merely transcribed the above as a blue thought onto my yellow memory, I would still be seen as a hardworking peasant from the idyllic countryside. (35)

The speaker’s presumptive new literacy thematizes his paradoxical illegibility as the author of his own life. He possesses a hyperactive imagination and acute recognition that his world has been limited by his words. Yet as he attempts to articulate a new identity, the transcribed invective—“FUAK YOW MOFTHEARFUAKIER”—disarticulates that identity by writing his body, whose “thin, almost transparent skin” acts like paper for an atmosphere “constantly swarming” with invectives and commands. The excitable speech “A Hardworking Peasant” writes down spells out an abject identity he cannot see as also his own. The activity of writing, for the poem represents it merely as activity, tropes the speaker’s legitimate claims to self-agency and knowledge at the same time it ironizes the uneven access to literacy-based
citizenship that would produce such “A Hardworking Peasant from the Idyllic Countryside” still unable to read and write himself.

We meet another one of globalism’s discontents in “A Peripatetic Purveyor of Nothing.” Dinh frames the scene in his poem as a dialogue between a seller, the peripatetic purveyor of nothing of the poem’s title, and a buyer, a mother whose children she says are grossly underweight. A postmodern parable, the poem represents a dysfunctional economy of exchange of both goods and communication:

On The Avenue of Idleness, there is a man who pushes a pushcart around with nothing on it. He rings a bell to announce his arrival. Children and other undesirables like to throw rocks at him.
‘I was never made out for this. I don’t want to sell nothing. I don’t even want to buy nothing.’
‘So much for nothing today?’
‘You better know it.’
‘A little cheaper by the dozen perhaps?’
‘Not at this weight, ma’am.’
‘But my children are grossly underweight!’
‘Like the billboards say, We can’t modernize overnight.’
‘Please wrap it up then.’
Like “A Hardworking Peasant from the Idyllic Countryside,” the poem also confronts us with the question of transformation at the individual level—here, in the very literal sense of the woman’s “grossly underweight” children. The social-economic transformation under the sign—literal billboards—of modernization and modernity or the lack thereof impedes the growth of the children. The forces of the global market impinge on the bargaining capacity of the local market. What emerges in the foreground of this perspective is the presence of local alienation against the backdrop of global connection. The poem explores, as Fredric Jameson puts it, “the way in which an individual consciousness can also in some sense be informed and determined, structurally constructed and influenced, by something so seemingly abstract as a far-flung

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50 The English version, “A Peripatetic Purveyor of Nothing,” is published online in Jacket 13 and in print in All Around What Empties Out. The Vietnamese version, “Nguoi Đi Lại Bán Con Số Không,” appears online in Tienve and in print in the Vietnamese poetry anthology 26 Nha Tho Duong Thoi or 26 Contemporary Poets.
The presence of an international, global market is present in both poems, though in this poem more explicitly cited than the implicit narrative of internal migration of workers from the countryside to urban centers implied by “A Hardworking Peasant from the Idyllic Countryside.” Both poems glimpse globalization from “below.” Back on the Avenue of Idleness, the nameless denizens of the poem are in some way or another characterized by their superfluousness and undesirability: the man who sells nothing, the children and other “undesirables” who throw rocks at him, the woman who tries to buy “nothing” for her malnourished children. Even the language spoken on the Avenue of Idleness is a degraded language of dead metaphors, clichés, and propaganda.

The woman attempts to participate in buying and selling, to get food for her children. She asks questions, but the seller’s replies seem unsatisfactory and evasive. “So much for nothing today?,” the woman asks, alluding simultaneously to the inflated prices of “nothing” or inflated complaints of the purveyor not wanting to do anything with “nothing”—“don’t want to sell nothing…don’t even want to buy nothing.” This exchange, where literal and figurative meanings become value-less in terms of acquiring a sufficient amount of meaning, could be pure play if not for what in actuality seems at stake for the woman and her children. Condensing the economic, emotional, and ethical stakes of the transaction, the mother exclaims, “But my children are grossly underweight!” Her invocation of her malnourished children functions on a number of levels. Rhetorically, the appeal to her “grossly underweight” children might serve to leverage her buying power by framing the transaction as a matter of desperation, survival and necessity. The woman argues on the evidence of the body, specifically the underweight, under-developed body of her children.
However, the woman’s message is intercepted by the forceful signal of the globalizing forces of modernization, where the billboard functions as the main source of interference, disruption. The social-economic transformation under the sign of modernization and modernity, here literalized in the billboard, participates in blocking the growth of woman’s children. Framed as an instance of reported or indirect speech, “As the billboards say,” the purveyor of nothing’s utterance attempts to coercively position and implicate his listener within the “We”—the ethnos of the national community of belonging—that fails to modernize. The “purveyor of nothing” effectively neutralizes the situation through his reference to the larger social-economic conditions of the global forces of modernization, spelled out by the billboards that say “We can’t modernize overnight.” Implicit in both the mother’s appeal and the seller’s response is a connection between the local event happening on the Avenue of Idleness and the larger forces of modernization and globalization. The reported speech also performs a temporal trick in the idiomatic phrase “overnight,” which frames modernization as an impossibility. The purveyor of nothing connects the local marketplace on the Avenue of Idleness to the far-flung and abstract forces of a global market. But this connection serves the more immediate and instrumental purpose of dissociating and displacing responsibility for addressing the problem of the “grossly underweight” children. Performing a substitution, the seller trades the gross national product of the developing nation for the grossly underdeveloped bodyweights of malnourished children.

The mother’s disgust—her appeal to her grossly underweight children and implicitly the social and economic situation that might be partly responsible—fails to solicit the empathy of the seller, and receives instead the indifference of cold rationality. The situation is deflated by the

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51 In Vietnamese, it becomes more clear that the billboards, referred to as “pa nô,” are connected to the West, as the word itself is a kind of import or foreign loan word. The English, however, stresses the question of modernization. Dinh withholds the word for modernize, or “hiện đại hóa,” from the Vietnamese version and instead translates it as: We can’t make immediate improvements.”
merchant’s rejoinder, with its reference to the larger social-economic conditions of the global forces of modernization, spelled out by the billboards that say “We can’t modernize overnight.” There is a coercive irony in what the merchant says in order to manipulate the local market within an “underdeveloped”/“developing” country, which in this case, fails miserably for the woman and her underdeveloped children.

The Vietnamese version of the poem, self-translated by Dinh as “Người Đi Lại Bán Con Số Không,” was published in the anthology of Vietnamese poetry called “26 Nha Thơ Dương Đại” or “26 Contemporary Poets.” For now, let me just mention a few significant differences between the English and Vietnamese versions of the poem in particular to gloss the penultimate line of the poem in Vietnamese. The critique of globalism contained in the poem’s penultimate line, “Like the billboards say, We can’t modernize overnight,” becomes sharpened in the Vietnamese, which reads, “Như bảng dạy: Không cải tiến liền được!” A literal translation of the Vietnamese line into English gives us: “As the panels teach us: can’t make improvements overnight” or “As the panel teaches us: can’t reform overnight.” In the Vietnamese version of the poem, Dinh chooses not to use the Vietnamese equivalent for “modernize”—“hiện đại hóa”—and instead opts for a looser, more everyday Vietnamese translation, which I translate back into English as: “We can’t make immediate improvements.” Another thing that the English fails to fully capture is the propagandistic language invoked by the billboard. The word for used billboard, “pa nô,” an Anglicized loan word for “panel,” calls attention to an imported version of global modernism. In Vietnamese, it can also have the more politicized meaning of a political panel, or what is often referred to in English as political committees. Vietnamese readers, then, would have no difficulty finding corresponding rhetoric about economic development and national reunification and seeing the political import of the poem as a critique of how the reality
on the ground is very different indeed from the rhetoric seen and heard from up high. Ultimately, the woman concedes to the purveyor of nothing. However, the poem has done its work by suggesting how the “grossly underweight” children embody the unaccounted-for remainder in this unequal trade and transaction. The emotional residue of that transaction and its formal effect in the poem, in which the non-modern, underdeveloped body of the nation is symbolically bartered, pound for pound, word for word, as it were, for the gross bodies of the underweight children, is nothing other than the affect already named in the mother’s description of the gross bodies of her underweight children: namely, the image of disgust. Writing after normalization, Dinh bears witness to the other aftereffects of war. His feelings of disgust for the grotesqueries of economic globalization disfigure the corporate picture of reconciliation and point towards a future in which present injuries will be in further need of repair.
This study began when my personal experience of the legacy of the Vietnam War came together with my research interests in literature and the politics of form. My interest in the topic of reconciliation is inseparable from my growing the son of Vietnamese refugees from former South Vietnam and witnessing the unresolved pain, furious contradictions, and anxious freedom of losing one’s country and adapting to a new country, culture, and language. While I was born in Vietnam, my family escaped, by boat, when I was still too young to retain anything other than a few indecipherable recollections. While I have felt the burden of their history, I have experienced none of the trials that my parents have. Instead, I have experienced a life blessed with the economic, social, and academic advantages of someone whose family might have already lived in the U.S. for generations. In these ways, my personal background bears on my interest in giving voice to the historical silences surrounding the Vietnam War and its aftermath. Yet, as I hope my study demonstrates, I also refuse to be burdened by the history that has shaped me. If the study of literature has taught me anything, it is that a critical and creative attention to language unsettles the grounds of our most beloved assumptions and opens up new ways to relate to self and others.

As I bring this study on the problems and possibilities of reconciliation to a close, my memory travels back to a place and moment during the year I decided to pursue graduate literary studies—to a medieval hilltop town in Tuscany in the winter of 2004. It was in Certaldo, Italy where I first met Linh Dinh. I was in Europe on a fellowship at the time and discovered that he was living in Certaldo as a guest of the now defunct International Parliament of Writers Cities of Asylum network. I took the train down from Paris. We decided to meet in the Piazza Boccaccio,
named after Certaldo’s most famous resident and the author of *The Decameron*. It was raining. I waited for Linh beside the statue of Boccaccio and leaned against his stone cape for shelter. Across from me was an old cathedral, unremarkable except for its immense wooden doors, which seemed immovable to me at first, until I watched them open and slowly release a cortege of mourners. That’s when Linh appeared, greeted me and pointed to the funeral just in case I might have missed it. We left the procession to its own workings and proceeded up the steep road to Linh’s residence at Via Valdracca 2, just inside the old city walls. I ended up staying for ten days.

In the course of our nightly conversations, he often circled back to the topic of contemporary Vietnam and Vietnamese poetry. Shortly before his Italian journey, he had lived in Vietnam for two and a half years, between 1999 and 2001. I listened as he spoke of the literary scene in Ho Chi Minh City, his affection and admiration for certain poets there, the official verse culture in Vietnam, and his disdain of the suffocating role played by the Vietnam Writers Association. Relearning Vietnamese, Linh began translating from Vietnamese to English many of the poets he was reading and meeting on a daily basis. He introduced me to a number of the poets included in my study, particularly Phan Nhien Hao, and his own work continues to offer a vital and uncompromising commitment to difficult truths.

It is sometimes forgotten that the group of seven women and three men who gathered in a villa in the Tuscan countryside to tell the hundred stories that make up Boccaccio’s *Decameron* have just fled plague-ridden Florence. Their humorous and often bawdy tales stand in stark contrast to Boccaccio’s haunting and unflinchingly detailed portrayal of the effects of the Black Plague at the beginning of book. Yet the backdrop of the Plague creates the conditions necessary for their stories. Through the species of refuge called literature, many of the writers I have
considered in this study similarly write in flight from catastrophe. Not as escape artists, but in order to resist and counter oppressive realities. These writers, and this study, offer an important reminder that giving form to conflict, contradiction, ambivalence, and antagonism does not remove them, and that literature’s ability to embrace such heterogeneity and multiplicity may be its highest value for reconciliation, after all.
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