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Much of Vietnam War literary scholarship focuses on white male narratives of the conflict. By alternatively drawing on feminist rhetorical theories of silence, listening, and praxis, my dissertation interrogates traditional psychoanalytic thought by investigating how American, Vietnamese, and Vietnamese-American women who experienced the war provide a different model for narrating the war and coping with trauma. These women must contend with misogynist and, for some, racist practices embedded within patriarchal regimes of power in media, education, psychoanalytic frameworks, government, the academy, and the family, in addition to their experiences of the war. These constraints create conditions that mandate working outside of these patriarchal institutions so that these women can cope with their trauma on their own terms. To do so, women protagonists resort to using silence to allow themselves time and space away from the dominant psychoanalytic framework that emphasizes rendering one's experiences into words as a necessary coping practice. Through the use of silence and selective telling, these women develop their own mode for coping with trauma to imbue themselves with their own sense of agency and self-empowerment.

My project relies on a wide variety of texts that range from popular accounts like Lynda Van Devanter's *Home Before Morning* and Frances Fitzgerald's *Fire in the Lake* to lesser-known works such as lê thi diem thúy's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* and Nhã Ca's *Mourning Headband for Hue*. By inviting Vietnamese-American and Vietnamese women's narratives into the conversation about the Vietnam War with white

American women's texts, I underscore the importance of listening to these works as women's texts, rather than those that are categorized as racially separate and different from white American discourse. Bringing these voices in connection with each other demonstrates how sexist regimes of power exert debilitating influence upon these people as women, conditions that also can be exacerbated by racially-infused logics of oppression. Placed into disenfranchised positions, these women call attention to the failures of current psychoanalytic diagnostic practices, and they expose how patriarchal institutions have created these constraining conditions for women in the first place.

HERSTORIES OF WAR: REPRESENTATIONS OF SILENCE IN WOMEN'S
VIETNAM/AMERICAN WAR NARRATIVES

by

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DEDICATION

To women veterans. May this telling be only the beginning.

APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Culture is the medium of the *present* – the imagined equivalences and identifications through which the individual invents lived relationship with the national collective – but it is simultaneously the site that mediates the *past*, through which history is grasped as difference, as fragments, shocks, and flashes of disjunction. It is through culture that the subject becomes, acts, and speaks itself as “American.” It is likewise in culture that individuals and collectivities struggle and remember and, in that difficult remembering, imagine and practice both subject and community differently. (Lowe 2-3)

Everywhere we go, we are presented with cultural narratives that purport themselves to be true. Even in the contemporary American public sphere, citizens still operate and think in accordance to prescriptions such as: War is a man’s enterprise. Silence is passive. Women are the gentler sex. Communism is evil. These narratives get repeated through multiple forms – media representations, historical accounts of armed conflicts, film, literature, music, and so on. Too often, silence is read as a passive acceptance of cultural life prescriptions. In my study of women’s Vietnam War literature, I have found that women protagonists use silence for this very function – to fight their war against patriarchal oppression so that they may disrupt the normative standards these regimes of power have put into place in order to subjugate narratives that speak against white male discourse. In Vietnam War literature and its criticism, women’s experiences of the war and their literary accounts have been relegated to the periphery,

almost to the point of obscurity. In various canonical works, women's representations of the war have been historically placed into a position of silence, forcibly situated into a quieted stance that is typically understood to be acquiescent and passive. Too often, silence is understood in these debilitating ways. Cheryl Glenn, however, maintains that this negative purpose is not the only way in which silence can function. She argues,

silence is too often read as simple passivity in situations where it has actually taken on an expressive power. Employed as a tactical strategy or inhabited in deference to authority, silence resonates loudly along the corridors of purposeful language use. Whether choice or im/position, silence can reveal positive or negative abilities, fulfilling or withholding traits, harmony or disharmony, success or failure. Silence can deploy power; it can defer to power. It all depends. (xi)

By interrogating women's Vietnam/American War¹ narratives, I maintain that women use silence to combat the constraints of white patriarchy that mandate that women remain not only passive bystanders in history, but also as subjects who are not afforded any sense of agency in monumental events of history, like that of war. In this way, women use silence to subvert common assumptions of passivity and acquiescence. Thus, silence in and of itself becomes activism. Unfortunately, until now, women's narratives and the

¹ I use the name "Vietnam/American War" to refer to this historical event in order to highlight the differing national perspectives of the war. Americans refer to the war as the Vietnam War, whereas the Vietnamese refer to the same period as the American War. This naming points to a tendency to blame the other, the enemy, for the atrocities committed within the framework of war, and thus absolve themselves largely from national responsibility of wretched actions inflicted on other participants in it. The difference in marking the timeframe for the war (1945-1979 for the Vietnamese and 1964-1973 for the Americans) points to an American solipsistic viewpoint of the war. Whittling the years down to only their involvement in the war eclipses the reason why the Vietnamese waged it in the first place – to rid themselves of foreign intervention and proclaim independence and freedom for their people. That foreign intervention involves players other than Americans – the French and Chinese are implicated here as well – but this is often forgotten or ignored in American texts. Americans tend to speak of the war in a Cold War context, rather than an anticolonial one as the Vietnamese do. By using the term "Vietnam/American War," I point to this discrepancy in naming not only to highlight how the war is remembered differently in nationalistic terms, but to also remind my primary American audience that difference in representation of a conflict is key to understanding its nuances, failures, and the lasting effects war can have on its witnesses.

silences they weave into them have not gained much attention in considerations of war literature in general, or Vietnam War literature in particular, because media representations and scholarship focus heavily on white male experiences of the conflict.

Too often, when scholars or even the general public seeks answers to the question “What happened in Vietnam?” we are confronted with stories that are all too similar. The sub-genre of Vietnam War literature in American studies often provides accounts that are chiefly concerned with white male protagonists’ experiences of the war. These accounts are important for their own reasons; they paved the way for scholars to begin discussing American imperialism in the late twentieth century as Hardt and Negri have shown us. Hardt and Negri argue that “Cold war ideology gave rise to the most exaggerated forms of Manichaeian division, and as a result, some of the central elements we have seen defining modern European sovereignty reappeared in the United States” (176). They go on to name the Vietnam War as the “pinnacle” of the reemergence of “this imperialist temptation” now springing from America rather than from Europe (178). Discussions of the United States as an imperial power combined with diasporic movements and transnational identities have extended into discussions about globalization, cosmopolitanism, and human rights. These trends, too, spring from the context of the aftermath of the Vietnam War, given that the largest concerted movement of a diasporic population post-World War Two came from Vietnam once Saigon fell in 1975. This first wave of Vietnamese immigrants alone numbered over 1.5 million (Pelaud 8). Summarizing Ed Friedman’s work, Inderpal Grewal notes how “it was only after the American withdrawal from Vietnam and the subsequent crisis of the Vietnamese boat

people, and the genocide committed by the Khmer Rouge, that a global human rights agenda was taken on by the United States as part of its international agenda” (146). Even though the white male narratives that arose out of the conflict have opened pathways for discussing the American nation and its imperialist practices is significant, I contend that simply relying on these narratives to answer the confounding question of what happened in Vietnam is short-sighted and violently homogenous, for there were far more racialized and gendered participants of the war than these conventional narratives account for. The aim of this study is to investigate those marginalized voices, namely by listening to the voices and the silences of American, Vietnamese, and Vietnamese-American women who experienced the war. By investigating how women use language and silence, we can begin to understand not only what is often not said about the war or what is relegated to the periphery in our understanding of it, but also how trauma functions differently for those who do not fit the WASP-defined parameters of psychoanalytic study.

As a means of rewriting women into the history of this war’s stories, in this introduction I first turn to a discussion of how female writers differ and depart from established norms of Vietnam War writing. Then, I describe how feminist rhetorical theories of silence, listening, and praxis are essential for investigating how these women produce and relate their stories of difference. Finally, I use these rhetorical theories to challenge and disrupt current psychoanalytic paradigms that seek to exclude women’s differing articulations of traumatic experience. Ultimately, this study argues that privileging of white masculinized voices in this genre of literature excises women and racialized persons from considerations of the conflict. Scripting American and

Vietnamese voices out of the repertoire of this conflict's literature negates not only the narratives they have to tell about their experiences but also their very participation in the war. Carol Lynn Mithers advocates that women's war stories "never really penetrated the public consciousness" because "what women have to say is not considered a legitimate part of the war's history" (83, 84). If one were to recognize women's participation in war, then this would negate an age-old myth; it would "destroy the claim to special male knowledge and all the privileges it brings. [...] Within the mythology of war, a man who kills, who holds 'the power of life and death,' can imagine himself a god. The woman who knows that in the end war comes down to blood, pain and broken bodies can only remind him that he is not" (Mithers 90). While Mithers is interested in how women shatter this myth, I am primarily concerned with the effects this silencing act has on women subjects. Whether women experience war firsthand or "at home" in the US, this negation of traumatic experience through being silenced has the potential to culminate in a double-wounding of the victim, where the effects of a traumatic event are exacerbated by socially-constructed misogynistic and racist modes of oppression, precisely because patriarchal regimes of power constrain her voice. Speaking is often understood to be a vehicle that is necessary in dealing with one's trauma. In order to undermine these oppressive patriarchal regimes of power that negate women's participation and victimization in the war and render their voices muted, some women use silence in defiant opposition to the prescription that one must render traumatic experience into words. In turn, women use silence so that they may momentarily reflect upon their own experiences and come to terms with these experiences on their own terms. The use of

silence as momentary introspection, as strategic contemplation, allows them to gain time and space away from these abusive regimes of power so that they may plead for rhetorical listeners; they ask their audiences to adopt a stance of openness and non-identification, so that readers can appreciate and validate these narratives of difference as legitimate parts of the war's story, just as they would men's.

Krista Ratcliffe defines rhetorical listening as “a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture. Defined more particularly as a code of cross-cultural conduct, *rhetorical listening* signifies a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in cross-cultural exchanges” (1, emphasis original). In order to engage in such a practice, Ratcliffe advocates that rhetorical listening follows four “moves”:

1. Promoting an *understanding* of self and other
2. Proceeding within an *accountability* logic
3. Locating identifications across *commonalities* and *differences*
4. Analyzing *claims* as well as the *cultural logics* within which these claims function (26, emphasis original)

Thus, in order to practice rhetorical listening, the listener must “stand under” the discourses of others, to let those discourses of cultural difference “wash over, through, and around us and then let[] them lie there to inform our politics and ethics” (28). This is precisely what these women authors of the Vietnam/American War ask: that we, as readers, listen to their narratives of difference in order to dismantle misogynistic popular conceptions of not only who is able to participate in war, but also to expose how the American cultural logics of exclusion exacerbate traumatic wounds. Ratcliffe explains

that there are four modes of communication that are typically used in the academy. English departments tend to value reading and writing over speaking and listening, and she argues that it is through listening that one can come to fully appreciate difference by adopting a stance of non-identification (18). However, I find that reading and listening go hand in hand. As adept readers, scholars pay attention to not only the words on the page, how they are arranged, and what merits focus, but we are also attentive to gaps, silences, and images and emotions that are conspicuously missing. These spaces of absence are often marked by punctuation: em dashes, ellipses, and so forth. Similarly, cut off sentences or thoughts draw readers' attention to these omissions within texts. Thus, readers can become listeners to the melodic rhythm of texts by being attentive to these silences, these gaps, while still being mindful of the particular words that are presented on the page. After all, in poetics it is silence – breaks, pauses – that gives texts cadence, an essential literary virtue. Only once we, as reader-listeners, understand the power that keeps these women's voices at bay and the harm that that causes them, can we then begin to appreciate how women resort to silence to work outside the confines of traditional ways of dealing with trauma. Throughout this study, I analyze fiction and nonfiction texts that range from popularized accounts of women's representations of the war like Lynda Van Devanter's *Home Before Morning* and Frances Fitzgerald's *Fire in the Lake* to lesser-known works in the American academy such as Nhã Ca's *Mourning Headband for Hue* and Laura Lãm's *Late Blossom*. In these texts as well as many others, women protagonists repeatedly use silence to allow themselves time and space away from dominant discourses and mandates of patriarchal power to give themselves the

agency and self-empowerment needed to deal with their traumatic experiences on their own terms. In essence, they refuse the appropriation of their trauma by male discourses of power that demand that they render their experiences into words, and in so doing they refuse to allow patriarchal conventions of coping to tell them how they ought to think about their experiences.

Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch name “strategic contemplation” as a key step in engaging in rhetorical assaying. For them, rhetorical assaying is a necessary process for “making sense of the practices, values, properties, and processes by which feminist rhetorical studies as an asset to [Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies] might be made more visible and deemed worthy and valuable not only to RCL but perhaps even beyond” (15). The second step in this process is strategic contemplation, wherein scholars take “the time, space, and resources to think about, through, and around our work as an important meditative dimension of scholarly productivity” (21).

Extending this practice beyond the scholar, I suggest that many women in this study also participate in this practice, but with a different end goal. Rather than engaging in a practice to appreciate feminist rhetorics, these protagonists use strategic contemplation as a method to understand how they, themselves, fit into the masculinist rhetoric of the war. Since popular culture – the media, government, educational institutions, and so forth – continually efface women’s presence in the war from American public memory, these women must take time and space away from these regimes of power to “think about, through, and around” their traumatic experiences in order to understand themselves as valid participants of the war, and their experiences as real. Too often, these women were

pressed to believe that their experiences were not “real,” that they had not “been there” despite Michael Herr’s protestations that all Americans had been in Vietnam in the final line of his canonical New Journalistic piece *Dispatches*: “Vietnam, Vietnam, Vietnam, we’ve all been there” (260). “This is one reason many women who had gone to Vietnam ended up marrying or living with male veterans,” Kathryn Marshall tells us (10). Emotionally aligning themselves with male veterans gave these women “someone to talk to, someone who – in the words of a former Army nurse – ‘made you know it had been real’” (Marshall 10). No one else, not the government, not the media, not historians or creative writers, would account for their presence. Thus, these women would often have to turn introspectively inward to reckon with their experiences simply because the masculinist discourse of the war made no room for them.

The word “Vietnam” conjures up a multiplicity of horrifying images and connotations in American public memory and these have not grown stale with time. It is remembered as the one war that Americans had lost in its history of armed conflicts. However erroneously this public memory is,² it is still a belief that is maintained throughout the American public sphere. All too often, this lost war, this lost cause, abounds with imaginings of the failures of the American *men* who participated in the war. This is not without reason, for this war has been presented to the American public as one that was dirty, a mistake, and extremely dangerous. Centering discourse about the war on men, through public images that proliferate on television, film screens, and male-authored texts, America is presented with a story of national failure, one that not only

² Don Ringnalda contests this notion in his monograph *Fighting and Writing the Vietnam War*.

could have been prevented had Eisenhower not so staunchly backed the French in the First Indochina War³ or had Lyndon Baines Johnson not been pressured to sign the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution by his advisors⁴, but also one that is consistently figured as a masculine failure, one within which American soldiers could and should have fought harder to win. Pitting these soldiers as failures ultimately effeminized them, constructing them as passive, weak, and unwilling to win. In an effort to redirect how the American public viewed these weak-willed Vietnam War soldiers, texts from the 1980s sought to revamp the veteran's image, casting him as muscle-bound, operating outside of authority, and seeking vigilante justice in characters like Rambo, as Susan Jeffords argues in *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*. Exhorting such an agenda, one that continues to focus on the male veteran through multiple revisions of his image, comes at a cost, which is cultural forgetting. If certain institutions of power, like the media, the US government, and as a byproduct the US educational system, wish to proclaim that war, and the Vietnam War in particular, is only an effort that men can take part in, then this also means that women are left out of its construction and its remembrance.

Cultural forgetting is necessary when patriarchal institutions of power wish to continue to shine the spotlight on men's experiences of the war. In writing about the production of history, Michel-Rolph Trouillot asserts that certain narratives are

³ Fredrik Logevall makes this claim in his historical study *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam*.

⁴ Marilyn B. Young provides a great historical analysis of the war that focuses on the American side of the conflict. She notes this internal pressure placed on Johnson to sign the Resolution so that he may continue funding his Great Society (160).

reinforced while others are silenced. There are two sides to historicity, he argues, one that implicates subjects in the sociohistorical processes of an event and one that is concerned with producing narratives about that event. It is how these two sides of historicity come together that interests him. “For what history is changes with time and place, or better said, history reveals itself only through the production of specific narratives. What matters most are the processes and conditions of production of such narratives” (25). In other words, when certain narratives are propped up, reinforced, and continually retold, like those of the male veterans of the war, those are the ones that become “history.” The narratives that do not necessarily fit the predominant cultural narrative are thereby silenced and forgotten, like those of women veterans, participants, and witnesses of the war. This project seeks to reveal “history’s” opposite, what I call Herstories, those stories that are subjugated to irrelevance or even disbelief by the American public, their male veteran counterparts, and the American government. Only by investigating how women experience war and relate those experiences to an audience can we begin to understand how patriarchal institutions consistently protect and maintain the production of “history,” one that is chiefly concerned with men. In this reification of *his* story, violent acts of silence are brought to bear upon the women who challenge “history,” to the point where they must work outside of the confines of the patriarchal institutions of power in order to assert their narratives of difference.

To more fully understand how propping up “history” is an overwhelming exercise of patriarchal power, I turn to Paul Connerton. In *How Societies Remember* he asserts that the legitimation of a present order is contingent upon how a society remembers the

past (3), for it serves the present needs of those who are in power. “For it is surely the case that control of a society’s memory largely conditions the hierarchy of power” (1). Thus, what images we are presented at a time will shape how the event is remembered in the future. Taking the nightly news reports from the Vietnam War, those that tallied body counts and at times forewarned of eminent defeat, the focus of such media representations of the conflict was on the American men who were there and how they were failing in their enterprise to save the Vietnamese from their “backward” Communist ways. Women, especially Vietnamese women, if they were shown, were merely background props, positioned as those that needed saving.

Culturally mediating the Vietnam War as one that was doomed to fail from the start reaffirms this event as one that was traumatic and suggests that the ultimate (and possibly only) victims of this historical episode are the American men who contributed their futile efforts to this cause. Jeffrey C. Alexander et al argue that “trauma is not something naturally existing; it is something constructed by society” (2). In other words, when the media broadcasts the nightly horrors of the war and projects them onto Americans television screens, this saga eventually is taken up by other mediums: addresses to the public from government officials, film, literature, and so on. I do not mean to suggest that the war was not traumatic; certainly it was for many. Rather, what I want to emphasize is how the event was to be remembered was socially constructed, for these various repetitions of the horror of the Vietnam War molded public memory to remember this historical episode as the most atrocious one in America’s military history. Alexander et al also suggest that “events do not, in and of themselves, create collective

trauma. Events are not inherently traumatic. Trauma is a socially mediated attribution” (8). In order for an event to be remembered as such, it needs to be socially mediated and remediated to fit this narrative line of trauma, tragedy, and horror. Ron Eyerman, Jeffrey C. Alexander, and Elizabeth Butler Breese in *Narrating Trauma: On the Impact of Collective Suffering* further explain how certain narratives traumatically come to affect a population rather than an individual.

Rather than denial, repression, and working through, it is a matter of symbolic construction and framing, of creating a narrative and moving along from there. A ‘we’ must be constructed via narrative and coding, and it is this collective identity that experiences and confronts the danger. [...] It is when narratives of triumph are challenged, when individual deaths seem worthless or polluted, when those who have fallen are seen not as sacrificing for a noble cause but as wasted victims of irresponsible chicanery, that wars can become traumatic indeed. (xii-xiii)

The Vietnam War shook Americans’ faith in themselves in terms of their military might, their righteousness, and their belief that they are the “good guy” in a brutal fight against the evil Communists. Heroics were reaffirmed with winning the Second World War, especially with the Allies’ liberation of the concentration camps. Vietnam, on the other hand, made Americans doubt themselves and their global political international motives and agendas. No longer was there a stalwart and loyal faith in American politicians. No longer was there faith in American government. Rather, what the US public now had to confront were various narratives that confirmed that each American death the war incurred was pointless and simply an utter waste.

Social trauma theorists like Alexander et al and Eyerman, Alexander, and Breese place primary and sole emphasis on the social construction of an event. These arguments

are in stark contrast to traditional trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra who rely on Freudian psychology as a foundational basis for their work. Rather than suggesting that events are “historically made” and “not born” (Alexander et al 37), Caruth maintains that the trauma of an event is located within the individual, which creates a psychological crisis that is inescapably bound up in the “referential return” (7), the re-experiencing, of the event. According to Kali Tal, a scholar that explores the intricacies of trauma by looking specifically at the Vietnam War, a traumatic experience can be described when,

An individual is traumatized by a life-threatening event that displaces his or her preconceived notions about the world. Trauma is enacted in a liminal state, outside the bounds of “normal” human experience, and the subject is radically ungrounded. Accurate representation of trauma can never be achieved without recreating the event since, by its very definition, trauma lies beyond the bounds of “normal” conception. (15)

Various conventional literary texts confirm this notion of trauma. White male protagonists often note how their Vietnam War experience changed them so dramatically that they had substantial trouble in readjusting to the World. Paco in Larry Heinemann’s *Paco’s Story* and Christian Starkmann in Philip Caputo’s *Indian Country* serve as prime examples of this difficulty in readapting to civilian life. In order to deal with this crisis, this disruption to one’s sense of “normality,” LaCapra argues that one must work through the event via a process of articulation (22). In essence, for one to begin to cope with one’s trauma, conventional theorists emphasize the need to render one’s traumatic experiences into words. Many authors who have experienced war or deal

with war as their primary subject point to the cathartic power of and in writing about their experiences. Tim O'Brien in the last lines of *The Things They Carried* makes explicit reference to how stories can "save" lives: "I'm skimming across the surface of my own history, [...] and when I take a high leap into the dark and come down thirty years later, I realize it as Tim trying to save Timmy's life with a story" (246). For those who fit the prescriptions of who can be a "victim" according to psychoanalytic study, writing, speaking, communicating one's traumatic experiences can be a cathartic, coping process. However, this prescriptive method of coping cannot be so easily approached by those who do not fit the WASP-defined parameters of psychoanalysis.

Multiple problems arise in this traditional conceptualization of trauma. First, as Tal emphasizes, the event fractures the person, due to the abnormality inherent in the event which is then projected onto the subject. Second, in either theorization of this field of study, critics place emphasis either solely on the individual in traditional discussions of how an "event" works upon the psyche of the victim or on the social construction of the "event" as though they are mutually exclusive realms. Third, conventional trauma scholars model their theories on the white male subject given their reliance on Freud or even Pierre Janet as their theoretical predecessor, which does not take into account interstitial identities or those that are culturally different than the American-Eurocentric models on which Freudian psychoanalysts base their theories.

As Tal demonstrates in her description of what constitutes an event, trauma disrupts a person's preconceived notions of normality. Given the shift in dealing with one's world, one that was previously considered relatively safe, confronting an event that

is “life-threatening” comes as a shock to one’s perception of daily life. This disruption then psychically fractures the subject. What this model implies is that the subject who experienced the event was previously “whole,” a fully-constituted subject and coherent as such prior to the event. This understanding of the subject and the event invites multiple questions: What if the subject experiences what can traditionally be assumed to be a traumatic event, but her environment prior to the event was not considered as being “safe”? What if the subject has been immersed throughout her life in a particularly volatile part of the world: whether her community (locally or nationally) has been engaged in a war that has spanned decades; whether her homeland has been subject to violently corrupt practices, governmental or otherwise; and so on? Further, to be considered a coherent and fully-constituted subject, one would have to have a listening audience at one’s disposal. But, what if the subject does not have access to one? Gayatri Spivak argues that the subaltern cannot speak because she does not have a communicable language in which to do so. When we do not give people the space and time they need in order to communicate their experiences, we resign ourselves to accepting a simplistic model of trauma theory, one that privileges a specific individual, one who speaks in the dominant idiom and who has access to an audience of listeners due to this privileged use of language. By allowing those persons who are not fractured as a result of the event an opportunity to express their trauma on their own terms, we afford ourselves an opportunity to consider, appreciate, and take into account different models of trauma and modes for coping with such experiences.

My second critique of current trauma theories elucidates the binary implicit in these conversations. Either critics tend to agree that the trauma of the event fractures a person's psyche and thus place emphasis on the individual's experience of trauma as traditional scholars like Caruth, LaCapra, and Leys do. Or, other theorists place heavy import on the social construction of trauma as Alexander et al and Eyerman, Alexander and Breese do. At times, theorists try to find a middle ground, such as when Brison prescribes remaking the self in a community of others as a crucial element in the process of coping. However, even in this prescription, Brison still takes the stance that the individual has been intensely psychologically maimed as the result of the event. It is as though violent social constructs have no bearing on the creation or the worsening of one's traumatic experience. Rather than adopt an either-or stance on this issue, I contend that trauma works in both ways. Surely, there are singular events that have debilitating effects on their victims, such as rape, specific wartime experiences, or other near-death encounters. Even the witnessing of these events can cause long-lasting traumatic effects in their victims, where they may show signs of traditionally defined symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (such as hypervigilance, acute paranoia, nightmares, flashbacks, and so forth). However, what we must remember is that there are outlying constraints that can exacerbate these events. Patriarchal and racist abuses of power come immediately to mind. Specifically for my project, examples of such can be seen when men discredit women's service in war altogether, claiming either that they were never there, or that their experiences could never compare to men's. Racially-infused logics come into play especially when a large influx of Vietnamese immigrants come to the

United States and they are expected to adopt the customs, language, and practices of white America immediately, which results in these newcomers feeling as though they need to erase their history and identity in order to adopt the stereotype of the model minority.

Constraints such as these, ones that are embedded into American cultural practices that are misogynistic and racist at their core, contribute to a layering of traumatic experience. First, one experiences an event, whether it is life-threatening in the traditional sense or it demands an extinction of one's old (cultural) life in order to adopt a new one through immigration and the demands of assimilation. Then, the traumatic experience of that event is exacerbated by culturally embedded logics of oppression, such as ones that advocate superiority in white cultural life, or situate women's experiences as secondary to men's. Ultimately, these outlying constraints create conditions with which traditional white male subjects of trauma theory do not have to contend. This relates to my third criticism of how scholars currently theorize how trauma works. Since Freud and other early psychoanalysts were concerned with mainly white patients, they simply did not take other subject positions into account.⁵ However, if we are to approach a more

⁵ David Eng in *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* notes how Freudian psychoanalytic theory disturbingly equates racial difference with sexual perversion. "From its very inception," Eng writes, "psychoanalysis has systematically encoded race as a question of sexual development. As the privileged episteme of psychoanalytic theory, sexuality comes to stand in for – and serve as a displaced category of – racial difference in Freud's writings. At the same time, racial difference repeatedly operates as a proxy for normative and aberrant sexualities and sexual practices" (6). This is not to mean that different races did not exist at Freud's time, however. Rather, it is how these differences in race were constructed that fabricated the idea of the "savage" and the "half-savage:"

"Savages" and "half-savages," standing in close proximity to primitive man, can be observed because they exist *during* Freud's time. However, these racially other savages and half-savages do

complicated view of how trauma works and in what ways, addressing cultural and racial difference is necessary. In terms of Vietnam War literary scholarship, the logical place to turn in order to do so would be to Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American texts, especially since Vietnamese accounts of the war have been largely ignored by the American public and the academy, and Vietnamese-American texts often investigate the intricacies of assimilation practices and demands.

However, intersections of race and trauma are not the only contributions that Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American texts have to lend to an American readership. Lisa Lowe in *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* describes how Asian America as symbol has come to embody a significant and turbulent era for the American nation.

not exist *in* Freud's time. Instead, they are securely positioned as temporally other to modern European man. That is, these contemporaneous savages not only exist in an indeterminate premodern past from which present-day European society has decisively emerged, but they are psychically frozen in this indeterminate past.

For Freud, white European man represents civilized man, or what he suggests to be primitive man's unrealized psychic potential. In insisting that there "are men still living who, as we believe, stand very near to primitive man, far nearer than we do, and whom we therefore regard as his direct heirs and representatives," Freud implies that these present-day savage races have fallen outside the chain of psychic evolution and human development. That is, these racialized groups are savage (and not only primitive) because they are not (nor can they ever be) in any process of psychic or social advancement. Locked in time, they are preindividuals and maldeveloped groups, undeveloped and undevelopable. This temporal congealing of Freud's figure of the savage with the primitive is evident in his assertion that in their mental life we see an atavistic image, a "well-preserved picture of an early stage of our own development." If, for Freud, ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, then the development of the individual recapitulates the development of civilized mankind not only through a specifically sexualized form but through a specifically racialized valence. (7)

Just as the Orient is a racist construct (Said), the racially different "savage" is a similar construct that does not exist. By only considering positions of marginality and otherness in this racist manner, I claim that Freud did not take other racialized positions into account when he put forth his psychoanalytic theories, for these demeaning stereotypes were just that – stereotypes, not rooted in reality.

In a manner unprecedented in the twentieth century, the Vietnam War (1959-1975) shook the stability and coherence of America's understanding of itself. An "unpopular" war contested by social movements, the press, and the citizenry, a disabling war from which the United States could not emerge "victorious" – there is perhaps no single event in this century that has had such power to disunify the American public, disrupting traditional unities of "community," "nation," and "culture." (3)

The Vietnam War had the power to destabilize many Americans' loyal beliefs in their government, their nation's political and military objectives and practices, and their culturally embedded convictions in certain American mythologies. Faith in the assumption that the US was the most powerful nation on the globe was shaken due to its failure to win a war against what was presumed to be a "backward" people. Confidence in America's righteous political aims and tactics was shattered when powerful politicians clandestinely decided to invade Cambodia. Even trust in America's goodwill soldiers was crushed when stories like the My Lai massacre appeared in newspapers' headlines.

As a consequence from shaking Americans confidence in their nation, this disunifying history has been mapped onto Asian American people in the United States, beginning with the large influx of Vietnamese immigrants. As though white Americans needed someone to blame for this catastrophic disruption to how they used to believe in their nation – as goodwill ambassadors, as saviors of "small," "backwards" people – they often projected that blame onto the newly arrived Vietnamese immigrants almost in an effort to protect themselves from incurring any of the fault for these failures of the American nation. Isabelle Thuy Pelaud notes that in the aftermath of the war, with South Vietnam's crumbling regime, millions of Vietnamese immigrants came to America in an

effort to flee from the new communist government, re-education camps, poverty, despair, and so on. In regards to these particular waves of immigrants coming to the US, Lowe articulates how these movements were quite different than those prior.

The post-1965 Asian immigrant displacement differs from that of the earlier migrations from China and Japan, for it embodies the displacement from Asian societies in the aftermath of war and colonialism to a United States with whose sense of national identity the immigrants are in contradiction precisely because of that history. Once here, the demand that Asian immigrants identify as U.S. national subjects simultaneously produces alienations and disidentifications out of which critical subjectivities emerge. These immigrants retain precisely the memories of imperialism that the U.S. nation seeks to forget. (16-7)

Demands of immediate assimilation were expected from these immigrants in white America's attempt not only to erase their past, but also to maintain the dominance of white American discourse in conceptualizing America's relation to its national subjects and the world. These obligations to adopt white American values, customs, and language violently produce conditions that mandate forgetting who one once was. This kind of forgetting that demands the erasing one's history, begets a different kind of forgetting, that of the violent imperial practices of the United States. As Frantz Fanon argues in *Black Skin, White Masks*, it is adopting the language of the colonizer that violently oppresses the racialized subject, for one must forget one's own history of subjugation in order to take the language of the colonizer as one's own. What this means for Vietnamese immigrants who arrived in America postwar is that they were not only expected to communicate in the language of their newly adopted homeland, but they were supposed to assume white cultural practices precisely because America deemed their

previous Vietnamese ones as inferior. Through these racialized demands that determine how one is supposed to live in a day-to-day existence comes a multivalent form of oppression that has the power to traumatize those who are expected to live by these strenuous demands, especially since their race attests to how they could never achieve the ideals of white America and its discourse. Disidentifications through racialization bears a process of disalienation, one from which Vietnamese-Americans can never escape since they, as bodily representatives, serve to remind the American nation of its military failures and its cultural disunifications. This disalienation, then, is not commonly considered as a condition that incites or produces traumatic experience. In this project, I demonstrate how these racialized constraints can indeed result in the traumatization of certain victims through what I term as long-ranging traumatic experience. In essence, this study exposes how gender, race, trauma, and war experience coalesce to create even more violent subject positions for women, largely through maintaining and embracing a silence about these women's experiences. This layering of sociocultural constructs and the sexist and racist demands that are placed upon disenfranchised subjects produce a different kind of traumatic experience. This difference in traumatic experience calls for a different kind of coping method, one that embraces the use of silence through the control and withholding of language to foster the development of agency through self-empowerment.

Chapter One analyzes how relying on conventional Vietnam War narratives for a complete depiction of the conflict supports a masculinist discourse of the war that excludes women and their rhetorics of difference. Commonly invoking three rhetorics

that reaffirm white male American discourse of the war, these male-authored texts construct women in a prescriptive way: she either embodies the femme fatale or is completely reduced to sexual objectification as I investigate in John Del Vecchio's *The 13th Valley*, Larry Heinemann's *Close Quarters*, and Gustav Hasford's *The Short-Timers*. Other pro-American rhetorics, as I analyze in Duong Thu Huong's *Paradise of the Blind*, espouse an anti-communist agenda that exposes how Americans consider Vietnamese viewpoints only when they are presented through Western eyes. A third rhetoric that American authors commonly employ confirms the belief that the American nation was traumatized by the loss of the war. These authors problematically refocus the spotlight on American male veterans of the war by using women protagonists as a metaphor for the collectively traumatized American nation, as exemplified in Myra MacPherson's *Long Time Passing*, Jayne Anne Phillip's *Machine Dreams*, and Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's *Buffalo Afternoon*. In essence, these three commonly invoked rhetorics in American discourse privilege men's voices to the point where they silence and disregard O/other perspectives.

Chapter Two examines how rhetorics of exclusion that focus on men's experiences of the Vietnam War silence women, especially those who directly participated in the conflict. Lynda Van Devanter's *Home Before Morning* and Winnie Smith's *American Daughter Gone to War* lament they are silenced by the government, the media, and the American public. Having already experienced a traumatic event, the war, in a traditional sense, these women demonstrate how being silenced due to their gender acts as a double-wound, one that is socio-culturally constructed. American women

are not the only ones to be silenced, however. Jasmine, the protagonist of Laura Lãm's *Late Blossom* articulates how her family, Vietnamese culture, and men's violence towards her forcibly silence her. Nhã Ca's *Mourning Headband for Hue* demonstrates how dissenting Vietnamese perspectives are silenced by the American academy, particularly when they do not blame either the Americans or the Communists for the horror war causes, but rather blame the act of war itself for the destruction of humanity. Finally, the protagonist in lê thi diem thúý's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* embodies a silence that has been imposed upon her by white America. These characters demonstrate how patriarchal regimes of power silence women's voices to keep these dissenting voices from gaining a listening audience. Thus, these socially constructed and maintained violences operate on two levels, one that doubly-wounds the victim, the protagonist, and one that functions to keep women's voices as a whole socially muted and therefore deemed irrelevant.

Being all too accustomed to how silence has been used against them, Chapter Three discusses how some women then use silence as a strategy to protect them from these oppressive institutions. For example, one of the protagonists in Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* uses silence to reinvent herself as a Vietnamese-American, a position she feels she must negotiate being both American and Vietnamese through selectively translating American culture, values, and language to her mother. Other authors use silence as a form of protection. Monique Truong, Winnie Smith, and, again, Lan Cao, use silence as a moment of quiet self-reflection to shield their protagonists from misinterpretation, condemnation, or their own traumatic experiences. Once silence has been used

introspectively, can women then use their own voices to critique oppressive regimes of power. Authors like Frances Fitzgerald, Gloria Emerson, and Laura Lân name the fallacious underpinnings of various American mythologies by exposing what is often not said – viewpoints that are contrary to American patriotic mythos. These authors openly challenge institutions of power that have a vested interest in propagating these narratives, such as the proclamation that America is always right(eous) in its political aims and tactics. Before this kind of critique can be launched, however, women need to take a momentary, reflective pause so that they can then expose the silences that have the power to marginalize those who speak against or outside of these powerful institutions.

These expressions of silence, both those that “defer to power” and those that “deploy power” (Glenn xi), culminate in a plea for rhetorical listeners, as I demonstrate in Chapter Four. Revisiting the memoirs by Van Devanter and Smith, I examine how their protagonists use silence as strategic contemplation and how they ask their audiences to do the same, for engaging in quiet reflection permits readers the time and space needed to fully consider these narratives fairly. Sam Hughes, the protagonist in Bobbie Ann Mason’s novel *In Country*, functions metonymically to evince how, as a transgenerational trauma victim, she relates the collective traumatization of the American nation as well as her own individual traumatic experience. Đặng Thùy Trâm’s diary *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace* presents her challenge to Vietnamese socialism by using her diary as a dialogic tool of resistance. Finally, Kathryn Marshall’s oral history *In the Combat Zone* provides a model for rhetorical listening since the women interviewed within this study actively sought out each other and created networks of access for other

women veterans. Thus, these women give themselves the opportunity to engage in rhetorical listening, and they point to the necessity of adopting a stance of non-identification that is necessary in this practice.

My conclusion investigates how these varying voices of American, Vietnamese, and Vietnamese-American women disrupt the silence that surrounds their experiences in an attempt to dismantle crippling regimes of patriarchal power that seek to keep their voices muted. To underscore the importance of and imperative to give these women a platform where they can exercise their voice, I point to what happens when certain masculinist rhetorics are reinforced in popularized literary productions as they are in Le Ly Hayslip's autobiography *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*. Hayslip positions the US as the economic savior for Vietnam, an underdeveloped country, and in doing so, she provides an example of how women authors also fall prey to patriarchal prescriptions of femininity in rhetorics of nation-building. Further engendering stereotypes restricts which voices audiences have access to, and they exhibit how embedded these misogynist assumptions and practices are in daily American cultural life.

Silence can be debilitating when it is lorded over those in order to maintain an unequal balance of power. When we fail to consider women's different experiences of war, we engage in perpetuating derogatory stereotypes. By looking at what happened to femininity's converse, masculinity, Susan Jeffords notes how America re-masculinized the American male veteran in the 1980s. In order to cope with and undo images of a threatened American masculinity, Jeffords claims that

Vietnam veterans are portrayed in contemporary American culture as emblems of an unjustly discriminated masculinity. Through this image of the veteran, American manhood is revived, regenerated principally by a rejection of the feminine and sexuality; reborn and purified, the veteran takes his place as an experienced leader and spokesperson for a conjointly revived morality and social politics that will regenerate America itself. (116)

Thus, hypermasculinized projections of American manhood came into the American cultural mainstream through productions like *Rambo: First Blood, Part II, Missing in Action, Uncommon Valor*, and other similar films (Jeffords 160). My point here is that due to these stereotypes of the wounded veteran – both physically and mentally – American culture sought to change and revamp his image, casting him as muscle-bound, determined, and intensely patriotic. While these images of a “revived” American manhood are arguably just as disturbing as those of the emasculated veteran, what matters is that how these men were portrayed *changed*. No such moves have been made for reimagining the feminine in war – for she is still cast as the enemy, whether that means that she is envisioned as a conciliatory and passive American woman who objects to war’s aims and tactics, or as a Vietnamese insurgent. Further, women are still excluded from representations of war, particularly in a Vietnam War context. What this does is perpetuate stereotypes of femininity, particularly when stereotypical characteristics of “weakness, passivity, nonaggression, and negotiation” come to define the feminine (Jeffords 160). These are images that popularized texts about the war, such as Hayslip’s, still uphold. Ultimately, this reaffirmation of war as a man’s arena further reifies and justifies the act of silencing women and excluding them from war's rhetoric. Instead, we need to understand that, given the debilitating constraints silence has imposed

upon these protagonists, these women need to and have found a new way for dealing with their trauma – using silent introspection so that they may begin to cope with their experiences on their own terms. All they ask is that their readers become listeners and do the same: listen to these moments of silence by adopting a stance of “strategic contemplation” because within those silences are expressions of openness and difference that so deafeningly destabilize patriarchal institutions of power.

CHAPTER II

MASCULINIST DISCOURSE IN CONVENTIONAL VIETNAM WAR

LITERATURE: THE FEMME FATALE, ANTI-COMMUNIST RHETORIC, AND

COMMUNAL TRAUMA

The standards for being a ‘real’ soldier – ‘courage, endurance, and toughness, lack of squeamishness when confronted with shocking or distasteful stimuli, avoidance of display of weakness in general, reticence about emotional or idealistic matters...’ – are almost indistinguishable from those of stereotypical ‘real’ masculinity [...] Going to war, then, is not simply a test of one’s ‘courage’ or ‘endurance’ but also of one’s *manhood*. (Mithers 84-5)

The West thinks of itself as masculine – big guns, big industry, big money – so the East is feminine – weak, delicate, poor...but good at art, and full of inscrutable wisdom – the feminine mystique. [...] The West believes the East, deep down, *wants* to be dominated – because a woman can’t think for herself. (Hwang 83)

Rather than denial, repression, and working through, [collective trauma] is a matter of symbolic construction and framing, of creating a narrative and moving along from there. A ‘we’ must be constructed via narrative and coding, and it is this collective identity that experiences and confronts the danger. (Eyerman, Alexander, and Breese xiii)

Conventionally, war writing is assumed to be written by men, mainly because the American public does not consider women “warriors.” As Carol Lynn Mithers explains in the first epigraph to this chapter, “Going to war [...] is not simply a test of one’s ‘courage’ or ‘endurance’ but also of one’s *manhood*” (84-5), given that war is constructed as a man’s duty, concern, and occupation. This masculinist notion is reinforced by public

images of war. For example, the construction of American war memorials tend to feature men's acts of valor as can be seen in *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima*. More specifically in connection with the Vietnam War, readers often are presented with a story that gets repeated (with plot variations, of course). Ultimately, we are presented with a common image of the tragedy of the Vietnam War. Within these popular white male narratives, readers meet a naïve, young man who prepares himself for going to Vietnam, a land he knows little to nothing about. Sometimes these narratives begin *in medias res*, but the protagonist is almost always “new” in country at the beginning of the text, as reflected by the common nickname bestowed up on him – Fucking New Guy (FNG). In order to deal with his harsh surroundings, this protagonist must become “hard,” that is hard of heart. As a result of becoming “hard,” he inflicts immense amounts of pain and suffering upon anyone he considers to be an enemy to him, whether they are “foreign” civilians, fellow Americans, or nonpartisan bystanders. After this drastic change to his character, he rotates home and confronts a hostile and unforgiving atmosphere, for he has been labelled as a veteran “baby-killer” by the American public due to the unpopularity of the war.

These standard representations of the war present a problem: these narratives validate and privilege certain voices – those who support this masculinist discourse of the war, those who espouse an anti-communist rhetoric, and those who believe that the loss of the war traumatized America on a national level – while discrediting and silencing others. Voices that have been silenced include marginalized ones, that of minorities, women, and Vietnamese perspectives on the war. When certain representations are viewed as authentic, authoritative, and “real,” as white male veterans' accounts typically

are, they tend to get repeated, as seen in the conventional, yet general, plot layout described above. I focus on John M. Del Vecchio's *The 13th Valley*, Larry Heinemann's *Close Quarters*, and Gustav Hasford's *The Short-Timers* out of the multitude of white male Vietnam War narratives because not only are they highly popularized representations of the conflict – either holding canonical status in this subgenre as Del Vecchio's and Heinemann's do or being made into a blockbuster hit in its film adaptation as Hasford's does – but also because each of these texts have pretty substantial women characters in them. Devoting at least some space to feminine representations of these backgrounded characters allows me to investigate how men construct women characters in this war's literature. To examine how American-backed anti-communist rhetoric is espoused in popular narratives of the war, I then turn to Duong Thu Huong's *Paradise of the Blind* since it was the first Vietnamese text ever to have been translated into English and was done so to explicitly appeal to American markets (Banerian). This ideologically-based rhetoric also reaffirms white masculinist discourse of the war because in describing the failures of the socialist regime of Vietnam post-war, America is once again positioned as the stronger of the two nations. In other words, dystopian depictions of post-revolution Vietnam effeminize this Southeast Asian nation by pointing out how its government cannot protect its citizens from starvation and/or corruption. Finally, in order to expose how certain authors highlight the cultural trauma of the American nation in the loss of the war, I analyze Myra MacPherson's *Long Time Passing: Vietnam and the Haunted Generation*, Jayne Anne Phillips' *Machine Dreams*, and Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's *Buffalo Afternoon*. By repositioning the spotlight on the collective

traumatization of the American nation, these authors further relegate women's voices of the conflict to the periphery in order to make room for revitalizing the narrative agency of male veterans, something that had come under scrutiny in the immediate aftermath of the war.

These repetitions that continue to give prominence to masculinist discourse, then, have the power to script how the American public, especially those not intimately familiar with the war, remembers this turbulent time in this nation's history. As Paul Connerton notes in *How Societies Remember*, "it is surely the case that control of a society's memory largely conditions the hierarchy of power" (1). In other words, these repetitions, and the validation of these stories through their remediations, serves to substantiate not only how the war is remembered, but also who is permitted to do the telling: white men. Connerton also explains how social memory works in order to justify social order and power:

[I]mages of the past commonly legitimate a present social order. It is an implicit rule that participants in any social order must presuppose a shared memory. To the extent that their memories of a society's past diverge, to that extent its members can share neither experiences nor assumptions. The effect is seen perhaps most obviously when communication across generations is impeded by different sets of memories. Across generations, different sets of memories, frequently in the shape of implicit background narratives, will encounter each other; so that, although physically present to one another in a particular setting, the different generations may remain mentally and emotionally insulated, the memories of one generation locked irretrievably, as it were, in the brains and bodies of that generation. (3)

In context of the Vietnam War, the American generation's memory of the war largely looks to the white male veteran's perspective to answer the ultimate questions this war

provoked: what was it like? What happened in Vietnam? Why did America fail? When the public, scholars, and readers look to these white male narratives to answer these questions, patriarchal power continually is reinforced and viewed as the institution that has the knowledge to answer these questions, as though only men have the privilege to speak on this subject. To address this unfair treatment of which voices are privileged and more importantly which voices are not, this project specifically interrogates what women – American and Vietnamese alike – have to say about the conflict. Where do these women’s stories converge with popularized depictions of the war? Where do they diverge? More importantly, how do these articulations of difference show their readers how patriarchal positions of power continue to subjugate women – their voices and experiences of the war, whether they are veterans or civilians?

Of the conversations that abound in this masculinist discourse of the war, one of the major views contends that this sub-genre has re-written the American nation. Philip D. Beidler in *Re-Writing America: Vietnam Authors in Their Generation* looks at Vietnam War soldier-authors to investigate how they individually and collectively reaffirm American mythologies. Born out of a war of utter devastation, these creative artists, whether they are engaged in the mediums of film or literature, ultimately perpetuate mythologies that have been a part of American consciousness and national identity for generations. He questions what Vietnam War literature has to offer its readers that does not end up perpetuating the construction of myth, an occupation with which the American nation has been deeply engaged. Some of the myths that concern him include the ideas that America is a state who pursues the frontier (assuming that a

frontier is always in existence) (91, 192), and that America is the beholder of a brighter tomorrow because this nation builds upon its dark past in order to create, albeit fictionally, a better future (45, 79). As far as Beidler is concerned, works by Philip Caputo, Tim O'Brien, and Larry Heinemann do this work, to name a few.

Jim Neilson in *Warring Fictions: Cultural Politics and the Vietnam War Narrative* points out that cultural media – film, literature, news broadcasts, public memory, and so on – have effectively rewritten the Vietnam War. By revising how American civilians treat their soldiers upon return from war, these very citizens (whether in the military or not) have forgotten that the war in Vietnam was a political and imperialistic venture on behalf of the United States. Since publishing houses are now a part of media conglomerates (Neilson 21), this affects what can and more importantly what cannot be printed (i.e.: capitalist critique), which ultimately impedes further developing Marxist critique in an anti-communist Western world. He extends this conundrum to literary scholars and advocates that while academics are the only ones who can challenge this formulation, they and what they publish are still manipulated by the capitalist system, since they rely on publications to advance themselves financially and in their respective careers. Through this introspection, he claims that previous scholarship has focused either on the ideological or mythmaking/rewriting aspects of this literature. However, he advocates that this war must be viewed as one in which American policymakers were not motivated by myth, but by the need to dominate the globe by way of a capitalist hegemonic imperative in order to reaffirm their place as elite.

Milton J. Bates in *The Wars We Took to Vietnam: Cultural Conflict and Storytelling* also concerns himself with the perpetuation of mythology in and through these texts. In an effort to engage in what Michel Foucault calls a “total history,”⁶ Bates investigates the vertical axes of the conflict that Americans carried with them when they arrived in Vietnam. He focuses on five of these conflicts: the frontier war, the race war, the class war, the gender war, and the generational war, respectively. By understanding what historical turmoil Americans carried with them to Vietnam, he proposes that Americans can understand the Vietnam War more intimately by examining these five axes. He ends his critical study by claiming that “the war did not make us anything we had not been before. It merely intensified the civil wars already raging in American society, some of which – the frontier and race wars, for example – have defined us as a people from the very beginning” (259). Thus, the Vietnam War, for Bates, was not a foreign war, but multiple American civil wars enacted upon a foreign land for the US participants.

Tobey C. Herzog in *Vietnam War Stories: Innocence Lost* investigates Paul Fussell’s three stages of soldier-authors’ war experience: innocence, experience, and consideration. Herzog adds a fourth stage to Fussell’s original three, which he calls aftermath. According to Herzog, the John Wayne Syndrome often accounts for these authors’ innocent imaginings and expectations of war, which are eventually jolted and

⁶ To clarify the use of this term, Bates explains that “Total history reduces the phenomena of an era to a ‘system of homogenous relations’ organized around a single cause or principle. So conceived, history is a single plane in which modes of knowing relate laterally to a presumed center. As an alternative to this model, Foucault recommends that we think of history (and therefore of culture) as stratified planes in which the layers – science, literature, politics, and so forth – overlap and irrupt into one another but remain autonomous” (4-5).

abandoned by some individualistically poignant experience such as witnessing death at close range. This experience often leads to a sense of numbness about one's actions. Eventually, these acts lead to consideration and color the soldier's perception of war and its aims. However, for Herzog, experience does not end at this stage. Instead, these considerations follow soldiers home and impact their lives, often tragically.

Philip D. Beidler in *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam*, his first of three books on the literature of this conflict, argues that all Vietnam War literary texts are exercises in sense-making of the war, for the character-participants and their audiences. He divides this literature into three periods: early Vietnam writing 1958-70, the middle range 1970-75, and the new literature of Vietnam 1975 to the present. He finds that Vietnam War literature ranges further in genre toward the later periods he investigates. This genre range indicates what he calls an "'optative' mode," "optative because of the openness and range of its formal eclecticism" (139). Regardless of their differences in style or arrangement, he contends that each piece is a literary effort in sense-making, an attempt to hash out what really happened in Vietnam for the Americans who fought there and the American populace in general.

Alternatively, Don Ringnalda in *Fighting and Writing the Vietnam War* combats these re-writing the nation arguments. He argues that by advancing the claim that this war rewrote the American nation, scholars try to make sense of the war by implying that it was unique. In contrast to Beidler, Neilson, and Bates, he vehemently takes the stance that Vietnam was not a war that made any sense, nor was it supposed to. Ringnalda contends that instead of trying to make sense out of the "one rotten apple in American

history” (viii), Vietnam War literature’s value lies within its very senselessness. To make claims that there is some sense in these narratives once the debris have been pieced together is part of the very problem; it reifies the ultimate myth of American imaginings: the belief that Americans have no myth (41). By making sense out of these jumbled artifacts that position themselves as remnants of memory of Vietnam, critics imply that there is an inherent linearity in these stories with a definitive beginning, middle, and end; when in fact, this is often not the case for Vietnam War narratives.

Other scholars debate the uniqueness of the Vietnam War. Katherine Kinney in *Friendly Fire: American Images of the Vietnam War* supports this idea. By examining the Vietnam War in context with its historical predecessors, namely World War II, Kinney asserts that friendly fire organizes the plots of these Vietnam War American narratives, unlike the literature from World War One or Two. Not only does this notion of friendly fire differentiate Vietnam War stories from its predecessors, but it also underscores the Vietnamese as historical agents in their participation of the war. As one might expect, Ringnalda takes this notion of Vietnam as unique to task. For him, Vietnam was not an aberration in American history. However, Kinney furthers her argument when she claims that American involvement in this war also challenges the construction of the United States post-war. Images of national presence in foreign spaces, the Vietnamese in America and US business enterprises in Vietnam, blurs the “accepted boundaries of war, insistently crossing the line between combatant and noncombatant, male and female, labor and battle” (191).

In a related vein, Maureen Ryan in *The Other Side of Grief: The Home Front and the Aftermath in American Narratives of the Vietnam War* also investigates how the American nation is reconstructed post-Vietnam. In her study, she examines how the home front and its turbulent atmosphere during the conflict affect cultural memory of the war even after it is over. She paints a picture of America gone mad during the war era, or as she puts it: a conglomeration of events that resulted in a “fermented [] witches’ brew that bubbled ominously in a society that seemed perilously out of control” (7). Her aim is to indicate that so many of us have been there (10), echoing Michael Herr’s last line of *Dispatches*, “Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, we’ve all been there” (260), indicating that the Vietnam War was a cultural experience in which all Americans have a stake.

While the above critics – Beidler, Neilson, Bates, Herzog, Ringnalda, Kinney, and Ryan – are largely concerned with the effect the Vietnam War had on the American nation, whether it rewrote the nation or not, other scholars are concerned with investigating how gender constructs operate in this conflict. Given that so many literary pieces of the war focus on men’s experiences of it, it is not hard to imagine why these investigations of gender would focus on masculinity. Susan Jeffords argues that American masculinity has been threatened and subsequently resurrected in the literature and film that arose out of the conflict. In her monograph *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and The Vietnam War*, Jeffords advocates that in the 1980s boom of Vietnam War texts that have infiltrated the market, there is a concerted effort to remasculinize the American soldier. Since the soldier came home to a hostile public, this plethora of texts has attempted to rectify his standing in the public sphere. Rather than

blaming the soldier for failures abroad, the American public sought to chastise the government and government officials, who, for Jeffords, come to represent the feminine (144). By rewriting the veteran as victim rather than perpetrator, particularly in his portrayal as prisoner of war or prisoner in general, he comes to “revive[]” “American manhood” (116), which only serves to place blame on the feminine, represented by “characteristics of weakness, passivity, nonaggression, and negotiation” (160) for the loss of the war. This bears significant implications for Jeffords because this reaffirmation of masculinity justifies its foregoing dominance over other relations – race, class, ethnicity, sexual preference, and so on (xiii, 186).

Building upon Jeffords’ work, Brenda Boyle in *Masculinity in Vietnam War Narratives: A Critical Study of Fiction, Films, and Nonfiction Writings* argues that this war produced a fluidity of masculinity, one that results in a “Man Dance”: “a self-conscious enactment of gender from among a variety of masculinities” (4). The fluidity of these masculinities “disrupted the easy equation between male bodies and masculine behavior. [...] In the decades since the war’s end, this notion of the mutability of masculinity has become normalized in American life, and the boundaries that separated masculinity and femininity have become increasingly blurred” (4). She maintains that this mutability of masculinity is what this war’s literature shows us. However, when femininity is represented in this war’s literature, it becomes stagnant, as I discuss later in my considerations of Del Vecchio, Heinemann, and Hasford. Throughout the rest of this project, I will demonstrate how femininity is variously portrayed through rhetorics of

silence and listening to create space for narratives of difference, those that do not subscribe to male-centered views of the conflict.

While this scholarly attention to how the war affects American representations of masculinity is important and valuable work, another large piece of the puzzle seems to be missing. I continually find myself asking, where are the women? They were obviously there, as can be seen in how they are written into men's stories about the war, albeit flatly and often in tertiary ways. What's more, where are the Vietnamese? Wasn't this their war after all? My questions point to a major problem in how Americans discuss, remember, and think about the war in Vietnam; the war is often remembered solipistically, as though Americans were the chief agents and participants, and therefore the greater victims when the war was "lost." This gap, this failure to consider other marginalized voices, is a problem in the current literary scholarship about the conflict. What is perhaps equally disturbing is that when we read conventional white male narratives about the war, women are often scripted in misogynistic, debilitating ways. In conventional white male narratives, women, all women, become and embody the femme fatale, for they are the carriers of death –physically, psychologically, and/or emotionally. Del Vecchio, Heinemann, and Hasford portray women as the instantiation of pure evil, which only serves to reaffirm the privileging of male voices when it comes to representing war. These authors and other conventional writers like them continually advocate that war is a man's place and as a result of this construction women do not fit into its discourse. Thus, when women appear in these texts they tend to be portrayed as

the most evil of beings as those who only seek to kill mercilessly, for they do not belong there in the first place; women cannot know or understand war.

The Femme Fatale in Conventional Masculinist Discourse

In conventional Vietnam War narratives, women often are either eclipsed entirely from the story or reduced to backgrounded, flat characters, so that the narrative may focus on the white man's experience in the Nam. This does not necessarily mean that these women characters, when they are included, tell us nothing about how women are prescriptively written about and written out of war writing. One such novel that reinforces stereotypes of women and by extension keeps them out of the war arena, as though they were never there, is John M. Del Vecchio's *The 13th Valley*, a novel that has been heralded as one of the classics of Vietnam War writing. In *The 13th Valley* the omniscient third person narrator introduces the readers to three somewhat-developed women characters: Linda, Stephanie, and Lila. Linda is the quasi-girlfriend of James "Cherry" Chelini, the protagonist of the novel. Stephanie is the love interest of the hardened, experienced soldier Daniel Egan, the man who functions as Cherry's role model. Lila is the wife who is currently suing for divorce of the 7/402 Alpha squad's Lieutenant Rufus Brooks. These women have very different functions, but ultimately they reinforce stereotypes about American women back in the World.

Linda, Cherry's "girl," but still "[n]ot anyone's girl" (505), stands in for the ultimate fuck fantasy. Cherry often thinks of her in purely masturbatory terms and conjures her image for those purposes. She is not worthy of being Cherry's girlfriend, for

that would imply that she is a woman beyond the sexual pleasures she imaginarily offers him. Rather, she is a “spoiled bitch” (468), who can only talk about gallivanting around the United States, visiting New York and Boston in her letters to Cherry (465). Since she is such a “spoiled bitch,” one who cannot imagine the horrors of war because she is too focused on herself, she can only offer him reprieve from the “darkest night hours,” in which Cherry thinks of Linda and “masturbate[s], quietly shooting his juices into the cold muck outside his poncho” (388).

Given that Linda only functions as a sexual fantasy and nothing more, she is also interchangeable with any other round-eye, or white American woman. As Jax, an African American boonierat also assigned to the Alpha squad, explains, “Eyes aint roun. Roun-eye? Ma-aann. Yo white fuckas always screamin roun-eye when you mean white” (365). Indeed this is true, for soldiers like Cherry often fantasize about white American women when they feel the urge. It does not matter what she looks like; all that matters in the fantasy is that she is a white woman. To prove the interchangeability of these round-eyes, Cherry, not being able to keep his mind from wandering, “began thinking about girls again. Damn, he was horny. He thought about Cathy and Judy. Then he thought about Linda. Linda. Was she still in Philadelphia? He planned his ravaging of her when he returned. Then he fantasized seducing the stewardess he’d met on the flight from New York to Seattle, seducing her while other passengers discreetly watched” (237). Linda, his sometime-girl, is presented in between a barrage of other women, those he knows along with perfect strangers. Thus, the woman, Linda, who should mean something to him beyond unfamiliarity, ultimately does not. She is as easily replaced with strangers as

are the others he knows by name – Cathy and Judy. In this sense, American women only serve one function: to please men sexually. Her interchangeability erases her personality, identity, and unique characteristics that make up her personhood. But for white men, she can only serve this function if she is also white. Racialized women to white men like Cherry simply do not exist, for they are never mentioned unless a black soldier like Jax references them.

On the opposite end of the spectrum is Stephanie, Egan's love interest. Rather than being reduced to such a simple functionality as Linda is, Stephanie is the perfect woman. This, too, bears troubling implications, for no person is perfect, nor should someone expect anybody to be. If a woman is viewed as such, she will only fail because she is human and to be human is to fail. Still, the narrator consistently throughout the novel tells its readers how "beautiful" (41) Stephanie is. Egan even calls her a "clandestine angel" (541). But it is not as if she is a perfect woman after all, for her perfection does not reside within her person, but rather in what she offers Egan in his times of distress and despair while at war. "Thoughts of her warmed his insides. She and only she had ever brought a warmth to his soul. Before her he'd felt an adolescent, a person only half-developed. With her he had been a man fulfilled" (63). She makes *him* whole. Thus, her perfection is contingent upon completing the man, not upon her being who she is. She also brings Egan solace by allowing him to imagine a change in the atmosphere and climate that surrounds him. "Like magic she eased the discomfort and anguish. She floated into the jungle and the rain ceased, the wind became a gentle breeze" (334). By being able to function in these ways – bringing Egan comfort,

completing his being – she persuades Egan that she is “the antithesis of Nam” (279).

What is problematic with this kind of prescriptive construction of her character is that it creates an image of a woman that is unobtainable, completely fabricated, and unrealistic. Even though Egan and Stephanie both make plans to reunite within the next couple of weeks when Egan DEROSes back to the States that plan ultimately does not materialize because, foremost, Egan dies in country. Had he survived his tour of duty, however, I argue that he could never have returned to his perfect woman because this “perfect” woman never existed in the first place.

Lila, Brooks’s wife, is far from perfect. Instead, she represents the threatening possibility that many of these soldiers fear in their relationships, or at least as far as these men are concerned. Men’s perceptions of their lovers back home are often tainted with a resentful, underlying suspicion that their women will be and are unfaithful to them. They fear the Dear John letter that they dodgily expect in the mail. As the narrator explains,

The story was as old as mankind, as old as war: the Dear John story. *For American soldiers in Vietnam the story was probably more common than for GIs in earlier wars.* The war was unpopular. Could any soldier really expect something more from his woman? The war was immoral, wasn’t it?, with all the indiscriminate killing, the bombings, the napalm, the defoliants. By extension then, were not the soldiers immoral too? Could anyone expect any righteous woman to stand by a barbaric man? (100, emphasis mine)

Even though the narrator understandingly seeks to justify a woman’s decision to leave her man while he is engaged in combat in a faraway land, this rhetorical questioning still implies that most women back in the States are unfaithful, and therefore are not to be

trusted, especially in *this* war given its unpopularity back home. Del Vecchio gives us Lila as an example.

Simply tired of “doing without” her man, Lila tells Brooks in a letter that she is suing him for divorce because “that *Goddamned Army* [...has] become you and squeezed out the man I knew” (101, emphasis original). Lila tries to explain to Brooks that the war has changed him and this validates her reasoning for petitioning for divorce. “It’s you who’s changed. I still want happiness and joy for us. I still want kids for us. I want to be much more than I am now for us” (381). Not only does this present Lila as selfish, but this justification for divorce also scripts her as willingly being uncomprehending. She cannot understand her man, the Army, or how war psychologically affects a person. What’s more, she does not even try to understand. This incomprehension casts her as a “bitch” (197), and fells Brooks as a man who has been “trapped” (94) by an evil woman that refuses to work on their marriage. Instead of working toward a solution to their marital problems, she seeks to kill the marriage that Brooks so desperately wants to save.

Brooks, on the other hand, cannot understand that this sole reason – that the Army and the war has changed him – could be the only reason Lila wants to leave him. Her abandonment, he imagines, must also be motivated by her being unfaithful to him. Brooks first imagines that Lila cheats on him with another man, a Jody,⁷ and then this daydreaming turns to fantasy, which disturbs him. Trying to think through this imagining, he confides to Egan that he has had fantasies about Lila, a Jody, and himself

⁷ The term “Jody” was often used to refer to a man who stole a soldier’s woman away while he was at war in Vietnam. The term applied to this man whether the soldier and his woman were considered to be still together (by both parties) or after she had written him a Dear John letter.

having intimate relations with each other in a ménage à trois scenario. Egan alleviates his fears though when he confirms that many men fantasize about “you and another guy and your lady” (491). Egan rationalizes, “I don’t think a guy can get it on with a lady who he knows has had other dudes and at some point not think when he’s eatin her he’s getting some other dude’s cum or when she stickin her tongue in his mouth think like she’d wrapped that same tongue around somebody else’s meat. It’s almost like he was blowin the other dude” (491). Egan even tells Brooks that this type of fantasizing while at war has a name: “the Nam Syndrome” (491). The labelling of such homo-/bisexual fantasies as a syndrome reduces sexuality to static categories, as though a man was either homosexual or not. Further, by indicating that this mode of thinking is diseased, a “syndrome” for which there should be a cure, it scripts these types of fantasies as abnormal, unwanted, or even disgusting. However, the prevalence of this kind of fantasizing implied in the naming of it, for it would only warrant a label if many suffered from this kind of diseased thinking, points to how the homosocial bonds created in a war arena outweigh those fostered outside of war either before or after one’s tour of duty. In Brooks’s fantasy, the unknown Jody quickly morphs into Egan, one of his most trusted and hardened fellow combatants in his Alpha squad. While the purpose of including these perceptions of women may be to highlight the notion that these men – Cherry, Egan, and Brooks – are more than just soldiers, that they have lives and identities apart from and outside of the war, I contend that these stereotypes – the fuck fantasy, the angel, and the bitch – are invoked to stress the male homosocial bonds that are created in the field. Ultimately, this refocusing of what war does to *men* collapses women into static,

and often derogatory, categories. Further, it reinforces the idea that war is a *man's* place, one that formidably changes him into a person who could only be understood by other men with whom he shared his war experiences. In effect, the women included in these narratives only serve to refocus the spotlight on male homosocial bonding in war.

While *The 13th Valley* portrays white women in stereotypical and debilitating ways, *Close Quarters* by Larry Heinemann provides even more disturbing portraits of Vietnamese women. In this canonical Vietnam War novel, readers meet Philip “Deadeye” Dossier, the protagonist who is a naïve, young man turned brute. For Deadeye, just as much for most other conventional protagonists of this kind of literature, the Vietnamese are equated with animals. They are seen as a “savage,” “backward” people, who are inferior in intelligence and deficient in material goods due to the economic underdevelopment of their country. After a particularly brutal encounter with this ever-elusive enemy, Deadeye watches the “natural” scenery around him:

We watched the cows raising their tails, dropping streams of shit; a woman pulling a rope bucket from the well hand over hand and then shucking down naked to wash – her skinny drooping breasts and withered arms dropping water; two old men dressed in black pajama-looking pants, trading swigs from beer quarts and puffing a hash pipe; a younger woman walking away from the ice woman's hooch, squatting down near a bamboo hedge, rolling up her pants leg to the thigh and pissing into a garbage dump. (127)

Old and young women and men are described as though they are equivalent to the cows in this scene in terms of barbarism, especially since the images are placed alongside each other in one sentence. Opposed to the American “civilized” men, the young woman does not use a toilet, the men engage in what the reader can assume is drug abuse, and the

older woman bathes openly in the nude, all while cows drop their “streams of shit.” Not only does he juxtapose these images so that he may remark how similar these backgrounded characters – humans and animals alike – are, but he also does so in a single sentence. Writing in this way denotes that one could not speak of one of these images without the others; they are too closely woven together to be separated, for they are one and the same according to how white men perceive these othered, racialized inhabitants of Vietnam.

This animal-mentality among the Vietnamese that Deadeye narrates, invokes his sincere and deep hatred for them, their communities, and their nation for him. As a result of this intense hatred, Deadeye indiscriminately kills Vietnamese. After his first confirmed kill in which he strangled the enemy to death, feeling neck vertebrae crunch beneath his fingers, he begins to harvest this hatred in a most fatal way. Taking a “kid” and an old man prisoner, since they had been suspected of firing sniper rounds at Deadeye’s platoon, Deadeye shoots the “kid” execution style (219). He explains that he killed this child so savagely because “I wanted that smooth, smug, slant-eyed fucking face ground into meat, transformed into spray” (219). Once the job was done, Deadeye tells his audience, “I hated him when he was alive and I hated his corpse” (220).

Although it might seem as though this hatred could not produce worse results, it does. When Deadeye deals with Asian women, he becomes even more monstrous. To Deadeye, the Asian woman could never compare to American women, even though his American girlfriend is still not afforded autonomy or a distinct voice within the text, which further elucidates how Deadeye’s voice is privileged and women’s are muted in

this man's narrative about the war. It is as though women exist on a continuum for Deadeye. American women are pristine, serving, complacent, and "kind" (326). Asian women from more affluent countries, like the prostitute, Susie, who he hires while in Tokyo on R&R, are subservient, yet deceitful and money-hungry. Finally, Vietnamese women are not only savage, barbaric, and backward, but are also lethal and horribly ugly and/or disfigured. These evaluations of women are apparent when he reminisces of Jenny, his American girlfriend, while picking up Susie in the hotel lounge: "Jenny and her fine brown hair; whose skin smelled of Caswell Massey soap and borrowed perfume; who joked, saying it tickled when I touched her, no matter where; [...] who liked farming because it was clean and honest work; who was just the right height in bare feet to dance with, and loved to polka most of all" (185). Even though he describes Jenny mostly according to her physical appearances, she still has a name, and values "clean and honest work," unlike the Japanese prostitute, Susie.

Susie, less than Jenny, but still eons better than the seven-three's regular prostitute in-country, Claymore Face, affords Deadeye different pleasures. Susie offers him "calm" and while he is with her, he finds that he can fall into a "slow deep rhythm of sleep," an obvious luxury for the war-worn grunt (193). But that is all that she offers him. Thus, she cannot compare to Jenny, his love. Claymore Face, on the other hand, suffers by the hand of Deadeye, becoming the target onto which he will direct all of his ferocity. When readers are first introduced to Claymore Face, we find that she is not "much ta look at but she puts out like crazy" (35). Cross, the lieutenant who introduces Deadeye to Claymore Face, explains that to get over her ugliness all he needs to do is to put a "paper bag over

her head” (35). To describe how Claymore Face got her name, Deadeye narrates, “she had pox scars from her forehead to the neckline of her blouse, like someone had beat on her with the business end of a wire brush, like she’d had *acne vulgaris* since the day after she was born” (35). Given her facial composition, not only do the men note that she has “the *ugliest* cunt for a hundred clicks around” (65, emphasis original) and that the sex she sells is “Terrible! Just pitiful! Like fucken a washrag soaked with vinegar” (65), a description that is grossly demeaning, but her nickname also denotes how she is not even worthy of a name beyond the epithet they have given her. Unlike Susie, which Deadeye insinuates is not her real name (208), Claymore Face is reduced to her physical appearance, an appearance that casts her as “pitiful,” ugly, and generally unwanted by anyone anywhere.

Given Claymore Face’s inferior status, as though the Vietnamese prostitute is the lowest of the low, Deadeye feels as though he has free reign in how he treats her because, according to him, she is subhuman. In this way, she becomes the ultimate target onto which he can act out his anger, frustration, hatred, and grief. In the most memorable scene of the novel, Deadeye forces Claymore Face to perform fellatio on him and six other men in his squad twice each at gunpoint. Sitting atop the Cow Catcher, an Armored Personnel Carrier (APC), Deadeye and his squad watch an FNG have intercourse with Claymore Face through the crew hatch, “clapping and shouting encouragement,” they throw “money at her face” (259). After the FNG finishes, Deadeye uncompromisingly narrates the scene in which he demands her to perform this communal sexual act:

“Hey, sweetheart. That money ain’t for free,” I said, bugging my eyes and shaking my head slowly. “No, no, negative, no. You all got to suck me off. Matter a strict fact, you got to suck everybody.” [...] she thought I was kidding. But when I made a show of reaching down and unsnapping the flap of my forty-five holster she jerked her head up and stiffened, like somebody had kicked her dead in the ass when she was asleep and told her to move on. [...] She went from cock to cock, among the giggling and jostling and dudes poking her in the back, and by the time she came around to Deadeye again her lips and chin and neck were smeared with spit and cum. I was hard again and everybody was hard again, so I told her to go around one more time.

We just sat in that circle while Claymore Face went the rounds again, her eyes darting from gun to gun. (260-1)

After she has completed her rounds, Deadeye casually comments, “After that Claymore Face didn’t come around much, and *nobody much cared*” (261, emphasis mine). This scene not only depicts how cruel and dangerous these men can be when it comes to interacting with Vietnamese prostitutes, but it also shows how they deem certain persons, like Claymore Face, to be subhuman, as though she is only an object that “gigg[les]” and is “dumb and dufus” (260). Given that women like Claymore Face are relegated to such subservient and demeaning positions, she is presented as a caricature – the “*ugliest*” woman (65, emphasis original), and the “world’s worst” “cunt” (259, 65). With such a status and representation, it is no wonder that she is not given a name, much less a voice. In this way we can see how being silenced can put one into life-threatening positions, for since she is considered subhuman, she is not afforded the opportunity to speak and perhaps protest this sexual demand, obviously one that scared her so badly that she never returns to the seven-three regardless of how lucrative business exchanges with these men could be. Further, the fact that “nobody much cared” that she did not return illustrates

how she is considered subhuman. Instead, Claymore Face is written out of the text, effaced and never given the chance to speak on her own behalf.⁸

The men of the seven-three further demean Vietnamese women by collapsing their identities into one category that positions these women as dangerous and life-threatening bodies. Throughout *Close Quarters*, Deadeye presents four types of Vietnamese women to the reader – merchants, mamasans, prostitutes, and insurgents. Merchants like No-Tits sell Coke and beer to the men, assumedly because she cannot sell her body because of her lack of endowments. Mamasans also provide mercantile services to these men, selling them ice. They, like other merchants, cannot sell their bodies presumably because they are too old and therefore could not find any willing customers. Insurgents, on the other hand, are gender non-specific, and pose a sincere and immanent threat to each of these American men’s lives. As the novel progresses, these women and their occupations begin to be equated with each other, casting each one as a life-threatening entity that demands extermination. One mamasan is suspected of having a booby trap in her home, but in reality it is just a “homemade mousetrap or something” (107). As a result of these accusations, her home and the rest of the hooches in her ville in Chieu Hoi are set aflame, the village’s livestock are killed or “run off” (111), two Vietnamese persons are killed, and the rest of them are taken prisoner. Merchants, too, are eventually equated with insurgents. Women are suspected of selling Coke with

⁸ Other characters that have been sexually dehumanized, albeit to a lesser extent than Claymore Face, like Jasmine in Laura Lâm’s *Late Blossom* who I consider in Chapter Two, note how they have to adopt a position of silent acquiescence in order to deal with such lewd advances and propositions, which effectively restrains their voices.

ground up glass in them to unknowing GIs.⁹ Prostitution, a more debased form of mercantilism as far as Deadeye is concerned, also poses a threat to these men's lives. Similar to the folklore that circulates about the Coke merchants, men also tell stories about how "somma these gook women put razors in they pussy" (264), casting Vietnamese prostitutes as *vagina dentatas*. The vagina, in this way, becomes not only a synecdoche for the Vietnamese woman, but it also functions as a lethal one. Women, particularly Vietnamese marginalized women, are not to be trusted. In fact, they should be feared and treated with gun-at-the-ready should any perceived suspicious activity occur. In these ways, merchants, mamasans, and prostitutes are collapsed into the lethal, untrusting position of the insurgent.

Gustav Hasford in his first novel *The Short-Timers* takes broader strokes when representing the lethality of women. Rather than only casting Vietnamese marginalized women as dangerous, Joker, the protagonist, shows the reader that all women are not to be trusted, even American women. Similar to Heinemann, readers find that the ultimate enemy is the Vietnamese female insurgent, as depicted in the novel's (and the iconic film adaptation *Full Metal Jacket*) memorable sniper scene in which the Lusthog squad prevails over this young beauty who wipes out members of Joker's squad one by one in a most sadistic fashion. However, other representations of women convey the idea that all women – real and fantasized – are only instantiations of danger and evil. For example, Joker describes the short-timers calendar, the image by which we get the novel's title, as a drawing that is divided into 365 pieces that can take many forms. The "most popular

⁹ A similar accusation, or "sea-story" as the Lusthog squad calls it, appears in Hasford's novel as well (76).

design” though, is “a big-busted woman-child cut up into pieces like a puzzle. Each day another fragment of her delicious anatomy is inked out, her crotch being reserved, of course, for those last few days in country” (45). Not only is this a way of counting down the days until these servicemen can return home, but it is also a crude drawing, one that highlights sexualized portions of her anatomy making her “big-busted[ness]” “delicious,” her “crotch” prized, and infantilizes her as a “woman-child.” What’s more, she has been hacked into multiple pieces, as though a crude violence has already been performed upon her body, a cutting that gives these men great pleasure when they can ink out, or blacken, another piece of her puzzle, for it signifies another day closer to their return to the World. I would be remiss if I did not also mention that this short-timer’s design is also a cartoon. As such, it signifies what these young soldiers are waiting for – a return home, but also something that they can never achieve. Just as the woman in the drawing does not exist, neither does home as they remember it. If these characters are lucky enough to survive their tour of duty, they will remain changed, hardened, by war. An uncomprehending American public will not be as welcoming as these men might expect or want them to be.

This idea that the American public will be unwelcoming and uncaring is particularly depicted in the epithet Mary Jane Rottencrotch, a name used to signify American women sweethearts at home. Sergeant Gunnery Gerheim, the drill instructor at Parris Island, first introduces this epithet to Joker and his fellow recruits. After administering rifles to these men, Gerheim explains, “This is the only pussy you people are going to get. Your days of finger-banging ol’ Mary Jane Rottencrotch through her pretty pink panties are over. You’re married to *this* piece, this weapon of iron and wood,

and you *will* be faithful” (13, emphasis original). Mary Jane Rottencrotch, a symbol of the unfaithful, rotten, festering American girlfriend back home is effectively replaced by a machine made of iron and wood, one capable of taking lives while protecting one’s own. As such, the rifle, the lethal protector of its owner’s life, becomes a feminized, hypersexualized tool, one that has been juxtaposed to its former equivalent – the untrustworthy girlfriend. However, the effeminized rifle also carries the potential to wipe out its owner’s life as well if the recruit becomes too close to this beautiful weapon of fiery destruction. This is precisely what happens to Private Leonard Pratt, nicknamed Private (Gomer) Pyle by Gerheim. After being ordered to give their rifles a woman’s name, Leonard becomes too attached to Charlene, his rifle. While reciting the Rifleman’s Creed, Leonard’s voice becomes more audible than the rest as indicated by the capitalization used in text. Instead of referring to the rifle as a rifle, Leonard bellows:

MY RIFLE IS HUMAN, EVEN AS I, BECAUSE IT IS MY LIFE. THUS I
WILL LEARN IT AS A BROTHER. I WILL LEARN ITS ACCESSORIES, ITS
SIGHTS, ITS BARREL.

I WILL KEEP MY RIFLE CLEAN AND READY, EVEN AS I AM CLEAN
AND READY. WE WILL BECOME PART OF EACH OTHER.
WE WILL...

BEFORE GOD I SWEAR THIS CREED. MY RIFLE AND MYSELF ARE
THE MASTER OF OUR ENEMY. WE ARE THE SAVIORS OF MY LIFE.
SO BE IT, UNTIL VICTORY IS AMERICA’S AND THERE IS NO ENEMY
BUT PEACE! (23)

He only calls the rifle his brother because he is quoting the creed. However, by emphasizing that this piece of machinery is human, Leonard begins to believe with ultimate conviction that this is true, that Charlene is his real and only true love.

Leonard begins to talk to his rifle, which causes Gerheim to claim that Leonard is a Section Eight, that he is going insane. Joker soon hears that Charlene speaks back to Leonard when Joker realizes that “there is also another voice. A whisper. A cold, seductive moan. It’s the voice of a woman” (26) when he catches Leonard talking to his rifle late at night. These conversations that Leonard has with his rifle spark a love between him and Charlene, a love like none other he has previously experienced. Leonard proclaims, “I LOVE YOU! DON’T YOU UNDERSTAND? I CAN DO IT. I’LL DO ANYTHING” (27, capitalization original). What he promises Charlene he will do is protect their love. After spying Gerheim looking admiringly at Charlene, as Leonard interprets it, he fatally shoots the drill instructor at point blank range and rationalizes that Gerheim posed a threat that would come between Leonard and Charlene. Then, upon realizing that he could never have the intimate and unconditionally dedicated relationship he desires with Charlene, Leonard extinguishes his own life by taking “the black metal barrel into his mouth” and firing (31). This homicide-suicide demonstrates how anyone or *anything* that is effeminized, like these soldiers’ weapons, encapsulates a brutal lethality that has the power to take their lives as much as they are designed to save them. In other words, the woman-as-caregiver simultaneously occupies the role of the femme fatale. Thus, the ultimate life-threatening danger that these men are faced with is

the woman, no matter in which way she is embodied – as the unfaithful lover at home, as the insurgent, or even as an inanimate object that takes on her properties.

American Privileging of Vietnamese Anti-Communist Rhetoric

We have already seen that a certain type of rhetoric that prevails in American depictions of the war casts women, or the feminine, as the ultimate enemy, the vanguards of evil. Another type of rhetoric that is privileged in the American literary market is one that ideologically supports anti-communist worldviews, which ultimately reinforces Americanized masculinist rhetoric of the war. By positioning the country of Vietnam as one that needs saving, and propping up the US nation as the one to do the job, this savior narrative reinforces the effeminization of East Asia. David Henry Wang in his play *M. Butterfly* notes how casting Asia as weak, backward, and in need of saving by the West, is dominant in American cultural rhetoric. Song, the transvestite diva of the play, tells her audience that “The West thinks of itself as masculine – big guns, big industry, big money – so the East is feminine – weak, delicate, poor...but good at art, and full of inscrutable wisdom – the feminine mystique. [...] The West believes the East, deep down, *wants* to be dominated – because a woman can’t think for herself” (83). Although Song is talking about China in particular, she still casts this stereotype as one that is rooted in the binary logic of East versus West. Stereotypes such as these about the weakness of Eastern nations pervade American public consciousness, so much as to substantiate the claim that Vietnam needs to be saved from itself. Since she, the East, particularly Vietnam, cannot think for herself, she needs to be saved from the evil,

coercive powers of communism, and America, the superpower of the West during the conflict, is heralded as the only one strong enough to save this meager damsel in distress. As Hwang so powerfully writes in the Afterword to his play, “The neo-Colonialist notion that good elements of a native society, like a good woman, desire submission to the masculine West speaks precisely to the heart of our [American] foreign policy blunders in Asia and elsewhere” (99). It is this positioning of the East as feminine, as weak, as in need of saving, that reifies the proliferation and popularization of anti-communist discourse in the American literary market particularly, and in American culture in general.

The popularity of Duong Thu Huong’s texts in the United States is a case in point of this effeminizing discourse. James Banerian notes how Duong’s texts are geared toward an American literary market (328).¹⁰ The first novel ever to be translated into English from Vietnamese is Duong’s first one, *Paradise of the Blind* (front cover). Due to this prominent distinction, I shall focus my discussion of anti-communist rhetoric on this text. When critics write about Duong Thu Huong’s *Paradise of the Blind* they tend

¹⁰ In his review, he specifically considers *Memories of a Pure Spring* and *Paradise of the Blind*. While *Memories of a Pure Spring* is primarily concerned with exposing the destruction of Vietnamese families due to the demands of the new socialist government, *Paradise of the Blind* takes this notion of destruction and decay to a further level when Duong extends these ruinous implications beyond that of the family. *Memories of a Pure Spring* tells the story of Hung, a famous composer, and his wife, Suong, who is the most famous Vietnamese singer of her time. When Hung is mistaken for a boat person trying to flee Vietnam, he is summarily sentenced to and imprisoned in a re-education camp. These “boat people” are looked upon with disdain by party officials (145), who reap the rewards of these broken families. Dam, a more loyal Communist, is promoted to Hung’s job, which eventually ruins his creative career. As a result of this employment displacement, Suong must sing herself hoarse in order to provide for her family – her husband and two children. Given these demanding times and constraints, Suong attempts suicide. Ultimately, *Memories* recounts the story of how the socialist government of Vietnam utterly ruins pure talent, breaks up families, and drives its citizens to a life of disease and drug abuse, as exemplified when Hung, out of desperation to feel something new again, contracts Korean syphilis from a prostitute while high on opium (264).

to note the prominence of food within the novel. Heather Stephenson notices that “Duong’s multi-layered story often conveys its emotional power through the rich suggestive language of Vietnamese food, whether it be a lavishly prepared meal Que brings to her brother’s family when she and her daughter are starving, or a five dish, five soup feast Tam hosts to display her hardwon wealth to the villagers who saw her humiliated years before” (173). Marilyn B. Young claims that the “one constant element in the novel” is the theme of “love and sustenance,” “the love of food” (24-5). While recognizing and valuing the prominence of this theme is important, for “food gestures toward every aspect of Vietnamese identity” (Delores B. Phillips 48), what Young and Stephenson fail to recognize are the ties that Duong makes between food and communist ideology. While high-ranking party officials are able to eat more than their share, other Vietnamese peasants, like Hang and her mother, are left to starve. The novel highlights this discrepancy between the haves and the have-nots and scholars note how *Paradise* has been banned in its own country for espousing anti-communist viewpoints (Blodgett, Brown). Thus, it is not simply a novel concerned with food. Rather, it is a depressing account of how communist ideology has ruined the Vietnamese nation.

Presenting the story of Hang, a young woman who has had to quit college to become an exported worker in Russia to support her disabled mother, Que, Duong exposes how communist ideology has ruined not only the people of Vietnam, but also the state itself. In the very title of the novel, *Paradise of the Blind*, we can see how communist ideology has maimed Vietnamese citizens. The novel abounds with disabled bodies – blind men, a singing cripple, and even Hang’s own mother who loses her leg in

a traffic accident. The cripple's singing refrain "*Hail autumn and its procession of dead leaves!*" (234, emphasis original) details how ideology, and its resultant forsaking of past Confucian-inspired values, has ruined the national Vietnamese character. After hearing the cripple who has no name sing this throughout her life, Hang finally understands that,

It had taken time to grow up, to leave this place, finally to understand this song, the refrains that had haunted our miserable little streets for as long as I could remember. This same voice, this same unchanging sadness. A life snuffed out, aborted, without a whisper of a dream. It was a life un-lived, a vegetable existence suckled on rubbish heaps and water lilies, fed on the brackish surface of a bog. You survived here, but you never really lived it. [...] The cripple yelled this. It wasn't a song. It was the cry of a crooked heart, a wounded beast. (234-5).

Given the dilapidation and dysfunction of Vietnamese society, at least in comparison with the ways of the older generation, Duong, in using the cripple as a synecdoche for Vietnamese society, calls all Vietnamese citizens "beast[s]," ones who are immersed in misery simply because they are not treated, and therefore cannot function, as humans. Unable to speak about their misery and their "vegetable existence" to a listening audience, these "beast[s]" must resort to yelling. However, even yelling does not produce results, for they are mired in this state of existence, "bog[ged]" down. Presenting the Vietnamese socio-political landscape in such a way not only reinforces notions of un(der)development in this Third World country, but it also positions the West as the place of advancement, progress, and opportunity. These are ideas that are appealing to and firmly upheld by American audiences, for they reaffirm the notion that America is strong – masculine, and that Vietnam is weak – feminine.

The reader does not witness the misery that afflicts the Vietnamese characters of Duong's *Paradise* only through the cripple. Rather, misery abounds. Given that "these days it's rare you find sincere, honest people," the central characters are surrounded by "bastards" (153). In this state, Hang realizes that in Vietnam, "That's the way it is. There's no dignity on this earth for those who live and breathe in misery" (190). While it is bad enough that Hang is left to feel this way – bereft of choice, underpaid and overworked, untrusting of people – we begin to see how this misery extends beyond herself to ruin the lives of all Vietnamese citizens, whether they are politically allegiant to the new socialist state or not. This is particularly evident when Hang compares and contrasts Vietnamese people with a young group of Japanese people she spots in a Russian park:

[The Japanese] had smooth, healthy skin, the glow of well-nourished people.

Japanese: The name alone was like a certificate of respectability, a passport that opened all the doors in the world to them. Just like that.

What did these people have that we didn't have? Hundreds of faces rose in my memory: those of my friends, people of my generation, faces gnawed with worry, shattered faces, twisted, ravaged, sooty, frantic faces.

Our faces were always taut, lean with fear. The fear that we might not be able to pay for food, or not send it in time, the fear of learning that an aging father or mother had passed away while waiting for our miserable subsidies; the fear that some embassy official just might not...

We had darting, calculating faces: You had to think of everything, weigh everything. All the time.

You had to think to survive, to feed your loved ones, to hustle for a day's wages sharecropping or sweeping on a train. You had to think too of the life that

stretched out ahead, the pain that still waited for you, of a future as obscure and unfathomable as sea fog.

Who could fail to notice these faces in the street among the others so certain of their happiness, their freedom?

Or faces like mine: to be twenty years old and see wrinkles forming on your forehead, dark circles of misery welling under your eyes. Desperate, soulful eyes. To have the eyes of a wild animal, darting about, razor sharp, ready to quarrel over goods at a shop counter or scuffle in a line for food. And there was the shame, the self-loathing, in the mirror of another's gaze. Life as one endless humiliation.

I watched the Japanese furtively. What was it? What did they have that we didn't? If it is true that we are born again, passing from one life to the next, then in a previous existence, surely, they were like us. Their intelligence, their perseverance – these are qualities we Asians have in no short supply. All this generation had was a bit of luck. Luck to have been born in peace time, in a real house, in the right place, under a real roof... (229-30)

The lack of food, the constant worry, the premature deaths of these Vietnamese citizens points to how they have been politically, economically, and culturally constrained by their new socialist state. They feel like caged animals, wracked with self-loathing. When Hang questions what the Japanese have that the Vietnamese do not, foreign relations with powerful states who champion notions of freedom and a free market economy come immediately to mind. The Japanese, in the late 1980s – the temporal setting of the novel, have lucrative political ties with the other major superpower involved in the Cold War – the United States. Vietnam, however, does not. President Clinton would not lift the trade embargo with Vietnam until 1994 (Brown 66). Instead, the Vietnamese are shackled politically and economically – as evidenced in Hang being an exported worker in Russia – to the Soviet Union. Even though Hang sees this as a turn of bad luck, this political

alliance still has drastic effects: it starves its citizens; it does not provide adequate housing; and it turns the Vietnamese people into calculating, untrusting animals bred and born in misery. In essence, given the lack of development, the Vietnamese state cannot protect its citizens from misery, for they are not strong enough economically to do so. Thus, Vietnam as a nation-state is positioned as weak, passive, and unable to forge its own sovereign standing in the world. Vietnam in these descriptions has become effeminized. What is even more interesting is how in the long excerpt above Duong uses ellipses to prove how the Vietnamese socialist state has crippled its citizens. These ellipses truncate the laundry list of injustices the new socialist republic of Vietnam imposes upon its citizens. The new communist state stymies individuals' growth and interaction with the world because they must focus on their day-to-day, hand-to-mouth existence. In this passage, she presents the infinite litany of the subjugating practices inherent in totalitarian control.

Living under a socialist state has more consequences than merely affecting the Vietnamese character, turning them into a bitter, pessimistic, and miserable people. These negative repercussions also extend beyond the people of the nation to contaminate their environment. The disrepair of Hang's surroundings is evidenced first locally at the community level, and then extends outward beyond the Vietnamese nation. In her own community she notes how in addition to the wear and tear of buildings' roofs with their "welter of gray and black spots" (102), that these structures were also "streaked with streams of rancid urine," which emitted an "overpowering" stench on hot days (103). Her environment is dilapidated, broken, unsanitary. On a return visit to Residence K,

where her loyal, communist bureaucrat Uncle Chinh used to live, she describes how the community had “aged” (174). Rather than simply remarking how a lack of money and resources infest the architecture of Vietnam, Hang narrates how “the main driveway was now scarred with bumps and potholes” and the “walls, faded dirty gray by rain and wind, were covered with obscene graffiti” (174). There “was something suffocating about that place, with its water pipes, cigarettes, old gasoline fires, burned sawdust, and the stench of the garbage that lay around the houses” (174). Not only does a lack of resources – monetary and material – begin to affect the day-to-day existence of those in Residence K, a former hamlet, but also these deficiencies infest the community’s residents with a lackadaisical attitude when it comes to repairing their own village. Nonchalance, disrespect, and the lack of choice to remedy their squalid daily lives have permeated the Vietnamese nation, as far as Hang is concerned.

However, these descriptors do not just apply to her community, or even simply the Vietnamese nation. While aboard the train to visit her supposedly-gravenly-ill Uncle Chinh, Hang notices how this infestation is not particular to Vietnam alone. Rather, it seems to infuse itself into any socialist state. Without specifically disclosing where she is in her journey to Moscow but assuming that she is outside of Vietnam’s borders given that she has now been on the train for some time, she describes the train stations as she passes them. Having caught her attention, she notes how “[t]his one was the ugliest. I don’t know why, but each time I stopped here I felt suffocated. These vulgar, anarchic forms seemed threatening, like some omen of future trouble” (165). This feeling of suffocation, of strangulation, when immersed amongst these ugly, putrid symbols of

cultural life has been extended beyond the Vietnamese nation. Now, it infects any nation whose foundation is rooted in socialist ideology. It even seeps into Russia, the motherland herself. While walking in a park in Moscow, Hang tells us that,

It was a modest park compared to those in most Russian towns, but there was something strange about it. It was in such a state of neglect that it looked as if the gardeners had abandoned themselves to drink. The trees, the grass, the flowers, the shrubs, everything grew helter-skelter. The foliage on the trees was so dense and untrimmed that it hung down in huge green umbrellas. Vines wrapped themselves around the tree trunks, and tufts of grass pushed their way through the pebbled paths. Clumps of moss and ferns invaded pink-and-white marble tubs that had once brimmed with red flowers. (228)

The description of the chaotic foliage in this Russian park echoes how Hang describes the cemetery where her Aunt Tam is to be buried. “It was a shambles, a chaos of wood and stone grave markers. Pineapple bushes and hedges of rattan grew wild around the edge of the cemetery, and the neglected tombs were smothered by weeds and wild flowers” (251). Not only do the people of Vietnam feel strangled, like Hang does, but even the foliage in socialist states begins to strangle other forms of life out – the vines that choke tree trunks, the pineapple bushes that grow wild create an image of chaos, havoc. Given this dedication to depicting such “natural” scenes of chaotic growth, one can assume that this is something new to the Vietnamese state. Prior to the establishment of their communist government, Hang implies that there was once order, which is something to be revered. Now, there is not.

In describing the cemetery where Hang is to bury her Aunt Tam, we can see how this wild “chaos of wood and stone” and weeds came into being. The younger generation

neglected to take the proper care to tend to their ancestors graves. This neglect is in stark contrast to former values and traditions of demonstrating filial piety. As Neil L.

Jamieson explains in *Understanding Vietnam*:

Family relationships were models for social organization. Both child-rearing practices and formal education emphasized learning to behave properly toward other family members. First and foremost, children were taught filial piety (*hieu*), to obey and respect and honor their parents. Children were made to feel keenly that they owed parents a moral debt (*on*) so immense as to be unpayable. A child was supposed to try to please his or her parents all the time and in every way, to increase their comfort, to accede to all their wishes, to fulfill their aspirations, to lighten their burden of work and of worry, and to comply with their wishes in all matters, great and small. From everyday life and from several thousand years of history, youngsters were bombarded with exemplars of children who “knew *hieu*.” The parent-child relationship was at the very core of Vietnamese culture, dominating everything else. (16-7)

Further, “A primary obligation of *hieu* was to provide male descendants to perpetuate the cult of the ancestors” (Jamieson 27). Part of this perpetuation of the “cult of the ancestors” includes the obligation to tend their ancestors graves and shrines. Given that Hang is the only living descendant of her Aunt Tam, this obligation has fallen to her, rather than to an oldest son as tradition demands. However, with the state of disrepair and the concomitant feelings of disregard engendered by the socialist state, ancestors’ graves are subsumed by unwieldy natural growth – weeds, rattan, pineapple bushes, and so forth. This overgrowth and the apathy apparent in the younger generation points to how there is now no longer a rigid and respected cultural life. Rather there is only a death-in-life kind of existence.

Confucian values fall apart in *Paradise*. Hang's family has been disunited since Uncle Chinh forced her father Ton into exile. Ton was exiled because he was seen as an "exploiter" (22), which ultimately led him to suicide, for he "could stand hunger, thirst, even cold. But not shame" (80). Having grown up without a father, our protagonist illuminates that as a result of the political change that resulted from the Vietnamese revolution she, like her Vietnamese compatriots, is fatherless in the "fatherland" (210), Vietnam. Due to the injustices forcibly laid upon the Vietnamese people through socialist ideology and doctrine, old traditions, a former sense of national pride, have died. Now, its citizens are starving – not just due to the lack of food; they are also starving for their culture that once was, but is no longer. Socialism has effectively killed the father – order, traditionally-inspired values and practices – of the fatherland. Now, Vietnam – its government, its people, and its way of cultural life – is in the hands of a distant mother Russia, a feminine figure that fails to care for her compatriots in the Soviet bloc. Given these representations of failure in the socialist system, it is not hard to imagine why such anti-communist rhetoric would appeal to American audiences, for it solidifies mythic constructions of the West – the US – as superior, as stronger, as a provider, all while painting its adversaries who support communist doctrine as weak, lacking, and miserable.

Portraying post-war Vietnam in such a way, a state that breeds misery and apathy, directly appeals to an audience that shares the same views on socialist doctrine, ideology, and states. An American audience, one that values a free market economy and democracy and one that champions the individual over the social, then, would be particularly drawn to Duong's anti-communist rhetoric. This is especially evident when

one considers her popularity in American readership over her other compatriots. Her writing has been heralded as “daring” by the *New York Times* (*Paradise* back cover), and *Paradise* has been called a “literary jewel dripping with political nitroglycerine” by *Entertainment Weekly* (back cover). *Time Asia* calls Duong “the most important chronicler of [Vietnam’s] disillusionment” (*Memories* back cover). With such accolades, we can see that espousing vehement protestations against socialist states, as she does, earns her a prominent and privileged position in the American literary marketplace. Ultimately, given her political stance as depicted in her fiction, Duong’s voice is heard more readily than others, particularly those who support the communist regime in Vietnam like Dang Thuy Tram.¹¹

Cultural Traumatization of the American Nation in Losing Vietnam

In *How Modernity Forgets* Paul Connerton notes how cultural amnesia is just as important in shaping how one thinks about one’s own nation as it is in the sharing of common narratives amongst a nation’s populace. “A shared amnesia, a collective forgetfulness, Renan asserted, was at least as essential for what we now consider to be a nation as is the invocation of common memories: ‘Forgetting’, he declared, ‘I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation’” (49). An example of a narrative that is often forgotten, excluded, or silenced is one that proposes the Vietnam War was an imperialist venture on behalf of the United States. Another type of narrative that is often forgotten is one that expressly challenges the notion that war is a

¹¹ Dang’s diary will be explored in Chapter Four.

masculine adventure, an adventure that stages a masculine bildungsroman where boys are finally initiated into manhood through the act of war. This shared amnesia – the forgetfulness that excludes narratives like these – cultivates and perpetuates certain national mythologies. One such mythology that gets repeated is one that claims that the loss of the Vietnam War was the first national loss of an American military enterprise. Given this false distinction,¹² the Vietnam War is remembered as one that is laden with communal, national suffering and trauma. The loss of the war is remembered as one that is experienced on a national scale, not solely an individual one. While this may be true, for there is evidence of expressions of national grief, especially in the erection of memorials, what this communal trauma denotes is a common narrative, one that excludes and begets forgetting just as much as it seeks to come to terms with the tragic past.

Selling over fifty thousand copies within the first six months of its publication (Wimmer 109), Myra MacPherson's *Long Time Passing: Vietnam and the Haunted Generation* details how the Vietnam War and its legacy has haunted the generation that was asked to fight it.¹³ One could understand how MacPherson's text would have such a

¹² Don Ringnalda takes this notion to task, which shall be explored shortly.

¹³ Critics give a mixed-review of this text. Adi Wimmer calls it "outstanding," since it "for the first time [provides] the different perspectives of many segments of the Vietnam War generation" (108). In a scathing review, V. Keith Fleming, Jr. claims that *Long Time Passing* fails on multiple fronts: its research is weak (168), it is a product of journalism rather than history (167), it will rapidly become outdated since its only value is that it is a "period piece" (167), and that MacPherson does not explain her methodology behind her interviewing practices (168). Much to Fleming, Jr.'s chagrin, I would suppose, Rachael McLennan notes how this text is not just a "period piece" (Fleming, Jr. 167). "Originally published in 1984," McLennan writes, "with a postscript added in 1993 and now a new introduction written in November 2001, these amendments to the text underline the continuing need to reassess the role that the Vietnam War has played in shaping present-day America, as well as showing the unhealed scars that continue to blemish America's national consciousness" (160). According to McLennan, the book demonstrates that the war's legacy continues to shape American foreign policy, namely through detailing the lesson that our contemporary wars should not highlight casualties or provide extensive media coverage of the conflict as it is occurring, and that American wars should be winnable (160-1).

widespread appeal because it demonstrates how a collective American “we” (Eyerman, Alexander, and Breese xiii) has been traumatized by the Vietnam War. Eyerman, Alexander, and Breese advocate that, “Rather than denial, repression, and working through, [collective trauma] is a matter of symbolic construction and framing, of creating a narrative and moving along from there. A ‘we’ must be constructed via narrative and coding, and it is this collective identity that experiences and confronts the danger” (xiii). In other words, the Vietnam War stained America with an “indelible mark” (Alexander et al. 1) that effectively traumatized the nation, both for participants and nonparticipants in the war alike. MacPherson advocates that “we” Americans need “[e]nough distance so that we can begin to erase our collective amnesia over the Vietnam War. Enough distance so that we can begin to heal the wounds of our nation’s most troubled decade of war” (7). For MacPherson, the war induced a collective amnesia about the event among American citizens, one spurred by a desire to repress and deny the trauma inflicted upon the American nation. Before these repressive and denying tendencies can take place, however, one must acknowledge that the American nation suffered a severe “wound” with the loss of the Vietnam War, a trauma with long-lasting effects.

MacPherson describes how one veteran, Terry McConnell, attended a veterans’ reunion week in November 1982 for the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. In an attempt to finally welcome the soldiers home, something that was not done when they rotated back to the World initially, a few former Marines “liberated a hotel’s American flag and flagpole” and erected it at the monument (607). When visitors came to visit the memorial, McConnell instructed them to “touch the flag”

and then he would tell them aloud: “Welcome home. [...] Welcome home. The war is over” (607). MacPherson, in articulating how this national trauma lingers, responds to McConnell’s statement:

Only it is not over. As much as we yearn to put it behind us, we cannot get over all the pain and divisions it caused. Vietnam is there in the memories of the generation asked to fight it. Men in wheelchairs and on crutches, or those who remember the war too well in their nightmares, live with Vietnam daily. So do mothers and fathers who keep their dead sons’ pictures on their pianos. Its effect is felt throughout our country, whose economy and faith in government were shaken. (607)

The language she uses here is telling. Not only does the trauma of the war extend outward to those who were not asked to fight it, but were affected by it anyway – the parents of this 1960s and 1970s generation, but it also extends to affect adversely the entire American population. It had the power to “shake[]” the entire nation, causing “ambiguous moral, political, and personal conclusions” (608) that refuse to be rectified. This remains an open wound for the nation. What is perhaps most telling, however, is how she invokes familial language. To bridge the generation gap, she does not speak of World War Two and Vietnam War veterans in a dichotomous fashion as other scholars typically do (e.g.: Milton J. Bates),¹⁴ but she speaks about “mothers,” “fathers,” and “sons.” In this way she scripts US citizens as a part of a collective American family. This family was effectively torn apart by the trauma of the war, for the Vietnam War had the power to divide the nation politically, generationally, and in gendered terms yet again.

¹⁴ For further information on how scholars write about the generation gap, please refer to Milton J. Bates’ chapter “The Generation War” in *The Wars We Took to Vietnam: Cultural Conflict and Storytelling*.

In essence, this conflict induced a “family neurosis” on a national scale (12). Jacqueline Austin in a review of MacPherson’s work asserts that MacPherson’s text is an exercise in bearing witness to the long- and wide-ranging effects of the war on the American nation. Interviewing so widely and compiling this information into such an “enormous book” (9), allows MacPherson to “put[] her snapshots into an album in which the entire generation is perceived as one complex, genetically traceable family” (9).

Reputed critics of trauma studies often situate their theories within the confines of psychoanalysis, as though traumatic events only have an impact on a person’s psyche in a disruptive and fracturing way (Caruth, Felman and Laub, LaCapra, Leys). Cathy Caruth, the pioneer in literary trauma studies, in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* asserts that trauma “is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4, emphasis original). Thus, for Caruth, trauma resides within the individual’s, the survivor’s, mind, and the experience functions in a repetitive, unavoidable way, a way that resists narration due to the unknowability of the event. Other theorists have expanded upon this notion of individual suffering to include social realms. Susan J. Brison argues that even though traumatic experience originates in the psyche, coping with this divisive experience depends on being “remade in connection with others” (xi). E. Ann Kaplan extends this social rootedness of trauma drama further when she writes that “most people encounter trauma through the media, which is why focusing on so-called mediatized trauma is important” (2). Although she bases her discussions of trauma

in film studies, I propose to explore how literary accounts of trauma yield similar results. This rootedness of the individual in trauma lay theory presents its own problems. As such, it does not take into consideration oppressive cultural factors that function on their own as long-ranging traumatic events. As Alexander et al argues in his introduction to *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, “Imagination is intrinsic to the very process of representation. It seizes upon an inchoate experience from life, and forms it, through association, condensation, and aesthetic creation, into some specific shape” (9).

In sociological studies, other authors have begun to define and explore the parameters of “cultural trauma,” which Alexander et al define as something that “occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (1). In light of this definition, we can see that this is precisely what happened to the American nation at the conclusion of the Vietnam War. Americans often associate the end of the war with the fall of Saigon on 30 April 1975, as opposed to the signing of the Paris Peace Accords on 27 January 1973, largely due to the mediatized memorializing process of the fall of South Vietnam’s capital. Given that the US government still “persisted in its commitment to Thieu” (Herring 325), the current president of South Vietnam, post the Paris agreements, most Americans did not view this treaty signing as the end of the war. Rather, that epiphany came with the fall of South’s capital. Many Americans felt distressed at the news. As Stephen A. Howard, an American veteran of the war, states, “I picked up the *Washington Post* and it said Saigon had fell. I said, ‘What the F was I there for?’ I mean what was

the whole purpose?" (Terry 127). These feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and a profound sense of futile and wasted efforts in this military venture quickly spread to the American public, for this was the first war that America lost on a national scale, or so it was, and still largely is, believed.

Don Ringnalda in *Fighting and Writing the Vietnam War* contests the notion that this war was Americans first failed military endeavor. In a comically sarcastic way, he writes:

Vietnam didn't change Americans; it showed them who they always were. *But almost everywhere one turns to "learn" about the Vietnam War, one reads that this war was unique, somehow outside American history.* It's a familiar litany: We're told that the Vietnam War was the only one we've ever lost, or at least didn't win. (The War of 1812 never happened? The Korean War was a mirage?) We're told that it was the only war in which there was no front, and the soldiers couldn't tell friend from foe. (The Philippine Insurrection didn't happen?) We're told that the Vietnam War was a uniquely evil war, in that it involved the massive slaughter of civilians. (Dresden was not firebombed? Hiroshima was not obliterated? During the war with Mexico, General Winfield Scott didn't have to cringe because he didn't see American soldiers commit atrocities "to make Heaven weep"? The massacres on the island of Samar never happened? Wounded Knee? Sand Creek? Mystic River?) We're told that it was the only war after which the soldiers weren't welcomed home with honor and caring commitment. (Daniel Shays and many other farmers didn't lose their farms to foreclosure because they couldn't pay back taxes accrued while they were fighting the war for independence?)

I use parentheses to make a point: much of American history is tucked away between them – if indeed it was even recorded so that it can be tucked away. The material camouflaged by the parentheses is buried under sensational headlines and thirty-second "news" stories. Of the single child dramatically rescued from drowning and the ten thousand left to starve slowly, the former always gets our attention. *And so it goes with the fighting-writing memories of Vietnam and other wars; we respond to nostalgic caricatures but overlook the parentheses.* (206-7, emphasis mine)

I quote Ringnalda at length because he makes an excellent point especially in connection with what gets memorialized in the wake of a prolonged traumatic event. How the historical and culturally discursive matter is articulated to a large populace (i.e.: the American nation) renders how it will be remembered. There are various mediating factors involved here. Ringnalda names news outlets. However, I would contend that literary forces are also at play, especially texts authored by women authors who were not participants in the war. In contrast to those women who served in the war,¹⁵ these homefront authors of the 1980s, namely Myra MacPherson with *Long Time Passing: Vietnam and the Haunted Generation*, Jayne Anne Phillips with *Machine Dreams*, and Susan Fromberg Schaeffer with *Buffalo Afternoon*, contribute to the revitalization of American manhood characteristic of this decade (Jeffords).

Susan Jeffords in *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* asserts that the bounty of texts that appeared on the film and literary scene of the 1980s cast veterans as:

emblems of an unjustly discriminated masculinity. Through this image of the veteran, American manhood is revived, regenerated principally by a rejection of the feminine and sexuality; reborn and purified, the veteran takes his place as an experienced leader and spokesperson for a conjointly revived morality and social politics that will regenerate America itself. (116)

By reaffirming American masculinity in these narratives, this gendered focus is solidified, further expelling women from these narratives, imaginings, and articulations

¹⁵ Authors such as Lynda Van Devanter and Winnie Smith shall be explored in the second and fourth chapters of this project.

of experience. Even though *Long Time Passing*, *Machine Dreams*, and *Buffalo Afternoon* include round, young women characters and sometimes even feature them as their protagonists, these authorial choices do not undermine Jeffords proposition. In fact, each of these texts situate their respective female protagonists as metaphor. Krista Ratcliffe in *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness* argues that metaphor functions as a trope that inhibits rhetorical listening. “[T]his trope invites readers to assume that one member of a group represents (i.e., is practically identical to) all other members; further, it invites readers to commence down the slippery slope to unfair generalizations and, worse, to stereotyping” (92). Ultimately, the use of metaphor supports a rhetoric of “dysfunctional silence” (92). As a metaphor for the American nation, these women protagonists efface women’s personal experience and involvement with the war to stand in for the cultural trauma imposed upon the American nation.

To further elaborate on what I mean by cultural trauma, I rely on Alexander et al’s formulation of the term in conjunction with Ron Eyerman, Jeffrey C. Alexander, and Elizabeth Butler Breese’s clarification of this phenomenon as they present it in *Narrating Trauma: On the Impact of Collective Suffering*. As Eyerman, Alexander, and Breese note, “The construction of collective trauma [also synonymically referred as cultural trauma] is often fuelled by individual experiences of pain and suffering, but it is the threat to collective rather than individual identity that defines the kind of suffering at stake. The pivotal question becomes, not ‘who did this to me?’ but ‘what group did this to us?’” (xii). In expanding the contraction of the individual to the social, we can see how this is pronounced in memorialization processes of mourning and healing in the American

nation post-war, particularly in the erection of the Vietnam Veterans memorial in Washington, D.C. Karal Ann Marling and Robert Silberman claim that the Wall (the memorial in Washington) did precisely that; its erection was an effort “to transcend ‘the tragedy of the war’” (10). While this memorial inaugurated a healing process for the American nation, it, at the same time, worked to substantiate a certain narrative about the war: that the Vietnam War was a man’s enterprise, and his alone’s failed endeavor. Paul Connerton explains the power of memorials in how they advocate practices of both remembering and forgetting. “Many memorials are, admittedly, powerful memory places. Yet their effect is more ambiguous than this statement might imply. For the desire to memorialise is precipitated by a fear, a threat, of cultural amnesia” (*How Modernity Forgets* 27). These processes of remembering and forgetting are inextricably linked, for as he states:

The relationship between memorial and forgetting is reciprocal: the threat of forgetting begets memorials and the construction of memorials begets forgetting. If giving monumental shape to what we remember is to discard the obligation to remember, that is because memorials permit only some things to be remembered and, by exclusion, cause others to be forgotten. Memorials conceal the past as much as they cause us to remember it. This is evidently so with war memorials. (*How Modernity Forgets* 29)

In presenting huge slabs of black granite that jut up out of the ground like a grave coming home to roost, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial bespeaks of a tragedy so severe that it has the power to traumatize the entire nation. Unsurprisingly and logically, the Wall is covered with men’s names. Women’s names, along with their contributions to the war, are so limited they might as well be not seen at all. This rhetoric of exclusion – writing

women out of the war – is further reinforced by the Wall’s accompanying statue The Three Soldiers, which features three men dressed and armed in grunt attire. While The Three Soldiers does privilege differing racial representation by having a black and possibly Chicano soldier standing each beside a white soldier, women are still conspicuously absent.

Jeffrey C. Alexander, in yet another critical text, *Trauma: A Social Theory*, advocates that “Intellectuals, artists, politicians, and social movement leaders create narratives about social suffering. Projected as ideologies that create new ideal interests, trauma narratives can trigger significant repairs in the civil fabric. They can also instigate new rounds of social suffering” (2). Naming the Wall as a place of healing, of moving beyond the Vietnam War so the nation can begin to rebuild itself again in accordance to old mythologies (such as the idea that tomorrow will always be brighter than yesterday or even today and bring promising rewards for those who work diligently for it), is an articulation of this kind of repair work that Alexander names. However, the exclusion of women from the masculinist discourse of the war exemplifies the “new rounds of social suffering” that these trauma narratives instigate. In relation to how some voices are reaffirmed, and in this case remasculinized, Alexander further notes that in the wake of the “cultural construction of collective trauma” (2):

Some stories are repressed by ruthless states, while others are materially sustained. Some stories are enriched by long-standing background representations; others seem so counterintuitive *vis-à-vis* established traditions as scarcely to be believed. Some trauma narratives address homogenous audiences, others face fragmented and divided audiences; for others, there is nobody listening at all. (3)

Women who participated in the war in whatever capacity, often experience this repression, disbelief, and silencing. Men's narratives, especially those that adhere to conventional standards of the genre of Vietnam War literature, experience the opposite: their stories are materially sustained by the multitudinous representations of their stories in film, literature, iconic photographs, historical writing, and so forth. What is surprising is that women authors who write about the conflict, but did not experience it firsthand, also play into this substantiation of *men's* narratives. They do so by writing metaphorically, focusing on the wounding of the American nation, and exposing the generation gap that further divides the American nation. By emphasizing the social over the individual, the Vietnam War becomes not only a story about the injustices inflicted upon American men, but also those imposed on the American nation. In such a formulation, women's voices are further subsumed by the cultural rhetoric of the war, one that privileges men's experiences over women's. In other words, MacPherson, Phillips, and Schaeffer imbue men with the narrative agency to articulate how the war ought to be remembered, for as Alexander states, "The truth of a cultural script depends not on its empirical accuracy, but on its symbolic power and enactment" (4).

The Injured Family as National Allegory

Stating that the Vietnam War induced a "family neurosis" as MacPherson does in *Long Time Passing*, conflates two distinct groups – the family and the inhabitants of a nation – in a particularly troublesome way. Families are often connoted to be tightly-knit, small groups, ones who share common history and ancestry, which in turn produces

strong emotional ties amongst the members of that group. National citizens, on the other hand, are not so generous. Elaine Scarry in “The Difficulty of Imagining Other Persons” states that even imagining other persons who share common space with oneself is a difficult and extraordinary task, even when they belong to the same nation. This is not to mean that a nation’s citizens do not share a bond, but that bond is not as tightly held as a family’s. Benedict Anderson explains how nationalism knits citizens together when he writes,

The nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. [...] It is imagined as *sovereign* because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm. [...] Finally, it is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. (7, emphasis original)

Thus, the bond a nation’s citizens hold is more nebulous in its construction. However, when MacPherson conflates these two notions in calling all Americans a part of a larger family, she indicates that the “indelible mark” (Alexander et al. 1) made upon Americans’ lives with the loss of the war is a communal one.

For MacPherson, this communal trauma affects the entire, “haunted” Vietnam generation. It begins within the family and extends outward. To explore how this trauma originates within the family, MacPherson interviews several veterans’ wives who have had to seek counseling due to their marital difficulties that have arisen from being married to a Vietnam veteran. Often, these women feel that they and their traumas are

not recognized by their husbands and by the larger American public, which only exacerbates the problem:

Phyllis is more than a little disgruntled at the treatment men get in the Vet Centers. [...] “They build this world for them [the male veterans] there and work on *their* problems. *Well, what about ours?* I am tired of hearing about what these guys are going through. I went to a wives’ group and I walked away worse than when I went in.

“One of the women was concerned about her sex life and the attitude was: ‘Well, you shouldn’t be talking about that right now.’ That somehow we’re selfish when we talk about *our* needs, our *children’s* needs. Don’t they think we’ve suffered any?”

It’s a continuing theme of feeling left out, a cry for someone to listen to her. “It’s ‘They count and *only* them. Like the ball games. Joe would like to join, but they say, ‘No, it’s only for them.’ I feel the family should be brought in more. I go to the women’s groups, but I don’t need six women saying, ‘My husband did this’ or ‘My husband did that.’ I want *answers*.

[...] Phyllis is in a new group of wives. “Now I talk with some wives and it’s uncanny. A new woman came in, doesn’t know me from Adam. It is the same story of my life. I wonder, How could you have all the symptoms the same if there wasn’t some common cause? Stress is one thing, but this is so similar: unfaithfulness, antiauthoritarian, not caring about anything, not being able to hold jobs. From all over, I hear the same story.” (262, emphasis original)

Not only does Phyllis lament that no attention is being paid to the women who are married to these men who no longer can function healthily at home or in society, but she also points to how these feelings of frustration and trauma are experienced on a communal level. The “new woman” she references “uncann[ily]” bears great resemblance to her own life and experiences at home. Ultimately, she seeks “*answers*,” and pleads for recognition and listeners to their own problems. Unfortunately, no matter how many veterans’ wives groups she joins, she still is not afforded any. These groups,

though they are intended to help these veterans' wives, end up reinforcing the male-centered story: "My husband did this' or 'My husband did that.'" What's more, it is the very women who seek help that reaffirm this male-directed focus, since it is *they* who share their stories about their husbands. This shifting of attention away from the women's problems to rationalizing, complaining, or simply explaining their husbands' behavior only further solidifies the real issue: the war is viewed as a traumatic event that happened to *men*, which then expands outward to affect the family, until eventually the entire nation is enveloped and implicated in this traumatic event. In the meantime, no space or time is afforded to these women who "want *answers*" like Phyllis.

One reason as to why veterans' wives have been largely ignored or forgotten in the cultural context of the war is because they are cast as caretakers. These women are not permitted room to speak to war's horrors simply because their main function is to repair the broken man, as often expressed in American patriarchal society. As Sandra Lee Bartky argues, "Girls learn 'to find satisfaction in the satisfaction of others, and to place their needs second in the case of a conflict'" (100). This is a particularly tenuous internalization when confronted with a wounded man, especially if that man happens to be in an intimate relationship with the woman who has internalized this prescription. Bartky further explains the problems this creates when she writes about how women feel they must tend to wounds:

this is a large part of what it is to provide someone with emotional support. But this means that in one standard scenario of heterosexual intimacy, the man appears to his female caregiver as vulnerable and injured. Fear and insecurity: for many men, these are the offstage companions of competitive displays of

masculinity, and they are aspects of men's lives that women know well. To the woman who tends him, this fellow is not only no colossus who bestrides the world, but he may bear little resemblance to the patriarchal oppressor of feminist theory. (114)

Expected to play the role of caregiver – to her husband, to her children, to the financial responsibilities of maintaining a household, and to upkeeping said household in carrying out the daily chores of cooking and cleaning – these women are supposed to relinquish their own needs in tending to themselves. As Candis M. Williams explains in MacPherson's text, "The partner is not considered to have special problems herself, nor problems related to her husband's poor adjustment. In addition, women are products of a culture that views them as the supportive care-givers; they can often be conflicted about seeking help" (266). This performative situating of woman-as-caregiver ultimately imposes a silencing of sorts upon her, which ends up refocusing the spotlight on male veterans' experiences, reifying their position of having *the* privileged voice to speak to Vietnam War experiences and the trauma those experiences produce.

Even though wives' groups have sprung out of the aftermath of the war, albeit in quite small numbers, these groups only provide them with one venue in which they can speak of their own trauma. Often, this is not enough, for the ones that need to learn of these women's "problems" are their husbands themselves. Focused so intensely upon their own war experiences, these male veterans often do not want to hear their wives' bemoaning. These veterans have internalized their pain to such an extent that they feel they cannot talk to their wives about their *own* problems. "I don't think he can look to me for that kind of relief," one veteran's wife says. "It has to come from other veterans"

(MacPherson 276). Not able to fulfill the role of caregiver adequately and unable to speak about their own pain, these women are reluctantly forced into a position of silence, reluctantly because, as evidenced in the interviews with these wives' groups, they obviously yearn for someone to talk to, and these groups provide them with a shallow and ultimately unhelpful venue in which to do so.

Reaffirming American Mythology

Certain texts about the Vietnam War tend to reinvigorate American myths. This is particularly troublesome because, as John Hellman explains in *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* "Myths enable a nation to cohere by reconciling, in the ambiguous relations of narrative, conflicts that its people cannot solve in the sharply delineated realm of analytical thought" (ix). In other words, myths supply a fabricated gloss not rooted in reality where more introspective thought and consideration should take place. As such, mythologies have debilitating effects especially upon subjugated peoples. For example, Hellman notes how the myth of the ever-expanding American frontier provided the impetus for imperial conquest: "positioned between Europe and the Orient, [America] appeared destined to expand westward to the Pacific before completing in Asia the progress that had begun there thousands of years earlier" (5). Thus, the frontier myth becomes the justification for conquest, and the consequent obliteration of peoples and their homelands. While the frontier myth is one that poses fatal threats to marginalized peoples around the globe, Phillips and Schaeffer both reify other American mythologies that have just as disastrous effects. Particularly, Phillips positions war as a cultural

inheritance, one that serves as a rite of passage into manhood and American citizenship. She also reaffirms the notion that war experiences are a man's enterprise mainly by using Danner, the main female character of the novel, as a metaphor for the wounded American nation. Schaeffer upholds other American mythologies, however. In *Buffalo Afternoon*, readers (re-)encounter the idea that America is the land of fortune and with a bit of hard (cathartic) work a better tomorrow is just on the horizon. Schaeffer also reifies and validates troublesome stereotypes of American women. But, perhaps what is most distressing about this novel is that she also portrays Li, the only rounded Vietnamese character of the text, in a cartoonish, exoticized way that verges on the obscene. Scripting Li in this way suggests that the American melting pot can and does work successfully, even though Li never actually immigrates to the United States except in a phantasmagoric way.

Jayne Anne Phillips has been critically acclaimed since her debut with the publication of *Black Tickets* (1979), a short story collection (Brosi 18, Willis "Seduced" 22, Adams 367). That acclaim only grew with the publication of *Machine Dreams*, her first novel and one that investigates the disparaging effects of the Vietnam War on a nuclear family set in Bellington, West Virginia. With her first novel's publication, Carolyn Hazlett Adams claims that Phillips had "arrived" on the literary scene (367). Meredith Sue Willis calls this text "excellent" ("Witness" 49). Willis in a separate article and George Brosi both note how *Machine Dreams* was a *New York Times* best seller and nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1984, the year of the novel's publication (Willis "Seduced" 22, Brosi 19). Further, *Machine Dreams* was named as

one of the twelve best books of the year by *The New York Times Book Review* (Brosi 19, Willis “Seduced” 22).

Critics tend to read *Machine Dreams* along various lines. Some note how this novel contributes to and deviates from Appalachian regionalist fiction (Adams, Gaskins, Robertson, Bronfen). Others discuss how Phillips constructs Danner to challenge 1950s and 1960s rigid and confining notions of women’s femininity and subjecthood (Ahokas). Catherine Houser contends that Danner is “the character who is discovered missing in action” as opposed to her brother Billy, who actually does become MIA as a result of his wartime experiences in Vietnam (39). For Houser, this alienation allows Danner to “thrive” because she refuses to view herself as a victim (39). Still other critics claim that this novel is one about redemption and reconciliation of the American nation with its traumatic legacy and its grave loss in the Vietnam War (Douglass, Price). Amid these various readings, one idea becomes clear: scholars tend to couch this novel as one concerned primarily with the Vietnam War. This is quite strange, given that only the last three chapters are devoted to the conflict. The remainder of the text, and the majority of it, focus on Mitch’s wartime experiences in the Pacific theatre of World War Two, and his family’s relationships, maneuverings, and perspectives in post-WWII America. In fact, by use of first person and third person narration, the reader intimately comes to know the four central characters of the text: Mitch, the husband and father; Jean, the wife and mother; Danner, the eldest child; and Billy, her younger brother.

Jayne Anne Phillips admits in an interview with David M. Stanton that this text is not “a book *about* Vietnam” (43, emphasis original). Rather, it is a novel that is

preoccupied in “trac[ing] what led to Vietnam” (43). Given the long chronological trajectory of the book, ranging from the Depression to 1972, this statement makes sense. I agree with Willis when she names Phillips as a “witness” simply because she “writes best about what she has witnessed” (“Witness” 50), which includes the cultural grief and trauma experienced at home due to the American failures in Vietnam War. Also, I concur with Price when she claims that Phillips invokes a trope of mourning to expose a sense of the loss of self in contemporary society. Diverging somewhat from these views, however, I argue that *Machine Dreams* works in two different, yet related, ways. Phillips’ novel calls attention to the idea that war is an American cultural inheritance. Second, by focusing on the reactions to the war at home, women authors like Phillips who only experienced the war at home, demonstrate how this war had the power to affect all American citizens of the time. In so doing, these women authors further exclude women from the masculinist rhetoric of the war, for the protagonist, Danner, functions as a metaphor for the traumatized and torn American nation, thereby effacing herself in this very metaphorical act.

Unlike many scholars, I do not read this text as one concerned with reconciliation. By the novel’s end, Danner, suffering the emotional turmoil of experiencing her younger brother’s death, is not reconciled. The final chapter glimpses into Danner’s fantastical daydreaming of Billy and Danner’s childhood days: Billy make-believing he is an airplane pilot and Danner pretending she is stalking a Pegasus-like creature. These reveries in the past culminate in the assumedly bloody destruction of Billy. His plane starts to go down, and she narrates, “So gentle it sounds like a song, and the song goes on

softly as the plane falls, year after year, to earth” (331). This daydreaming in an imagined past ultimately makes her face the horrid probability of her brother’s death. Billy is presumed dead because he “jump[ed]” out of the helicopter he was in when it was hit by the VC (293). Even though Danner, and the reader, can presume that Billy died as a result of this action, the situation is not that easy. Billy is classified as Missing in Action (MIA), which does not allow his body, or his memory, to be redeemed by his family. Thus, this story is not one about reconciliation or redemption. Rather, it is a tale that exposes inherent problems within metaphorical writing, the generation gap, and patriotism.

Danner, after learning of her brother’s tragedy, remains in a liminal space. Pirjo Ahokas, in noting how she seeks out information about Billy’s disappearance and continually does not find any of real value, claims that this evidences how “women are not at any point included as part of the multiracial collectivity in Vietnam” (78). While this is true, I would further assert that Danner is also excluded from the narrative itself. By representing the disruption the war caused at home through the MIA status of Billy, her individual reactions to and experiences of the war are eclipsed by the metaphorical nature of Danner’s experiences. In my reading, the trauma of the war extends outward in a set of concentric circles. The loss of her brother first affects Danner, which we can see with the alteration of her behavior. Instead of being faithful to one boyfriend, as she had been in the past with Riley, she now “started seeing veterans” because “they knew the subtle facts about the military, and they were angry” like she was (320). These debilitating effects spread outward to her family. Mitch blames himself for not

pressuring Billy to defect to Canada, as Danner initially suggested he do (323). The loss of Billy also affects their Bellington community, leaving Kato, Billy's girlfriend, with little choice but to marry a much older man and then become immediately pregnant by him. In other words, Billy's loss prompts Kato to appropriate stereotypical gender norms that she normally would not have. These effects, we could imagine, could ripple outward until they affect the entire American nation, particularly since Danner is not the only one who has lost a family member to the war. Instead, she is one instance, one representative, for the thousands of families that have suffered such a trauma. Given that we can imagine multiple points of trauma erupting across the nation, it is understandable to assume that the entire nation would be traumatically and culturally affected by the war. Through the rippling effect of these concentric circles, Phillips presents a text that represents Americans traumatic experience of losing a war on a national level for the first time in the nation's history, so far as popular memory is concerned, for even though not all families tragically lost a member to the war, on a community- or even regionally-based level, each and every American either knows someone who did or can imagine what that kind of loss would be like.

A myth that this novel upholds asserts that war is an American inheritance, which can readily be seen in the novel's structure. First, this is not Billy's story. It is not centered on him or his experiences in Vietnam. Although his status of being MIA creates the central crisis in the book, it is his family's reactions to that news that presents the major problem Phillips exposes within its pages. A larger part of that crisis is the idea that war is an American cultural inheritance, one in which men can prove their bravery

under duress and serve their nation heroically. Second, Billy gets these ideas from his father, Mitch. Even though Mitch is quite silent for the most part – he never speaks of his childhood or his experiences in the Pacific theatre of the Second World War to his family (103) – Billy still understands war as a man’s duty, even if it is imposed upon him by the draft. The progression of bequeathing military duty upon one’s son is shown when Billy wonders “if he’d ever sit across some room listening to his own kid and get scared” (264) should his future son also feel the imperative to join a war effort for the sake of his country. Finally, given the large sections devoted to each of the four Hampson family members, and by having the two men serve in their respective wars, Phillips demonstrates how war is an American cultural inheritance. Schaeffer makes a similar move in *Buffalo Afternoon*, since her novel traces the lives of three generations of an Italian immigrant family, the Bravados. Each of the Bravado men has served in one of America’s wars: Pietro, the grandfather was in World War Two; George, the father served in the Korean War; and Pete, the central character of the novel, enlisted and served in the Vietnam War. Given the impetus to join various war efforts for the sake of the country and to demonstrate one’s duty and patriotism for this adopted homeland, Schaeffer also scripts war as an American cultural inheritance and obligation.

Upholding a different myth, one that confirms participation in war as a man’s enterprise, Phillips constructs Danner as a metaphor for the wounded American nation. Initiated by the loss of her brother Billy in the war, Danner undergoes a “*sudden and rapid*” change, a trait that Piotr Sztompka names as a condition for exposing a cultural trauma (Alexander et al. 158, emphasis original). Her behavior alters when she begins to

express intense anger more often and when she starts to socialize with Vietnam veterans rather than her normal group of friends. By writing Danner in this way, she not only points to the cultural trauma the American nation endured in the late 1960s and 1970s, but she also is effectively written out of the story. Having Danner operate metaphorically does not permit her the freedom to express her individual reactions to losing her brother. Rather, she, like the rest of the nation, suffers from a vicarious trauma. Krista Ratcliffe in *Rhetorical Listening* notes how metaphors often work to stress identification, rather than to expose differences. This is a problem because when characters like Danner function metaphorically they emphasize the importance of similarity and not difference, which ultimately reinforces conventional narratives that privilege male voices. This reification of the masculinist discourse of the war further excludes women from the war's rhetoric – as participants, as part of the changing cultural atmosphere at home, and as ones who have lost loved ones in this violent conflict. Therefore, in writing metaphorically, Phillips effaces women's involvement and investment in the war by redirecting and reaffirming the focus on men's sacrifices in the conflict.

This redirection of focus, one that places male veterans and their experiences in the spotlight once again was even further supported by a national government agency. In order to complete *Machine Dreams*, Phillips received two National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) grants, one in 1978 and another in 1984 (Doherty 90). The federal funding of this project is important to consider because it supports a trend in the 1980s that was preoccupied with "restoring collective identity" of the American nation (Doherty 90). Margaret Doherty maintains that state-funded fiction, those financially supported by

NEA grants, had shifted in the 1980s. In the past, these NEA grants were awarded to authors who produced what was considered “high” art. However, in the 1980s, NEA grants were awarded to authors who wrote “minimalist” fiction because these writers appealed to wider, working- and middle-class, audiences. Given this shift to support minimalist writing, a genre arguably more accessible and comprehensible to lesser-educated readers (88, 93), state-funded fiction is mainly dominated and manipulated by market value and profits. In response to this shift, I question whether Phillips’ minimalist fiction in fact “restor[es]” collective national identity. While fiction like Phillips’ is interpreted as one that is concerned with exposing the cultural trauma the American nation sustained by the loss of the war would understandably be rather appealing to a larger literary market, as opposed to works that are considered more high-brow especially at this kairotic moment, I do not agree that Phillips’ work restores collective identity. Rather, *Machine Dreams* exposes the fissures and hauntings of the war’s disruption in the cultural and mythological logic of how Americans conceive of their nation and the war. This is particularly evident given that the novel ends in 1972, before the Paris Peace Accords were even signed, before the fall of Saigon, and before the erection of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in D.C. As far as Danner is concerned, the war has not ended, nor will it ever. By ending the novel at this historical moment, Phillips demonstrates how an intense and prolonged grief has descended upon the nation, one that does not show any signs of being ameliorated.

Schaeffer’s novel, in comparison to Phillips’, is more distressing, for it reaffirms troubling American mythologies that hold the power to further subjugate those who

reside in the American nation. Pietro, the grandfather who emigrated from Italy, positions the United States as a land of infinite opportunity and redemption from misery, a stark contrast to Duong's representation of Vietnam. After Mrs. Bravado goes to a fortune-teller, she and her husband decide to go to America. "And so Pietro Bravado was sent to America. His was the usual story, but then again, it was not. He did not expect to find streets of gold. He expected a hard, stony place where he would work until his hands bled, but with his blood, he would buy money and he would send for his family and together they would build a nest in the wilderness" (22). Coupling the myth that promises hard work will win an immigrant freedom and luxury with the frontier mythos of the wilderness, Pietro is certain that life in America will be much better than the one he currently has in Italy. This idea does not wane with time. Schaeffer even ends the novel reaffirming this misleading belief. Having returned to the World after a hard, distressing tour in Vietnam, Pete, Pietro's grandson, finds it most difficult to readjust to American civilian life. However, this is not to end badly for him. Speaking to his best friend and combat buddy, Pete says in the last lines of the novel:

"It's *afternoon*," Pete said. "It's buffalo afternoon for us, man. We're going to make it. It's the peaceful time. It's time to wander the fields and bring it all back home."

"A little late, but better than never, just like the parade," Sal said. "Yeah, it's buffalo afternoon for me. Hey, the sun's out."

"A little late, but not too shabby," Pete said. His eyes were moist but he was smiling. (535)

Awash with brilliant sunshine, even though the day was leaden, gray, and about to snow at any moment just prior to this conversation, this exchange that commemorates peace and reintegration into American society implies that if a traumatized veteran just works hard enough – cathartically, personally, and within one’s community – then he can become fully healed from his emotional scars. In this way, Schaeffer traces the hard work ethic originally applied to occupations to one that also has the power to heal psychologically and socially traumatized peoples. If only it were that easy.

If her depiction of what it takes for a man to heal himself of his own emotional traumas was not already enough, how she depicts women – American and Vietnamese alike – is even more troubling. The men of Pete’s rap group constantly fear that they are becoming like “a goddamn *woman!*” (345) simply because they are more observational about their surroundings now post-war. In order to control his temper, Pete resolves that he would “have to learn to be passive. He’d have to become like a woman” (417). These representations of American women as ones who are preoccupied with home décor and who are innately passive only serve to uphold debilitating gendered stereotypes. While this is problematic in its own way, what is most disturbing about this text is how Schaeffer constructs Li, her metaphor for Vietnamese women and even the Vietnamese nation.

Even though Philip K. Jason argues that “Schaeffer gives us a most ambitious representation of a Vietnamese character, making the young girl Li one of the narrative voices of the novel” (183), I would simply refute that claim. Susanne Carter also notes how this novel is “one of the most critically acclaimed” of Vietnam War fiction (17).

These laudatory praises are troublesome, not only in the novel's reaffirmation of American myths that claim this land is the benefactor of opportunity and progress and the beholder of bright tomorrows, but also in its racist construction of the only Vietnamese voice we get to hear in the text. Li is constructed as a caricature, a cartoon. When we first meet her she is a poor peasant-cum-prostitute. This, in and of itself, is an issue, for as Isabelle Thuy Pelaud notes in *This Is All I Choose to Tell: History and Hybridity in Vietnamese American Literature*, "The young prostitute is depicted as sweet and childlike, the tone of her voice light and unthreatening. She is eager to please her client" (129). In such a role, the Vietnamese woman's identity is erased, supplanted by the need to fulfill the desires of the white man. As a prostitute at the "car wash," Li meets Pete who likens her to Betty Boop (170, 171). After imposing self-exile because she becomes pregnant and does not want that disgrace of being an unmarried, soiled woman to affect her family, Li leaves her village and on the way adopts "a good and affectionate companion" (212): a monkey, which essentially scripts her as a Mowgli-like character, replete with ignorant barbarism. Eventually, she reunites with Pete who she had promised to find. She is motivated to join his world, his American culture, because "If one leaves one world, one must find another," she explains (153). "One cannot remain forever poised between two spheres. I had been the first to see the white men and I belonged with them, or so I believed" (153). This stalwartness to move forward implies notions of progress valued in American mythos. What's more, it negates the reality of subject positions of characters who occupy interstitial spaces, such as Mai in Lan Cao's

Monkey Bridge and Linda Hammerick in Monique Truong's *Bitter in the Mouth*.¹⁶

Instead, Li is positioned as the “model minority,”¹⁷ one who undisturbingly, willingly, and fully assimilates to American culture and identificatory practices. While these are all problems with how Li is constructed within the text, perhaps what is most upsetting is how she eventually turns into a mythical creature. In a somewhat dream/fugue state while at a veteran's dance, Pete imagines that there is a door that people can step through and become reincarnated into their own creature of choice. For the Americans, they take animal forms: a hawk, a hyena, a camel. But for Li, she becomes a kinaree, a mythical creature in which the upper-half of her body is a bare-chested woman, and the lower-half is a bird. She is also equipped with wings. At first, she becomes this creature by stepping through that magical door (525). However, she retains that form at the end of the text as well, whereas the other characters largely do not.¹⁸ As kinaree, Li adopts the form of an exoticized mythical creature, and as such reinforces the stereotype of the fetishized, erotic, and exotic Asian woman.

Writing women in this way – as the instantiation of the exotic, as metaphor, as submissive stereotype – only serves to reinforce the masculinist rhetoric of the war, for each of these women – Danner and Li – are only included in these texts to highlight the men's narratives they accompany. Further, in writing prescriptively in terms of gender

¹⁶ These Vietnamese-American characters will be further explored in Chapter Three.

¹⁷ See Viet Thanh Nguyen's *Race and Resistance* and Pelaud's *This Is All I Choose to Tell* for further discussion on the intricacies and problems inherent in this stereotype of Asian American peoples.

¹⁸ The Chief, the Native American grunt of the text is figured as the White Man, a mummified-type character who performs life-saving practices upon the men he cares about, bending bullet trajectories, supplying water for the severely dehydrated when no water resources are near, and so forth. He is revealed as the White Man at the end of the text. This construction is racially motivated as well in my reading of *Buffalo Afternoon*.

and in terms of how the war afflicted the American nation as a whole, these authors re-substantiate American mythologies, championing notions of reconciliation and redemption in the wake of a most-destructive war. As a result, authors like Phillips and Schaeffer try to persuade their audiences to adopt a blind patriotism, one fueled by believing in the American Dream. Even though Pelaud's project is concerned with Vietnamese-American literature, what she writes about the American Dream is apropos:

Some Vietnamese Americans, enticed by the notion of the American Dream, believe that anything is possible in America, including the reconstruction of the past. If America can erase and make up the past, so can they. This version of the American Dream possesses mythic qualities beyond notions of America as the Gold Mountain. America is seen as a place inhabited by childlike, innocent, and blindly trusting people who believe everything they are told by their government, the movies, the media, and those around them. The blind trust and naïveté of those who live in a superpower can be exploited to their benefit. (94)

This blind faith results in a blind patriotism, one infused with the sufferings of others, for as Pelaud articulately points out, "American society is not as open, fair, and free as many claim [it] to be. This belief ignores relations of power and obscures America's history of conquest, exclusion, and exploitation of minorities of color" (57). It is simply a shame that the history of American destructive and fatalistic demonstrations of power continue to be ignored in the wake of a war that shook the nation to its core. While I can understand the impetus to revive American mythologies and their corresponding sentiments of patriotic pride in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, America's history of conquest and its patriarchal privileging of men's narratives is too oppressive of a history to be ignored.

Conclusion

In exposing the inherent problems within the argument that the loss of Vietnam induced a national, collective trauma, I do not mean to indicate that this loss did not have these kinds of widespread, disastrous effects. It did. In fact, America's experience and loss in Vietnam can be referenced as a superb example of what a collective trauma is, what it looks like, and how it affects a large population. What I mean to emphasize in pointing out these problems in writing about collective trauma is how doing so culturally supports certain narratives about the event while suppressing, or even outright denying, others. The narratives that are privileged in American discourse of the war are those that sustain the view that this war was a white man's adventure, one where he fought the evil forces of communism. The privileging of these voices – those that emanate from and reaffirm American white men's perspectives only serve to silence others. In the second chapter, I investigate how women – both American and Vietnamese – are silenced by and through these patriarchal forces. Further, I expose how this silencing has debilitating effects on women – personally, psychologically, and in gendered terms culturally.

CHAPTER III

HOW WOMEN ARE SILENCED: THE INITIATION OF THE DOUBLE-WOUND

Women's Vietnam stories have not been heard because what women have to say is not considered a legitimate part of the war's history [...] there has always been a place for women to serve in war, but there is no place for them in its mythology. (Mithers 84)

[T]rue speaking is not solely an expression of creative power; it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless. As such, it is a courageous act – as such, it represents a threat. To those who wield oppressive power, that which is threatening must necessarily be wiped out, annihilated, silenced. (hooks 8)

[I]t is surely the case that control of a society's memory largely conditions the hierarchy of power. (Connerton 1)

Paul Connerton in *How Societies Remember* claims that the construction of our present is largely contingent on how the past is socially remembered. “[W]e may say that our experiences of the present largely depend upon our knowledge of the past,” he writes, “and that our images of the past commonly serve to legitimate a present social order” (3). Although he situates his analysis in examining ritualized embodied practices, when we take the Vietnam War into consideration and interrogate how the war is memorialized in aesthetic representations, namely through literature, we can see that certain narratives serve to highlight and sustain certain voices that are in power over those who are not. As explored in the first chapter, the voices that tend to get privileged are those that are in keeping with white American masculinist discourse. What this privileging of these

viewpoints does then is exclude those who speak otherwise. Typically, these are voices that have been historically marginalized, those of minorities and women. In this exclusion, these voices then become discredited at best, or silenced at worst.

This chapter specifically interrogates what happens when American, Vietnamese, and Vietnamese-American women's perspectives and voices are silenced, as I explore in Lynda Van Devanter's *Home Before Morning: The True Story of an Army Nurse in Vietnam*, Winnie Smith's *American Daughter Gone to War: On the Front Lines with an Army Nurse in Vietnam*, Laura Lâm's *Late Blossom*, Nhã Ca's *Mourning Headband for Hue: An Account of the Battle for Hue, 1968*, and lê thi diem thù's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*. Van Devanter's and Smith's works exemplify how being silenced by one's community, family, fellow veterans, and publishing houses affects their protagonists in debilitating ways. In essence, silencing these women results in a double-wounding of already-traumatized women veterans. Lâm's memoir further outlines how constraints firmly embedded in one's society, such as filial piety and the subordination of women in Vietnam's social hierarchy, place women into positions of powerlessness. Throughout her text, we can see how silence is used as a cultural tool that exerts power over others to legitimate the present patriarchal order of Vietnamese society. Nhã Ca's memoir provides an example of how dissenting Vietnamese viewpoints have been silenced by American publishing houses, the academy, and her own government. Finally, lê's novel demonstrates how Vietnamese immigrants' voices are overwritten, and thereby silenced by white America. I contend that silencing perspectives like these functions as a

double-wounding for the already-traumatized victim, as the various protagonists examined in this chapter are.

Traditionally, trauma is understood as an individual, psychic experience, one that results from a solitary event in time (Caruth, Felman and Laub, Agamben, Leys). I argue, however, that traumatic experience can manifest itself in layers. For example, if the event of the initial traumatic wounding is the Vietnam War and the experiences one has in that horrifying atmosphere, then this experience could be further exacerbated by outlying factors that reach beyond the temporal and spatial boundaries of that event. Some of these outlying factors may include: the cultural subjugation of women and marginalized perspectives, racist practices embedded in American institutions of power that privilege white discourse over those that emanate from Third World countries, and overwriting raced and gendered diasporic viewpoints to reposition white worldviews as dominant. In my study, I regard traumatic experience as not initiated by a singular event. Rather, it is a process dependent upon social position, cultural constructions, and the mandates of national traditions.

What is particularly troublesome in this layering of traumatic experience is that narratives that work outside the confines of the dominant idiom, Westernized white male discourse, are regarded as different. Regarded in a way that highlights difference positions women's narratives as those that must be considered as apart from mainstream notions of what constitutes war and warriors. Highlighting difference in the narratives that these women bring to Vietnam War writing is effectively used against these women authors and protagonists to rationalize the subjugation of their voices. From publishing

houses that refuse to publish their “kind” of books to cultural values that prescribe what a woman can or cannot say, one lesson remains clear: language has been used, historically, to exercise patriarchal power over women. As Trinh T. Minh-ha writes, “language is one of the most complex forms of subjugation, being at the same time the locus of power and unconscious servility. With each sign that gives language its shape lies a stereotype of which I/i am both the manipulator and the manipulated” (52). Thus, in order to participate in the conversation, even if the end goal is to disrupt the prescriptive thinking at the root of that conversation, writers who bring a different narrative to the fore must disclose their stories in conventional modes of relation. Minh-ha further elucidates, “The more I accept his word-prescriptions, the more my *competences* shrink. From ‘forget who you are and forget me not’ to ‘know who you are and copy me not,’ the point of view is the same: ‘Be like *us*’” (52, emphasis original). It is because these women’s narratives are *not* “like us,” the dominant and popularized method of speaking about this war, that these women have been silenced. In essence, the effects produced by this debilitating “deferring to power” work that this kind of silencing has upon these women not only affects them on an individual level (which then exacerbates the traumatic event), but it also affects women on a social level. Ultimately, the dominant mode of discourse is used to control, limit, and quiet any (dissenting) woman’s voice.

The Initiation of the Double-Wound

Lynda Van Devanter’s *Home Before Morning* serves as a primary example of how women have been silenced in their efforts to speak about their own experiences in

the Vietnam War. Her memoir contrasts with conventional writing of Vietnam War narratives by exposing the difficulties she encounters in trying to relate her narrative to a listening audience. Although she, too, transforms from being a naïve initiate to becoming a “hard” or “numb” veteran, she is not permitted the distinction of being seen as a “veteran.” When she returns to the US, she decides to join a Vietnam Veterans Against the War protest march, but is barred from participating:

There were only a few women in that room. They seemed lost. Some clustered together; others, like me, stood alone, not yet knowing anyone well enough to feel comfortable. When we moved outside to line up, I took a place near the front. However, one of the leaders approached me. “This demonstration is only for vets,” he said apologetically.

“I am a vet,” I said. “I was in Pleiku and Qui Nhon.”

“Pleiku!” he exclaimed. “No shit! I used to be with the 4th Infantry. You must have been at the 71st Evac.”

“I worked in the OR.”

“You people did a hell of a job,” he said. “You folks saved my best friend’s life.” He smiled at me for a few moments while I shifted awkwardly under his praise.

“Do you have a sign or something I can hold?” I asked.

“Well,” he said uncomfortably, “I...uh...don’t think you’re supposed to march.”

“But you told me it was for vets.”

“It is,” he said. “But you’re not a vet.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You don’t look like a vet,” he said. “If we have women marching, Nixon and the network news reporters might think we’re swelling the ranks with nonvets.”
(271-2)

This exchange not only silences what Van has to say, but also negates her veteran status. Due to the gender differences between Van and the organizer of the march, he refuses to consider her a “veteran” of the war, despite the fact that he lauds her and her fellow women nurses’ success in “sav[ing] his best friend’s life.” This refusal of allowing Van to march alongside the male veterans that have joined the movement is solely predicated on the fact that Nixon, the current President of the United States, and “the network news reporters” would not take the organization’s agenda seriously simply because she does not fit into the masculinist prescription of what gender constitutes a “warrior.” This everyday rhetoric, as seen in the proliferation of images, discussions, films, literature, and so on, is intricately bound up in institutions of power – the White House and the media. Thus, how institutions of power portray people and events determines how the public unjustly imagines them. In other words, these institutions of power – the US government and the media – and the narratives they substantiate “serve to legitimate [the] present social order” (Connerton 3) that claims that women have no place in war – historically or presently. In turn, this has severe consequences: being excluded by denial of status; being silenced; unwriting, and thereby invalidating, life experiences and the meaningfulness of those experiences; and overwriting one’s racialized experiences to reflect white American discourse.

American women participated in the Vietnam War in various capacities and in numerous occupational positions, both in military and civilian sectors. About eighty percent of military women who served in Vietnam were in the Nurse Corps (Marshall 4-5). They were there trying to save lives, rather than take them. Pat Johnson explains that

“as a nurse, I didn’t feel I was part of the war effort, that people were being injured there” (Walker 54). Many women express this compulsion to go heal those who have been injured in the war; it is a way for them to serve their country in a life-preserving way. Women also served in the US military as secretaries, clerks, air traffic controllers, photographers, cartographers, decoders, engineers, and so forth (Marshall 7). Many of these jobs brought these women prestige that few could find in the United States at the time. For nonmilitary women, they also did work in Vietnam of which they could be proud. They worked as “donut dollies” with the Red Cross, as journalists, photographers, nurses not affiliated with the American military, and so on. Despite these positions American women held in Vietnam, their stories still largely go unnoticed in both academic discussions about the war and in American public memory of the conflict. Instead of acknowledging their contribution to and participation in the war effort, a deafening silence surrounds these women’s experiences.

Army nurses’ memoirs such as Van Devanter’s and Winnie Smith’s *American Daughter Gone to War* distinctly convey how being silenced and discredited as a “veteran” of the war carries the power to doubly-wound, or further traumatize, a person who has already experienced a traumatic event. Since these women’s experiences are often discredited by the American public and the men who also served there, these women authors challenge how the American public conceives of gender and its roles in war. As Carol Lynn Mithers explains, “Women’s Vietnam stories have not been heard because what women have to say is not considered a legitimate part of the war’s history [...] there has always been a place for women to serve in war, but there is no place for

them in its mythology” (84). Thus, by producing works that contest this masculinist rhetoric and men-only-club logic, American women authors are afforded an opportunity to articulate how conventional representations of the war silence them in traumatic ways.

In an effort to broadly sweep across the topic of women’s Vietnam War writing, Milton J. Bates notes that Van Devanter’s memoir is “exemplary” (237) and “far more realistic” (167) than men’s narratives. Without saying much more, he insinuates that these distinctions come from the fact that her text was written “with the help of a professional writer” who also happens to be a man, Christopher Morgan (169). In a much more condensed and offhanded, but similar, fashion, Don Ringnalda speaks of Van Devanter when he describes the minimal services offered by VA hospitals (212). He does not even consider her book, its content, or how it diverges from conventional Vietnam War narratives. Unfortunately, in order to understand what critics have to say about Van Devanter’s work, scholars have to turn to journal articles. I say unfortunately here because it is unfortunate that Van Devanter’s memoir is not taken as seriously by Vietnam War literary scholars hip on the subject of women’s experiences in the war, which in its own way imbues a different kind of silencing act upon women veterans, even those who write “exemplary” accounts.

Carol Lynn Mither’s “Missing in Action: Women Warriors in Vietnam,” observes that the silence that enshrouds women’s experiences in war is a purposeful one. If cultural memory were to recognize women’s participation in this masculine adventure, then this would challenge the notion that men become gods while at war. Therefore, weaving women into the mythology and cultural logic of war challenges this “privilege”

of men being (mis)remembered as gods and exposes the fallacy inherent within this logic (90). Susan K. Alexander further argues that women veterans have become invisible and as a result of their invisibility in the American public eye they have become silenced. This silence, she finds, functions as a form of protection; it protects women from the blame they have internalized from losing their male comrades in the war. She uses Van Devanter's work as an example and also names her as the spokesperson of women veterans.¹⁹ While these scholars find that silence can be used as a form of protecting oneself, Van Devanter and Smith express how being silenced has a debilitating effect upon how they deal with their wartime experiences. Further, being silenced also reinscribes the masculinist rhetoric of how the American public thinks about war, which in turn reaffirms institutions of power that subjugate women's experiences by rendering them inauthentic.

When scholars write about Smith's text, they often do so in conjunction with Van Devanter, as though these two works are so similar that Smith cannot be understood as different and separate from Van Devanter. However, these women indeed present different works. While these two texts have much in common – stylistically, thematically, and emotionally – there is still a distinct difference between the two. Namely, Winnie suffers from a lack of understanding with an important audience member, her father, who ought to understand her difficulties in readjusting to home since he himself is a World War Two veteran and came home as a disabled one who suffered a

¹⁹ Naming Van Devanter as *the* spokesperson of the women's veterans' movement is somewhat justified since she founded the Women's Project in the Vietnam Veterans of America's organization. However, naming her as such presents problems of its own, which shall be discussed later in this chapter.

leg amputation as a result of his experiences there. On the other hand, Van experiences similar emotions of loneliness amongst a broader public. Given that Van Devanter's memoir was originally published in 1983, it stands as a precedent for Smith's text which was published in 1992. In my reading, Smith's memoir differentiates itself from Van's mainly by way of calling attention to the generation war²⁰ that informs her specific experiences. In Winnie's hardships of coming home and readapting to civilian life, she often speaks of certain discomforts, which shall be explored in this chapter, and points to glimpses of understanding between her and her father that will be discussed in my fourth chapter.

Van Devanter sets her text apart from the others – both Smith's and conventional narratives of the war – when she explicitly recounts the hardships Van endured when she initially sought publication for *Home Before Morning*. When Van was contemplating writing her memoir, one editor told her, “Nobody wants to read that *kind* of book” (344, emphasis mine), even though the American literary market was suffused with various men's accounts of the war in the 1980s. Susan Jeffords in *The Remasculinization of America* argues that suffusing the American literary market with representations of the American soldier in this decade served to reaffirm his masculinity, given that these soldiers were effeminized and emasculated in the war's immediate aftermath. Due to the US losing the war in Vietnam, these soldiers were originally seen as stereotypically feminine, portraying characteristics of “weakness, passivity, nonaggression, and

²⁰ For more information about the generation war, or also commonly known as the generation gap between World War Two soldiers and Vietnam War soldiers, please see Milton J. Bates fifth chapter entitled “The Generation War” (174-213) in *The Wars We Took to Vietnam: Cultural Conflict and Storytelling*.

negotiation” (Jeffords 160). This remasculinization of the veteran occurs at the same time Van first approached an editor with her manuscript. This editor responded that the literary market was not interested in the “kind” of text she had to offer because it was not in keeping with the masculinist vogue of the time (344). Quoting Lynne Hanley’s *Writing War: Fiction, Gender and Memory*, Renate W. Prescott explains that “[b]ecause men have been the traditional writers of war, often ‘Women are robbed of the authority of expressing themselves on the subject of war because they are assumed not to be in war’” (52). This assumption is obviously false, for as Carol Lynn Mithers demonstrates, American women have served in war stretching at least as far back as the Revolutionary War (83). Instead, the problem, for Mithers, lies in war’s mythology. For Mithers, women are written out of war’s mythology precisely because their presence challenges heroic conceptions of male soldiers. “To admit that women serve and suffer in war is to destroy the claim to special male knowledge and all the privileges it brings” (90). Those “privileges” are those wherein a man can imagine himself “a god” because *he* “holds ‘the power of life and death’” while he is engaged in battle (90). When a woman enters this foray, however, she “knows that in the end war comes down to blood, pain and broken bodies [and] can only remind him [the male veteran] that he is not [a god]” (90). Women authors often feel compelled to break this silence and thereby shatter this masculinist war mythology.

Before one can break this silence, one must first acknowledge and intimately know its disparaging effects. When masculinist rhetorics of the war deploy their power of silencing other dissenting narratives like those that women offer, women often suffer

the brunt of its effects. Krista Ratcliffe calls this “dysfunctional silence” (84-93), which has four functions: “(1) It is driven by negatively resonating terms; (2) It proceeds via a cultural logic that masks coexisting commonalities and differences; (3) It offers interlocutors dysfunctional rhetorical stances of denial, defensiveness, and guilt/blame; and (4) It proceeds via the interpretive trope of reading metaphorically” (85). As I have discussed in Chapter One, having women function metaphorically as Phillips and Schaeffer do further enables and instantiates this dysfunctional silencing act upon women authors who seek to dismantle the notion that war is only fought by men. Poised under a suspicion of disbelief simply because they present narratives that counter this woman-as-metaphor prescription, women authors like Van Devanter and Smith are haunted by this “dysfunctional silence” throughout their texts. For Van, this third function proves to be debilitating, for it acts as a double wound.

Van first experiences trauma and suffers from PTSD as a result of her experiences in war. While in Pleiku she is often quite close to mortal danger: she is awoken multiple nights due to mortar fire shelling the area near her hospital compound and even witnesses a Huey helicopter explode due to engine fire spreading into the gas tank on the landing pad at the hospital.²¹ However, it is not necessarily these experiences that intrusively resurface in her remembrances of her experiences. Instead, images of grotesque and

²¹ Winnie in *American Daughter* explains how she was quite close to mortal danger as well. Larry, a field Lieutenant, who visits the hospital to say goodbye to one of his best friends who is about to die, tells Winnie that “Somebody ought to be court-martialed for putting a hospital so close to the motor pool and ammo dump” (213), which indicates that the hospital grounds are dangerously close to a space that very possibly could be targeted by the NVA or NLF. Therefore, although many nurses were led to believe and operated under the assumption that they were safe, and some were, relatively speaking, in rear areas like Saigon, not all hospital grounds were “safe” (Smith 213). Further, some women, like Winnie, also believed that their lives would be protected by the Geneva Convention, a notion that quickly was dispelled.

mangled faces appear in her nightmares and in her wakefulness. The one image that unrelentingly haunts her is that of a young soldier named Gene. Initially, his horrifying wounds grab her attention. However, when she begins to see him as a person as opposed to a patient, a body, a mass of flesh, is when she starts to be haunted by his image. To describe his wounds, Van narrates,

Three intravenous lines ran from bags of blood to his body, one in his jugular vein and one in each arm. The lower portion of his jaw, teeth exposed, dangled from what was left of his face. It dragged along the canvas litter and then swung in the air as he was moved from the gurney to the table. His tongue hung hideously to the side with the rest of the bloody meat and exposed bone. When he was on the table, Mack Shaffner, the facial surgeon, dropped the lower jaw back into place. (Van Devanter 194)

Notice how her description of the nameless patient, a formless pile of “bloody meat and exposed bone,” held together with lifeless, but life-supporting, “intravenous lines” contrasts to her later description of Gene, the person, below. This shift in viewing Gene as a person rather than merely a patient comes when she stumbles upon a personal photograph of his:

During one of my circuits around the table, I accidentally kicked his clothes to the side. A snapshot fell from the torn pocket of his fatigue shirt. The picture was of a young couple – him and his girlfriend, I guessed – standing on the lawn in front of a two-story house, perhaps belonging to her parents. Straight, blond, and tall, he wore the tuxedo with a mixture of pride and discomfort, the look of a boy who was going to finish the night with this black tie in his pocket, his shirt open at the neck, and his cummerbund lying on the floor next to the seat. She, too, was tall, and her long brown hair was mostly on top of her head, with a few well-placed curls hanging down in front of her ears. [...] But the thing that made the picture special was how they were looking at each other.

I could see, in their faces, the love he felt for her, and she for him, a first love that had evolved from hours of walking together and talking about dreams, from passing notes to each other in history class, from riding together in his car with her sitting in the middle of the front seat so they could be closer.

On the back of the picture was writing, the ink partly blurred from sweat: “Gene and Katie, May 1968.”

I had to fight the tears as I looked from the picture to the helpless boy on the table, now a mass of blood vessels and skin, so macerated that nothing could hold them together. *Gene and Katie, May 1968.* (Van Devanter 197)

Once she discovers this photograph he becomes a person, one who loves, one who has a family, one who was once whole – physically and emotionally. By happenstance, Van realizes Gene’s personhood when she sees and imagines him as a whole person – healthy and in love. In this epiphany she unites the “mass of blood vessels and skin” with the “boy on the table,” which causes her to fight back her tears. With most other patients, Van does not experience this rush of emotion, of sadness and grief over senseless waste. She even notes how “this one was different” (197) and that difference manifests itself in how it transforms *her*. “I knew a profound change had already come over me. With the death of Gene, and with the deaths of so many others, I had lost an important part of myself. The Lynda I had known before the war was gone forever” (199). The recognition of her patients, particularly Gene, as people, causes her to experience nightmares, dysfunctional depression – to the point where she cannot go to work – and an internalization of guilt and self-blame for those she could not save and how she could not communicate with her family and friends once she returned home. Furthermore, in the above quotation, she refers to herself as Lynda in the third person. In removing herself

from the “I”, she points to how she has become divorced from her former self in developing PTSD and how she has lost her own personhood through the acknowledgement of Gene’s.

Her inability to communicate comes as a result of being silenced by her family, friends, and other veterans. Although her family and friends do not necessarily dispute her veteran status as those at the veteran protest rally did, they often silence her. For example, when she shows her family slides of her Vietnam experience, they soon turn “bloody” (259), depicting the casualties she worked on while in country. This makes her family – her mother, father, and sisters – “uncomfortable” (259). Her mother even proposes that “[m]aybe it would be wise to put [the slides] away” (259). Van rationalizes that perhaps her mother was “right, but the realization hurt me more than bullets or rockets or napalm ever could. I wanted to grab the people I loved by the shoulders and say, ‘Listen to me! Look! This is what I’ve gone through! I’m one of you! This is life! Please let me talk about it!’” (259). Wanting to scream at her family, she elects not to, for she feels as though they could never understand her. Not being able to speak about her wartime experiences, Van demonstrates how being silenced by her family causes her to feel anguish and severe pain. Thus, being silenced acts as a double wounding. First, images of Gene unrelentingly pierce her nightmares and wakefulness; then she is silenced by her community and family, which causes her to implode upon herself into a severely disabling depressive state.

After meeting various people, friends and acquaintances, who ask her what Vietnam was like and finding that they did not care to hear lengthy answers, (typical

responses of “It sucked” was sufficient), she admits that “[a]fter a while, I decided it was easier to simply deny that I was a Vietnam vet. There was certainly nothing good in being one, so why broadcast it? I buried the experience as deeply as I could” (265). However, this burial was not effective. She begins to feel as though she “didn’t fit anyplace. I wanted to belong somewhere and to belong with someone. I found myself thinking frequently about the comradery I had felt in Vietnam, the strong bonds we had all forged. I wanted to be back in a group like that, but none were available” (287). These feelings of loneliness soon turn into depression. She confesses that she began to seriously think about suicide (294) and this has grave consequences in her personal and professional life; unable to function, she loses her job at a privately run dialysis unit in Los Angeles. To describe the effects of such a chronic depression upon her personal life, Van recounts:

In the middle of August, I sank into the deepest depression I had experienced up to that time. I began crying day and night for no reason. I just felt so awful. I didn’t know what was going on with me. I had an overwhelming physical feeling of *being oppressed*. Everything seemed so dark. It was as if the sun never came out, although in reality it was always shining in southern California. I felt like there was an enormous weight on top of me. It became an effort to get out of bed or to take a step. I started calling in sick a lot and spending entire days in bed. I didn’t eat and I couldn’t fall asleep. I wouldn’t even put my clothes on. I’d stay in my nightgown or wear a T-shirt all the time. I wouldn’t read or watch television. I would merely lie around all day crying, with the covers over my head. When night came, I would drink myself into oblivion.

When I went to work, *I didn’t talk much. I gave monosyllabic responses.* (Van Devanter 304-5, emphasis mine)

Although her reluctance to speak could be read as an act of using silence, I argue that it is not. Rather, her “monosyllabic responses” are a symptom of the severe depressive state she is in. Further, this depression was spurred by her traumatic wartime experiences, then exacerbated by being silenced when she tries to cathartically engage with those experiences. Not being able to speak when she initially wanted to, she turns quasi-mute. Further, she specifically relates this feeling of depression to oppression, and this depression has a direct effect on her speech, causing her to respond with as few words as possible. The effects of depression on her speech mark an express link between oppression and silencing.

Winnie also experiences this kind of silencing from her family. Like Van, Winnie shows slides of her experiences in Vietnam to her parents. Her father, himself a disabled veteran, asks to see pictures of her patients. Not having taken any, her mother asks Winnie to then tell them about her patients. Shortly after beginning to speak about one of them, her mother interrupts, “Nobody wants to hear that stuff. [...] Some things are better left unsaid” (251). For Winnie, this act of silencing functions in two ways. Her mother uses this as a tactic to undermine Winnie’s experiences and emotions. What’s more, her “mother not only can’t understand but accuses me of using Vietnam as an excuse for my failures. The real problem, she maintains, is that I’m lazy, or I would have done better with my nursing career. And I’m boring, or I would have a man by now” (303). Since Winnie’s protests to these accusations get her nowhere, her mother uses silence to censure her daughter, which demonstrates just how debilitating being silenced can be. On the other hand, her father initially silences his daughter because “[w]ar’s no place for

a girl,” he explains while “adjusting his artificial leg with both hands” (23). In essence, her father does not want to face the trauma she may have experienced while at war. Thus, he silences her to protect himself from vicariously re-experiencing wartime traumas. In the end, though, both ways of silencing Winnie have profound effects on her, casting her into a deep depression where she plans her own suicide, which is quite similar to Van’s coming home experiences. Thus, for both of these women, the depression they experience as a result of being silenced weighs heavily on their lives; being silenced is a “lonely” (Smith 294) and “oppress[ive]” (Van Devanter 304) experience.

Explicitly linking oppression and psychic alienation, Sandra Lee Bartky in *Femininity and Domination* argues that “psychic alienation,” a term borrowed from Frantz Fanon’s *White Skin, Black Masks*,²² is a mode in which “terrible messages of inferiority” are delivered to certain peoples (Bartky 23). She describes three categories of oppression, which include “stereotyping, cultural domination, and sexual objectification” (23). While I agree with her in this respect, I would also like to add the act of silencing to this list, for silencing someone is a mode in which one may lord power over another, rendering the marginalized person inarticulate, debilitated, and wounded. In essence, silencing has the power to (re-)traumatize a person. It is helpful to remember that Dominick LaCapra, when discussing the distinction and relationship between acting out

²² In *Black Skin, White Masks* Frantz Fanon argues that race is a construct, one that enables one group of people to be deemed inferior by another. According to Fanon, it is through language that certain stereotypes and rumors pervade one’s culture, ones that call black men animals. Ultimately, black people wish to whiten their race to escape their oppression, which he terms as “lactification” (29). To correct these erroneous ways and desires, Fanon suggests that “Both have to move away from the inhuman voices of their respective ancestors so that a genuine communication can be born. Before embarking on a positive voice, freedom needs to make an effort at disalienation” (206). By disalienating oneself, then one can attempt to rectify the damage inflicted by psychic alienation.

and working through trauma, names working through as an “articulatory practice,” for working through enables the traumatized victim to “distinguish between past and present and to recall in memory that something happened to one (or one’s people) back then while realizing that one is living here and now with openings to the future” (22). As evidenced in Van’s case, there are no “openings to the future;” she is relentlessly stuck in the past as a result of her wartime experiences *and* from being silenced. She has no audience: her male veteran cohorts refuse to acknowledge her participation in the war by discrediting her claims of being a “veteran,” initial attempts at publishing her memoir are shot down, and she suffers from being silenced that causes her to descend into deep bouts of depression that leave her feeling oppressed. Thus, silencing has the power to doubly-wound a traumatized victim such as Van, and this act of silencing is predicated on her gender. Since she does not fit the normal prescriptions of what a warrior is, she is not understood as holding this distinction. As a result, her experiences are erased, vanished as though they never took place, and she even resolves herself never to mention her experiences or the fact that she is a veteran to anyone for fear that she will be disbelieved.

Indeed, silencing holds this disciplinary power. As Cheryl Glenn notes, “Whether choice or im/position, silence can reveal positive or negative abilities, fulfilling or withholding traits, harmony or disharmony, success or failure. Silence can deploy power; it can defer to power. It all depends” (xi).²³ How we read silence, according to Glenn, depends upon the “social-rhetorical context in which it occurs,” a context that is influenced by “environmental, locational, communal, personal” states and who initiates

²³ I will investigate how women use silence to “deploy power” in the next chapter.

the silencing act – the self or another person (9). In the social-rhetorical context of how American women veterans have been silenced when they try to interject their voices into the dominant masculinist discourse of the Vietnam War, it is clear that silencing functions as a double wounding, a powerful act that debilitates and disciplines the women who try to break that silence through writing. The reason silencing has the power to (re-)traumatize victims like Van and Winnie is because of how many groups and institutions impose silence upon them. Not only are they silenced by their family, friends, and fellow male veterans, but they are also silenced by publishing houses that refuse to publish their “kind” of books (Van Devanter 344).

Familial and Cultural Silencing in Vietnam

Laura L  m, a Vietnamese diasporic writer, published *Late Blossom: Memories of Life, Loss and Love in Viet Nam* in 2006. In her memoir, she recounts how Hoa Lai, translated into Jasmine, the central character, is forcibly silenced by her mother, the cultural prescriptions of gender in an Asian society, the men with whom she surrounds herself, and through acts of violence. Even though there is a slight parallel between how she and Van and Winnie are silenced by their respective families, how Jasmine is silenced by her mother starkly differentiates itself from the constraints that Van and Winnie experience. Instead of being met with an unfamiliarity with war and not wanting to witness the destruction it causes as in Van’s and Winnie’s case, Jasmine’s mother, Kim, knows war and its devastating powers all too well having lived through decades of it in Vietnam’s wars for independence. Instead, Kim uses silence to force Jasmine into a

position of acquiescence, so that she may become the dutiful daughter she is expected to be. Similarly, the cultural constraints that men impose upon Jasmine and their use of violence against her also forcibly place her into a position of acquiescence, which ultimately renders her voiceless in her attempt to articulate her traumatic experiences.

Jasmine often suffers the abuses of her mother – physically and psychologically – due to what Jasmine calls a “terrible accident” that “would change my mother’s life” (45). At thirteen, Kim is caught in between an argument between a husband and wife while she sells rice wine at the Truong An marketplace. The husband, in his fury, hurls a ceramic bowl at his wife and it accidentally crashes into Kim’s head, which causes permanent alterations in her mood and behavior (46), making her fly into rages, normally against those she holds most dear. When she would lash out at her daughter, Jasmine resolved that if she remain silent and not provoke her mother further she could quiet her mother and stop her beatings. As an example of the verbal abuses she hurls at her daughter, Kim would often call Jasmine a “whore,” which only makes Jasmine hate her (230). However, on one occasion, Jasmine speaks back in order to defend a friend of hers. “Amazed at my defiance, she turned to the only resort she understood – violence. She went into one of her rages and nearly killed me. She raced through the house, grabbed a kitchen knife and came at me with it. I ran into the alley. Knife in hand, she chased after me until I was nowhere in sight” (250). This is the only time Jasmine “assert[s]” herself against her mother (250). By threat of death, Jasmine is forced into a position of acquiescence, quietly accepting her mother’s verbal and physical abuse, which further alienates her from her own flesh and blood.

To further understand why Jasmine would be forced into such a position, understanding the Vietnamese cultural constraints that dictate not only how a child should act in accordance with one's parents, but also how a woman is expected to behave in Vietnamese society is necessary. Neil L. Jamieson in *Understanding Vietnam* states that the Vietnamese family functions as a kind of "natural order in microcosm":

The Vietnamese family was a small world unto itself. What Westerners consider "nuclear families" were embedded in extended families and patrilineages, and the sense of family included the deceased and those not yet born in a single fabric of spiritual unity and material well-being.

First and foremost, children were taught *hieu* [filial piety], the cardinal virtue of society. Anxiety over repayment of *on* [moral debt] to parents and ancestors was a powerful force for both virtue and achievement. [...]

You were, simply by being alive, in debt to your family – no matter how much you might have accomplished, no matter how wretched you might be. You still had to thank them for the food you ate, the house you lived in, your spouse, your land, your membership in the village, most of all for life itself. You benefited from the merit accumulated by other family members over time, and from the family reputation. Success only increased the debt; it could never serve to repay it fully. Every family had to work hard constantly to maintain its relationship with the neighborhood, the lane, the rest of the village. This network of relationships, too, you held in trust for your family. Obligations extended in both directions, to those not yet born as well as to those who had passed away. The primary obligation was to the family itself as an eternal corporation.

The cultural ideal was an extended family household functioning as a single, well-integrated unit, hierarchically structured. Full authority and ownership of all property rested with the parents, whose wishes had to be obeyed. Any blatant breach of filial piety was, in fact, illegal and would be severely punished by the authorities should it come to their attention. Even worse, to be found guilty of such behavior in the court of public opinion would give one a heavy burden of shame to be borne the rest of one's life. (22-3)

Given that parents have complete “authority” over their children, any defiance of their wishes could be interpreted as a breach of filial piety, a grave personal insult and a social misdeed. Thus, when Jasmine talks back to her mother, defending her friend who is not a “slut[]” (250) as her mother claims she is, Kim views this as such a breach in filial piety, which causes her to fly into one of her rages. Children, regardless of their age, were expected to accede to their parents’ wishes, fulfill any aspirations their parents had of them, and to do so quietly and happily, for this would demonstrate a (at least partial) repayment of *on* to their parents. I contend, however, that these cultural constraints also contribute to another way of understanding trauma, for to quietly accede one’s desires in order to serve others – in this case parents who are abusive to their children as Kim is – one must also surrender one’s voice so as to limit the suffering of those abuses as much as possible.

What’s more, there are cultural gendered prescriptions Vietnamese society places upon women. Jamieson notes how women were expected to “perform their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers *in a nondisruptive manner*” (18, emphasis mine). Jasmine continually notes throughout the text that she has to “calm down and not show any emotion or expression – *that was my training*” (172, emphasis mine), for to do so would be considered “disruptive.” Rather, Vietnamese women are expected to deal with the lot they have been given in a quiet manner, one that does not speak out against the patriarchal forces at play. In the most memorable example of keeping silent to prove one’s acquiescence to male desires, Jasmine narrates how when an older American soldier, George, forces himself on her and rapes her, she found herself “pinned by the

weight of his body. The thing between his legs terrified me. *I bit my lip and closed my eyes. A sharp pain suddenly pierced me like a sword. I burst into tears*” (279, emphasis mine). She does not cry out in rage or terror. Instead, she bites her lip and closes her eyes in a refusal to acknowledge the violence to which he subjects her. In another instance, she is propositioned by another American man to trade sex for freedom (to get out of Vietnam and immigrate to America in 1975), and this proposal enrages her to the point where she “bit [her] lips with suppressed rage until they bled” (310). In order to keep from speaking out against such a lewd exchange, she forces herself to keep quiet to the point where she enacts a violence against herself, biting her lips to the point where she draws her own blood. In relation to her experience with George, turning blind and mute to his violence demonstrates how silence has been embodied within her person as a cultural inscription. It is a violence so severe that it changes how she thinks of herself. Prior to this rape, she was a virgin. Afterward, she is “dirty, useless, a piece of garbage” (279). As she explains to her reader, “Virginity, a traditional Vietnamese virtue, had been a central component of my identity. [...] Forced to give it up for a crude and unworthy man, I now fell apart. I had lost a central defining aspect of who I was. My behaviour became erratic and totally contradictory” (280). This act of violence is so traumatizing to her, both in a personal and cultural sense, that it changes who she perceives herself to be. She is no longer the pristine woman ripe for marriage; instead, she is a soiled woman forced into a relationship with this “unworthy” man. In other words, the initial traumatizing event – rape – is exacerbated by the cultural gendered constraints Vietnamese society places upon her.

In order to prosper as much as possible from this horrifying turn of events, Jasmine finds no other recourse than to enter into a relationship with George. As she explains, “In our culture, if a girl is raped by someone the family knows, she would end up marrying him, as no one else would want her. Psychologically this would also help reduce the effect of the trauma. By becoming George’s mistress [since he already had a wife and family back in the United States] I would at least help my family. [...] I had become a symbol of shame” (280). By forcing George to pay her a monthly allowance in the form of apples that she can then sell on the black market, she uses this money to help her family in their impoverished state. In other words, misfortune turns into a modest fortune, a repayment of *on* that she can use to support her family financially in their desperate time of need. According to Vietnamese culture, this repayment of *on* could be used to lessen her sense of shame of being a soiled, rape victim and thereby be used to psychologically “reduce the effect of the trauma.”

As Jasmine shows us, silence is not simply a method one uses to keep another from speaking out. Rather, silence can also be inscribed culturally, one that patriarchal cultures use to suppress women’s voices – their articulations of injustice, disapproval, shock, and dismay. Silence, then, is used as a cultural tool as much as it is a personal one. In this regard, it carries perhaps even more catastrophic effects, for it holds the power not only to silence one voice, but many. Trained to be “nondisruptive” (Jamieson 18), Vietnamese women like Jasmine feel that they are forced into a position of acquiescence to men’s desires and wishes. They are culturally shaped into what men expect them to be – quiet, accepting of fate, and subordinate. If they were to do

otherwise, they would be considered as a threat not only to the man who wishes to keep the woman in her subordinate role but to the social fabric of Vietnamese society itself. In order to keep men in their position of power, this act of resistance would require an obliteration of those voices that work against this social grain. As bell hooks so rightly advocates, “[T]rue speaking is not solely an expression of creative power; it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless. As such, it is a courageous act – as such, it represents a threat. To those who wield oppressive power, that which is threatening must necessarily be wiped out, annihilated, silenced” (8). Although hooks is arguing for a black feminism in American feminist discourse in the 1980s, similar conclusions can be drawn in regards to Vietnamese patriarchal culture. “[T]rue speaking” in this case would be an act that calls out the sexist regimes of power embedded within one’s social hierarchy. However, “true speaking” also carries dangerous consequences – that of being “wiped out, annihilated, silenced.” Ultimately, this renders the act of “true speaking” futile, for if one only speaks in order to be silenced, the message that speaks against this violence cannot be clearly articulated because powerful institutional forces continue to suppress it. Resigned to this truism and paradox, Jasmine feels that she cannot speak out; instead she can only bite her lips – the vehicle that has the power to disrupt this suppressive tool – until they bleed. Thus, when cultural gendered constraints further enable the silencing of women’s voices, traumatic experience then becomes even more compounded by oppressive regimes of power. Ultimately, the combination of oppressive forces at play here – filial piety and female acquiescence to men’s desires – further exacerbates the effects of the initial

traumatic event within the subject, particularly because society has wrested the power to speak of such experiences from her.

Silencing Dissenting Vietnamese Perspectives

Unlike authors like Duong Thu Huong as examined in the first chapter, other Vietnamese voices tend to be silenced by the American academy and publishing markets simply because they do not support and/or substantiate an anti-communist, Americanized masculinist rhetoric within their works. This silencing act obscures marginalized perspectives, relegating these types of narratives to the margins of literary study even though they may merit consideration due to how their perspectives differentiate themselves from more traditional representations of the conflict. One such author is Nhã Ca, a Vietnamese woman author²⁴ who wrote *Mourning Headband for Hue: An Account of the Battle for Hue, Vietnam 1968*. Originally published in Vietnam in 1969, Nhã Ca relates her experience of the destruction of her beloved city of Hue, once the Imperial capital of Vietnam, during the 1968 Tet Offensive, also known as Tết Mậu Thân²⁵ in Vietnam. Even though she lives in Saigon at the time of Tết Mậu Thân with her husband and two small children, she arrives in Hue days before the offensive begins to attend her father's funeral. While mourning her father and tending her family's ancestral shrine in

²⁴ Although Nhã Ca currently resides in the United States, since she wrote this work while she was a resident in and native-born citizen of Vietnam, I consider *Mourning Headband for Hue* a Vietnamese work rather than a Vietnamese-American one.

²⁵ This alternative naming of this event emphasizes that 1968 was the Year of the Monkey, which essentially places the emphasis of this event on the celebratory lunar new year, rather than the death, destruction, and flailing American support for the war that the term the Tet Offensive carries with it. This is just one of the multiple differences of viewing the war and its events between American and Vietnamese participants and writers of the war.

Hue, the city explodes with gunfire, mortar fire, and bombs. She suffers the unrelenting chaos of the offensive for twenty-some-odd days, not really remembering how long the fighting lasted. Even though Nhã Ca presents her horrific account of what it is like as a South Vietnamese civilian to experience such an intense battle as the one for Hue was, what is most remarkable is that this text was not translated into English and published for English-reading audiences (i.e.: American markets) until 2014, forty-five years after its original publication.²⁶ I contend that this is so because she does not necessarily condemn communist ideology, nor does she forthrightly blame the North Vietnamese Army, the National Liberation Front, or those who support the North's efforts in the war. Rather, she states that Vietnamese civilians are the real victims of the war as opposed to American male combatants,²⁷ and the perpetrator of their malaise is the war itself; all factors – ideology, politics, militarism, any soldier – are to blame for the death of her compatriots and the demolition of the beautiful, historic Imperial city of Hue.

Olga Dror, the translator and author of the introduction of the memoir, explains how reviewers of the original text read *Mourning Headband for Hue* along various lines: as an anti-Communist, an anti-American, and an antiwar work. “While some, like Võ Phiến, saw *Mourning Headband for Hue*, as a denunciation of Communist atrocities, it was also an undeniably antiwar, and in many ways an anti-American, work,” Dror writes (xx). Indeed, she is correct, for Nhã Ca includes passages that reflect all three of these

²⁶ It is also important to note that no scholarship in English-reading academia has been produced on this work either. While this may be due to the recent availability of this work to an English-reading public, it still demarcates how American literary scholars privilege certain white male authors' voices over those of racialized women. Scholars have set a trend of looking to those privileged voices to construct how Americans – in academia and the general public – think about and remember the war.

²⁷ American male-authored texts particularly espouse this view of the war, as I discuss in my first chapter.

positions. First, she indicates an anti-American sentiment when she portrays Americans as those who menacingly mock those who mourn for their loved ones and their city amid the destruction of the offensive. Vân, the narrator and the name Nhã Ca²⁸ uses for herself as the protagonist of the novel, explains how “Several Americans stand and gaze at the group of people, then bare their teeth, laughing inappropriately, in a manner that in no way fits the situation or the scene” (163-4). Having Americans “bare their teeth” and “laugh inappropriately” suggests that these invaders are akin to vicious dogs who are bent on wreaking as much destruction as they possibly can with their bullets and bombs. They have no concern for those they harm, kill, or render homeless. This barbarity on the part of the Americans is further elucidated when they make a game out of making a defenseless dog drown itself:

Several black and white Americans stand on the bridge and keep shooting to prevent the dog from swimming to the shore. The dog gradually gets farther and farther away from the shore, howling plaintively; it’s absolutely heartrending. The bullets are still fired nonstop, but it seems they don’t intend to kill the dog, only to prevent it from getting to shore. [...] A group of evacuees runs up in confusion; their shouts and cries echo in the sky. The louder grow the shouts and cries, the louder the laughter of the Americans. The people fall and then get up, get up and then fall headlong. Why is my nation in this position? Why is the dog over there still trying, with great difficulty, to get to the shore to regain its life? I feel such a pity for my people, for my country, that human life is worth less than a joke, less than a dog. (268)

This scene not only specifically calls attention to how Americans cruelly treat Vietnamese citizens, but it also points to how Americans equate the Vietnamese with

²⁸ Nhã Ca is a pen name, one that means “a ‘courteous, elegant song’ or ‘canticle’ in Vietnamese” (back cover).

animals. However, this is quite different than simply saying that the Vietnamese have been dehumanized. From Vân's perspective, demonstrating how the Americans treat Vietnamese citizens as dogs proves how it is the Americans who are inhumane and not the Vietnamese, for the US soldiers shoot at these evacuees, making them dance, fall down, and stumble over themselves and others, all for a joke. This cruel and unjust treatment of civilians who are unwittingly caught in a major battle and have nowhere to run simply marks how it is the Americans who are sadistic barbarians; it is they who are the animals. This different perspective, one that confirms the barbarity of the "civilized" Americans, is in stark contrast to conventional American narratives of the war, particularly as I have noted in my discussion of Deadeye Dosier in *Close Quarters* in Chapter One.

One could understand how presenting Americans in such a distasteful manner would not be particularly appealing to American literary markets, especially for popular presses. For so long, one could even say from the beginnings of publications that arose out of the conflict, American authors have tended to paint American soldiers as: victims, as exemplified in Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* or Philip Caputo's *Indian Country*; patriotic servicemen, as can be seen in Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's *Buffalo Afternoon*; men bound to duty simply because they had no other option than to answer their draft call as in Tim O'Brien's *They Things They Carried*; and other ways that highlight the plight of being entrenched in a losing war. In other words, American white male narratives tend to focus on their own perspectives, casting themselves in the spotlight. Nhã Ca's treatment of Americans, however, does not include such sympathetic

or American-centered portraits. Thus, I speculate that this is one of the reasons why it took so long for this text to be translated into English and made available to an American readership. Olga Dror notes in her introduction how Nhã Ca along with her work has been deemed “subversive” (xxi). She has been called such because she does not subscribe to conventional depictions of American or Vietnamese fighting forces. As a result of being a subversive writer, her work has been largely silenced by popular American publishing markets and *Mourning Headband for Hue* has been relegated to realms of obscurity, that is until Dror translated her work. What is perhaps even more interesting is that even though American readers now have this text at their disposal, it was not picked up by a popular press. Rather, Indiana University Press published the English translation, which indicates that it is not a text for a general readership. Having a university press publish this book indicates that only a select readership would be interested in the material covered in the text, which ultimately confines who may or may not have access to the work.

Similarly, and in a much more drastic fashion, Nhã Ca has been silenced in her home country. When it was originally published under the government of South Vietnam, it won a national prize (xx). However, when the South fell to the North, the new communist regime did not take kindly to what Nhã Ca had to say about the revolution, mainly because the piece did not take a steadfast pro-communist stance. As a result, “*Mourning Headband for Hue* was publicly burned alongside many other South Vietnamese works officially deemed subversive” (xxi). While this may seem like a drastic measure, it was not necessarily out of the ordinary, for as Dror points out, not only

was Nhã Ca's work publicly burned, but so were many others that were considered as "subversive" material. One can understand why the new Socialist Republic of Vietnam may consider her work as such, since she often takes a scathing and unapologetic tone when she writes about the communist cadres in the war. Given that she does not necessarily approve of either sides' – the communists' or the American-backed regime's – methods of reunifying her country, Vân explains the different political uses of pronouns to express one's uncommitted attitude toward the Communist forces of the war:

We usually use the word "they" to refer to the Việt Cộng and to avoid the word "liberators." In fact, would it not be ironic and cruel to use the word "liberation" at the sight of such pain and utter destruction in the city? Even when we just entered the narrow lane leading to my uncle's house, I saw at once a flag of liberation, tattered, hanging on a guava tree in front of a collapsed house. (90)

In pointing to the destruction the "liberation" forces bring with them and the tattered appearance of its own insignia, Vân notes the irony imbued in the term "liberation" when it is followed by demonstrations of extreme violence. In fact, for Vân, the real victims of the war are not the soldiers who fight on either side of the revolution – the communists or the American puppets. Rather, the true victims of the war are the civilians themselves.

When Vân advocates that the true victims of the battle for Hue and the war itself are the civilians of Vietnam, those who have no political allegiance to either side, but merely wish for their own and their families' survival, she clearly demonstrates that *Mourning Headband for Hue* is an antiwar work. In the "Small Preface" to the memoir, Nhã Ca asks her generation to take responsibility for the war and the destruction it has caused, not only in terms of lives taken and/or maimed, but also in terms of the

demolition of entire cities that once held such beauty and historical import as the city of Hue did. She pleads, “Our generation, the generation that likes to use the most beautiful and showy words: not only must we tie a mourning headband for Hue and for our homeland, which are being destroyed, but we must also take responsibility for Hue and for our homeland” (10).²⁹ To underscore the import of taking responsibility, and to absolve those who fight in the war, but at the same time place blame upon the war itself, Vân, upon looking at the ruins of the city while aboard a helicopter on her way back to Saigon, questions:

They [the Communists] are also people, aren't they? Oh Hue...do you, Hue, do you hate and resent them? Eyes that remain open deep down in the black soil, glowering there in that lightless world, do you hate and resent them? Surely you do, right? But you must not hate and resent them; rather you must hate and resent the bullets brought into this country to transform us into people who are killed or arrested, forced to kill people, kill siblings, fathers and mothers, those of our own flesh and blood. I have seen so much of torn human flesh and entrails during the past month. How much more will be enough so that we will never forget? (285)

Even though humans are the actors in this gross drama, she is reluctant to place blame on them. Rather it is the political circumstances of the war, as evidenced in the reference that “bullets [are] brought into this country” by outside agents – such as the US and Russia, that deserve the blame for the utter desolation wreaked upon the city and the nation. To further explain how devastatingly Hue has been left in shambles due to the offensive, she likens the city, when seen from an aerial view, to a corpse: “A gigantic dead body is lying with arms and legs outstretched – fallen, torn, with skin and flesh

²⁹ Tying a white mourning headband around one's forehead is a funereal cultural practice in Vietnam.

coming apart. The enormous corpse of Hue has lost its face, its arms, and its legs, and whatever remains is but a heap of slime turning to mud” (298). Littered with actual corpses of thousands of civilians that were caught in the crossfire in the battle for Hue, the death of the Imperial capital is a loss that she cannot bear.

The complete and utter destruction of Hue symbolizes the havoc war inflicts upon a nation, upon its citizens, and demonstrates war’s attempt to obliterate a nation’s history, for if Imperial capitals are razed then all of its historical monuments and the cultural import those hold are demolished as well. Vãn searchingly questions the impetus for such chaos, while trying to pinpoint the culprits for these despicable acts of violence:

So many guns, so many cannons, so many bombs have torn to pieces this entire small city, the beloved native place of mine. I am surprised when I think why all the artillery from America, from Russia, from Czechoslovakia suddenly lands in the hands of North Vietnamese and South Vietnamese to pour down on a small city that is as good-natured as is the city of Hue. Ammunition from all the faraway countries, sent here in the name of helping the South, assisting the North, suddenly focused on a small city, tearing into pieces its innocent flesh, chopping off the arms, legs, and faces of so many people. Images of pieces of arms and legs can be seen along the roads; scenes of furtive love expressed amid gunfire in a corner of a solemn Catholic church inundated with screaming and crying. An image of a corpse of a newborn baby bundled in its mother’s blouse...oh life...why must it still go on? (233)

She also notes how the beauty of this ancient city has now been completely ruined by the offensive when she asks:

what about the venerable old Citadel, the last vestiges of a historical era with golden branches in jade palaces, ancient porcelain vases painted with flowers from hundreds of royal generations, and an abandoned, empty golden throne? Now it’s all finished; Soviet Russian and Czech guns along with American guns

have razed to the ground and crushed into bits a venerable old city, a city of history. Never can it be rebuilt again. (270)

Caught in an ideological proxy war, the Vietnamese, along with their historical vestiges, are wiped out. Hopeless and forlorn, Vân mourns the death of her once-beautiful, ancient city of Hue. The city likened to a corpse and filled with rotting bodies paints a portrait of utter desolation and the culprit she names for this destruction is the war itself. It is this bipartisan standpoint that refuses to blame either the Americans, their puppet regime in the South, or the communist cadres that make loyal Vietnamese Party leaders cringe with distaste.

Similarly, writing such viewpoints in 1969, after the war had turned favorably toward North Vietnamese efforts, at least in American public opinion, markedly diverges from American early narratives of the war that were popular at the time. Michael Herr's *Dispatches* published in 1968 sought not to blame the war for the destruction it caused. Rather, Herr's agenda in his New Journalistic piece was concerned with expressing how the war affected all American citizens, as echoed in his last line, "Vietnam, Vietnam, Vietnam, we've all been there" (260). Nhã Ca's memoir, however, supports neither of these rhetorics – a pro-communist one, nor one that solely focuses on the American casualties of the war. Instead, she presents a narrative of difference that refuses to conform to these *de la mode* tropes. Unfortunately, her narrative is so different that it has been relegated to silent obscurity due to its book burning in Vietnam and its very late translation into English. On the other hand, its translation into English perhaps points to a stance of openness that university presses (and by extension, their readerships as well)

are finally willing to take. It is this position of non-identification and understanding that I argue readers must adopt in Chapter Four.

Returning to these images of torn flesh and limbs that are scattered throughout the streets of Hue, Nhã Ca positions the real victims of this atrocity as the civilians themselves, for with death comes the breaking up of families. Dror claims that “[d]espite possible ideological controversies, Nhã Ca’s work is distinguished by its strong voice elucidating the experiences of civilians trapped for weeks in a horrible battle” (liv).

While trying to flee the falling bombs and the incoming North Vietnamese, South Vietnamese, and American soldiers, Vân cannot help but notice how there are so many innocent civilians caught in the crossfire.

In this city, so many people are dead – so many children and adults; so many mothers have given up, leaving their children desolate and lonely. But those young children, can they survive until the battle ends? While in the church [a place where she and her family sought refuge], I saw some children whose parents were killed by bullets, and they followed groups of refugees. They ran back and forth, punch-drunk, being bullied by some, being shouted at by others. Starving, they steal and snatch from other people. What if I die, or if I don’t die, yet all the same still lose my children? (83)

This image of childless mothers and motherless children abound throughout the memoir.

Notably, Nhã Ca ends her work with this very image: of an orphan directionless and wandering, setting off on his own in the new and unfamiliar city of Đà Nẵng since his home city of Hue has been reduced to rubble. After returning the blood-soaked coat Vân lent this small child while aboard the helicopter that took them out of the ruined Imperial city, Vân asks this nameless child where he is now going. Without responding to her

question except with a shake of the head, she wishes him luck on his journey in the final line of the memoir: “Little beloved child, little beloved child of Hue, little beloved child of Vietnam – I wish good luck to you” (305). Repetitively structuring the sentence and well-wishing in this manner, this newly orphaned child not only points to the ultimate destruction this offensive has caused, but she also situates this orphan as an allegory for the current state of the Vietnamese nations. Divided, lost, and experiencing such pain and loneliness, the Vietnamese family has died. Not only are the two nations of North and South Vietnam politically divided and embroiled in a most gruesome and costly war, but the war itself has made its citizens forget the national familial ties that once bound their people. If the family functions as a social network in microcosm for the Vietnamese nation (Jamieson 22), then Vietnam has been shattered through war, which effectively splits up the great Vietnamese family. Instead, they are reduced to the state of being orphaned. They have nowhere to go and no family to which they can return.

In representing the warring Vietnamese nations as ones that have been ruthlessly destroyed, Nhã Ca’s memoir provides an account that is not in keeping with conventional rhetorics of the war. Hers is not a work that supports the viewpoint that there was a common goal amongst Vietnamese participants for the independence and reunification of the Vietnamese nation, a stance that is typically endorsed by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Neither is *Mourning Headband* a narrative that features American soldiers enmeshed in a hopeless quagmire. Given that her work takes neither of these positions, for it is an antiwar text, Nhã Ca, and Vân by extension, has been silenced for decades by the American literary market and the communist government of Vietnam on the simple

premise that her experience is different from and therefore not in keeping with conventional, accepted methods and standards of writing about this war. Having already suffered a massive tragedy of witnessing the demolition of the Imperial city of Hue, this trauma is only worsened by this silencing act, an act that even further subjugates marginalized and dissenting perspectives on what it means to lose such a cultural staple of the nation and its history. In essence, American publishing houses and the Vietnamese government use silence as a cultural tool to subjugate and obscure dissenting perspectives.

When Displacement Translates into Voicelessness

lê thi diem thúy's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* recounts the story of a girl and her family who immigrate to America in the aftermath of the Vietnam war as boat people. Her experiences of relocation are at first articulated through the voice and perspective of a young girl at the age of six and the story follows her diasporic experience into adulthood. Readers learn that the narrator has experienced some horrible tragedies – being separated from her mother for two years until she can join them in America, losing her brother while in Vietnam in an accident that resulted in his drowning and death, and being separated from her father in Vietnam while he was imprisoned in a re-education camp. Provided that she has experienced such traumas, her immigration to America produces a displacement that translates itself into an embodied silence, one that is both spurred by tragedy and one that is inherited from her father. Intertwining these ideas of inherited silence and situationally-produced silence highlights cultural differences

between American and Vietnamese ways of living in the world, for this silence that she comes to embody is imposed upon her by white America.

Scholars tend to agree that the unnamed narrator has a voice in lê's novel. Xiaojing Zhou maintains that "*The Gangster* enacts what *I Hotel* [another Asian American novel] seeks to accomplish: 'To haunt a disappearing landscape. To forever embed this geography with our visions and voice'" (302). Yu-yen Liu argues that Dao Strom, lê, and Lan Cao, all three Vietnamese-American women authors, (re)invent a new *topos*³⁰ to articulate and reformulate notions of their home country – Vietnam. In regards to lê, she connects this new reimagining as one that is embedded in a sense of loss. Liu claims that this "narrative is not simply a story of poignant relocation, of assimilation, but also of profound reflection on the life that was lost" (76). This loss ultimately invokes a traumatic experience in the narrator, but this trauma then opens up possibilities for the "beginnings of alternative voices," ones that resist dominant narratives of the war and begin to "unsettle the overdetermined images of Vietnam" (78).

In my view, however, lê's novel does not result in an articulation of voice – alternative or otherwise. Rather, lê is more concerned with demonstrating how certain voices get overwritten by white America. Given that the narrator is continually misunderstood by the other characters in the novel, she is rewritten in their terms and in how they perceive her, her actions, and her words. Zhou notes how refugees like lê's

³⁰Liu uses this term in a double sense: "In Greek a *topos* means a 'place,' while in Latin it refers to a 'standardized method of constructing or treating an argument.' My main premise straddles the word's dual implications to explore the way that Vietnamese-American women writers articulate a *topos* of their pasts that illustrates a sort of locational discourse which unsettles the overdetermined meanings of 'Vietnam'" (70).

unnamed narrator “become the object of the normative gaze of white America” in novels like *Gangster* (300). In this process of confusion, misunderstanding, and overwriting, the narrator’s voice becomes silenced, which further exacerbates the initial traumas she has suffered. Thus, the overwriting of raced and gendered perspectives to reflect and support white worldviews functions as a double-wounding because it wrenches the voice from the traumatized victim and supplants it with one that substantiates oppressive regimes of power.

The narrator suffers multiple tragedies as a newly arrived immigrant from Vietnam. One of these occurs when her home, located in an Navy housing complex, is demolished so that the owners may make space for more luxurious condominiums, townhomes, and single family homes. When she and her parents were initially notified of this drastic change to their living arrangements, they could not believe that this could legally happen:

When the eviction notice came, we didn’t believe it so we threw it away. It said we had a month to get out. The houses on our block had a new owner who wanted to tear everything down and build better housing for the community. It said we were priority tenants for the new complex, *but we couldn’t afford to pay the new rent so it didn’t matter*. The notice also said that if we didn’t get out in time, all our possessions would be confiscated in accordance with some section of a law book or manual we were supposed to have known about but had never seen. We couldn’t believe the eviction notice so we threw it away. (96, emphasis mine)

For the narrator, it is simply unthinkable that people in this position of power and wealth could alter their lives so abruptly and drastically without having to inform them fully of the situation. The Vietnamese immigrants are unaware of these “law book[s] or

manual[s]” that have the power to change their lives so radically; they are uninformed because they are assumed to have already known. However, no one tells them where this information can be found, nor do the new owners care to elaborate. What’s more, this immigrant family is further constrained by financial limitations imposed upon them, since Ba, the father, is a gardener and Ma works as a seamstress in a factory. They cannot afford the new rent because these occupations are the only ones that are deemed suitable for them given their raced and immigrant statuses in the eyes of white America. Eventually, due to their disbelief that the destruction of their home by people they have never seen could come true, their house and all of their belongings in it are buried in the wreckage of the demolition. “A wrecking ball dances madly through our house,” the narrator tells us, “Everything has burst wide open and sunk down low. [...] There is not a trace of blood anywhere except here, in my throat, where I am telling you all this” (99). This tragedy and the telling of it have severe consequences, not only in terms of homelessness, but also in personal terms; it draws blood and pain from the speaker.

But even speaking of this, and other traumas, is inconsequential, for the narrator finds that she is continually muted with a “quiet” voice, which then is met with an audience who refuses to listen to her. While playing a seven-minutes-in-heaven type of game in her pre-teen years, she finds that her voice comes out “low and quiet” when she expects to hear it laced with “alarm” (58). “[H]e put his hand on my chest. I said, ‘Hey.’ I thought my voice would come out high like an alarm but it came out low and quiet, with a lot of space around it” (58). The “alarm” she speaks of here is not one filled with bodily violation, for she invites his touch, but one of surprise and awe. Regardless, she

does not speak in the way she thinks she should. Instead, she is met with “quiet” repeatedly in response to this new experience of having a boy touch her (58, 63).

It is not surprising that her voice is “quiet,” for this is an attribute she has inherited from her father. As a young girl in Vietnam, “I understood that I, even more than my brother, looked like him. The women would say, ‘You have his eyes, his nose, his dark skin, *his silence*’” (104, emphasis mine). Even when she and her father communicate it is as though they are just “pass[ing] the silence back and forth, like a smoke” (107). Thus, silence is something that she has inherited from her father, as though it is a kind of stance one takes toward life: quiet, nondisruptive, and conciliatory. However, this is not solely the case. Silence is something that is imposed upon her and her father by white America, a land chock full of people that strain to make the world whiter. As a newly arrived immigrant, Ba, her father, takes a job as a painter in exchange for room and board for him and his daughter. Melvin Russell, the son of the man who sponsors their immigration along with four other Vietnamese “uncles,” employs Ba and the other four men as “house painters and general maintenance men” for the various properties Mel manages. Repeatedly and almost to the point of obsession, Mel instructs Ba and the others to repaint these properties, “to ‘touch them up,’ ‘make like new,’ ‘make white again’” (9). “On almost every day of the week, you could find them working: five small-boned Vietnamese men climbing ladders in empty rooms, painting the white walls whiter” (9). This painting job leaves these Vietnamese men confused. They believe that “[s]o much white is unlucky,” that “[l]ayers of white bury you” as though the multiple coats of white dress “you up for your own funeral” (9). Traditionally, in Vietnam white

is associated with mourning, as we have examined in Nhã Ca's work. In America, on the other hand, whiteness conjures connotations of pristineness, cleanliness, and purity. This little rebellion on behalf of the Vietnamese men that they share only with each other articulates a cultural miscommunication between American values and Vietnamese ones. A miscommunication such as this, and a seemingly inconsequential one, ultimately results in a failure of dialogue and a failure in understanding others' subject positions. As Krista Ratcliffe explains, "*understanding* means listening to discourses not *for* intent but *with* intent – with the intent to understand not just the claims but the rhetorical negotiations of understanding as well" (28, emphasis original). Part and parcel of this goal of "*standing under*" discourses (28, emphasis original), is the acknowledging and valuing of differences. Without such valuing, one's stance cannot be understood, and it cannot be heard in the first place, which promotes a negation of worldviews as though they simply do not exist.

When discourses and perspectives are not understood, people are interpreted as "strange," which results in Othering marginalized peoples. Not being able to sleep at night, the narrator tells her audience that she and her father would walk the streets of San Diego and window shop. This gets interpreted as "strange behavior" as reported in a "Neighborhood News" article (110):

A Vietnamese man and a young girl were seen wandering the aisles of the Safeway Supermarket on University Avenue between the hours of midnight and 1 a.m.

According to the store manager, their behavior was "*strange*" but *not in any way threatening*. When asked to clarify, the manager explained, "Everything seemed

to interest them. I mean, everything, from the TV dinners to the 10-pound bags of dog food.”

The man was seen picking up various items – a pack of shoelaces, a pine-tree car freshener, a box of Jell-O, a Pyrex measuring cup – and studying them. According to other customers and store employees, he would then show the items to the girl and encourage her to hold them for a minute before he carefully returned them to the shelf.

From the *random* way they went through the store, it was clear they were not looking for anything in particular. (110, emphasis mine)

Awed by the variety of products available in the Safeway, the narrator and her father are viewed as “strange,” their behavior “random.” At the same time, they are also seen as nonthreatening. In this way, they represent the “model minority” due to their docility (Nguyen 23). Viet Thanh Nguyen notes how there is a compulsion to portray Asian Americans as either the “bad subject,” those who are “dangerous,” or as the “model minority” even among Asian American writers themselves (23). This dichotomous representation presents problems because “these practices” of black-and-white, either-or representations of Asian Americans “reveal that Asian America is an often willing and enthusiastic participant in global capitalism, racial domination, and class stratification” (23). Even though this prescriptive writing of the model minority is present in this scene, it is important to remember that lê is not endorsing this kind of view. Rather, it is white America that views the narrator and her father this way. Normative whiteness has written them into this role. What white America does not know about Ba, though, is that in Vietnam he was a “gangster,” a man who was considered so deviant that the narrator’s mother’s family disowned her mother when she decided to marry him. Thus, lê gives her

readers a character that straddles these two categories, resulting in a man who does not necessarily fit either prescription. What matters here, though, is the fact that white America views Ba and the narrator as nonthreateningly “strange,” as people who engage in random behavior and are awed by the opportunity of choice, even if it is only with consumptive products like dog food and the “different varieties of salt available” (110). Qualifying their behavior as “random” suggests that they are motivated by something other than logic, which marks how different they are from the majority in this adopted homeland since Americans tend to place great pride in reason. Interlacing this scene with awe further insinuates that they have come from an impoverished, “backward” background, one that will impede their ability to fully assimilate to American culture.

Just as Ba does not fit either stereotype of the model minority or the bad subject, the narrator also does not fit into American society, for she is perpetually stuck in a placeless position. Just as she names her father as a “gangster,” she also tells her readers that she wishes to become “the gangster we are all looking for” once she grows up (93). Expressing this desire demonstrates how elusive and fantastical these stereotypical categories are, for no one truly embodies a stereotype. In stating this, the narrator rebels against such debilitating stereotypes by using the bad subject, “dangerous” stereotype. She wishes to dismantle how others perceive her in a disruptive, “dangerous” way. By using stereotypical categorization to negate this idea of an either-or existence, she lands herself in neither category, which ends up defying the fallacious logic that substantiates the existence of these stereotypes.

Her placelessness is also demonstrated through her inaccessibility to a listening audience. No one understands her and even when she does use her voice no one listens. As an adult and after running away from home, she reveals to her readers: “It was known that my parents had a daughter who lived on the East Coast, somewhere near New York. Some people heard that she had run away and some people heard that she had simply gone away. That was many years ago and now the rumor was she was writing stories. No one had read them and no one had met her. They imagined that her English was very good” (148). Even as a writer and imagined to be articulate and accessible in this occupation, the narrator has no readers. Further, she cannot even clarify how she came to the East Coast and correct the rumors because “no one had met her.” She, herself, is merely a story and not a person with her own history, identity, or even a voice. There is no listening audience at her disposal at all. Even though she has learned to use her voice through the writing of stories, there is no one to listen to or read them.

As a result of being silenced, of being overwritten by white America, she feels as though she is a butterfly trapped in amber. As a child when she was living with Mel, her father, and the four Vietnamese uncles, she finds Mel’s paperweight in which there is a golden brown butterfly encased in a “thick glass disk” “trapped in a pool of yellow jelly” (24, 25). Trying to figure out how this insect got stuck in such a predicament, “I held the disk up to my ear and listened. At first all I heard was the sound of my own breathing, but then I heard a soft rustling, like wings brushing against a windowpane. The rustling was a whispered song. It was the butterfly’s way of speaking, and I thought I understood it” (25). She interprets her own breathing as the butterfly’s voice and hears the trapped

soul plead for release. The insect is alive but no one hears how it wishes to escape this suffocating mode of existence much like the narrator herself. Eventually, she tries to free the butterfly by hurling the disk into the wall, but the paperweight misses the wall and crashes into a display cabinet that houses some of Mel's prized possessions, glass animal figurines he inherited from his father. Having broken not only the paperweight but also the contents of the display cabinet, she, her father, and the four Vietnamese uncles are cast out of Mel's house. This is her first brush with homelessness in America. Like the butterfly, she feels constrained by her new habitat, America, but once she is freed she is only to become displaced once again, having nowhere to go. Thus, her continual displacement throughout the novel – cast out of Mel's house, evicted from her apartment that gets demolished, having run away from home at age sixteen – translates itself into a muted existence, one where no one listens to her or her stories because her audience – white America – refuses to see her on her terms. Rather, she is strange, alien, unrooted in place. She is even further unrooted in identity, as exemplified in her namelessness. There is no fixity to the narrator; her namelessness points to how she is at once Asian America and no one at all. This displacement in place and identity results in her being silenced, for her identity, behavior, and speech is overwritten by how others, namely white America, sees and interprets her.

Conclusion

Being silenced holds the traumatic power to doubly-wound a victim. American women nurses in Vietnam suffer from this silencing in a depressively debilitating way, in

not being able to function in society and in being deprived of the opportunity to work through their trauma since doing so demands that they articulate their experiences. However, it is not only people who lord this power over others to wrench their voices from them. Socially constructed constraints also have the power to render someone voiceless. This is especially apparent in Laura Lâm's text when Jasmine justifies how she has been forced into a position of quiet acquiescence by Vietnamese cultural traditions that mandate women to be "nondisruptive." What's more, other institutions of power like the American literary market and the government of Vietnam can further constrain a writer's voice and mute dissenting perspectives, as exemplified in Nhã Ca's memoir. In regards to Vietnamese-American voices, lê shows how raced and gendered diasporic voices are overwritten and thereby silenced in the process to redirect attention to how whites perceive the world. In demonstrating these various ways in which certain persons and institutions can wield oppressive power to silence others, I present a more complex interrogation into what constitutes trauma. I also contend that traumatic experience is a process, one that does not end with the finality of the event's conclusion, but one that can worsen with time dependent upon one's social context post-event.

CHAPTER IV

USING SILENCE TO COPE WITH LONG-RANGING TRAUMA

[S]ilence is too often read as simple passivity in situations where it has actually taken on an expressive power. Employed as a tactical strategy or inhabited in deference to authority, silence resonates loudly along the corridors of purposeful language use. Whether choice or im/position, silence can reveal positive or negative abilities, fulfilling or withholding traits, harmony or disharmony, success or failure. Silence can deploy power; it can defer to power. It all depends. (Glenn xi)

During many of the interviews [with American women Vietnam War veterans] there were long silences on the tapes. They are indicated in [*A Piece of My Heart*] by a series of dots. But the dots can't possibly describe a moment when, at a dining room table late at night with tears welling in a woman's eyes, a sentence would drift away. There were times when the flow of a memory would take the person to such an unpleasant place that she would hesitate and then shift her trend of thought to avoid it. Some pauses lasted until the silence in the room became impossible to endure. (Walker 4)

Covered with righteous platitudes, theirs [the Americans'] was an essentially colonialist vision. [...] When their 'counterparts' [the GVN and ARVN forces] did not take their instruction, these advisers treated the Vietnamese like bad pupils, accusing them of corruption or laziness, and attempted to impose authority over them. And when the attempt at coercion failed, they retreated from the Vietnamese entirely, barricading themselves [...] behind the assumption of American superiority and the assumption that the Vietnamese were not quite human like themselves. (Fitzgerald 369)

In *The Spirit of Mourning: History, Memory and the Body*, Paul Connerton distinguishes between two types of silences: intentional versus imposed silences. Those who invoke intentional silences do so for various purposes, of which he notes religious and cultural reasons for his project. Imposed silences, which I examined in the previous

chapter, are those that people use to force others into a position of inaudibility. The main difference between these two types, for Connerton, “hinges upon the question of agency” (56). In other words, who has the right to speak about what and when, and who chooses to use silence determines the significant difference between imposed and intentional silences. In this chapter, I analyze works by Lan Cao, Keith Walker, Monique Truong, Frances Fitzgerald, Gloria Emerson, and Laura Lãm to argue that women authors of the Vietnam/American War often use silence for various rhetorical purposes. Lan Cao uses silence to indicate how Vietnamese-Americans feel the necessity to reinvent themselves in terms of identity and history so that they may assimilate into their new adopted culture in the United States. Yet, other authors like Monique Truong, Keith Walker, and, again, Lan Cao use silence as a form of protection, to shield their protagonists from misinterpretation or condemnation. Only once marginalized characters have used silence as a form of quiet introspection can they then expose how silence has historically oppressed them and their voices. Authors like Frances Fitzgerald and Gloria Emerson use silence by exposing what is often not said – ideas and viewpoints that are contrary to popular American beliefs – to name the fallacious underpinnings of various American mythologies. Jasmine in Laura Lãm’s *Late Blossom* uses silence in a similar fashion as Fitzgerald and Emerson to bring narratives of the war that are often un(der)represented in American considerations of the conflict to the fore, particularly when she breaks the silences that surround common misperceptions of the event. Authors like Fitzgerald, Emerson, and Lãm, therefore, make the presence of silence in American discourse

apparent so that they may make room for their differing perspectives, those that certain institutions of power try to keep at bay.

In these multifaceted ways, these women authors use silence to express the injustices in privileging certain voices over others. Thus, they appropriate the very tool that historically has been used to marginalize their experiences and mute their voices, so that they may carve out a space for their own voices to be heard. In calling attention to the necessity of preserving silence to maintain American mythologies, these authors use silence in order to break it so that they may undermine its potency in mythologies' cultural constructions. Further, when characters like Mai in Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* use silence to reinvent the self in becoming Vietnamese-American, they suggest the impossibility in doing so, even though the desire to fully assimilate is there regardless. When silence is used as a form of protecting the self from one's own traumatic memories, Cao, Walker, and Truong demonstrate how silence is intricately tied to traumatic experience in a way that is different than what I explored in my second chapter. Rather than it functioning as a double-wound, silence becomes a way for these women protagonists to cope with their trauma, especially since the kinds of trauma they experience defy common conceptions of what constitutes a traumatic experience. In these ways, the use of silence is recursive; women appropriate this tool as a mode of expression to indicate how they have been historically oppressed on the basis of their gender and/or race, and to point out how silence itself functions as a new method of coping with trauma.

According to leading psychoanalytic theories that are largely adopted in literary trauma studies, a singular event, locatable in place and time, instigates a traumatic experience. Undergoing such an experience produces debilitating symptoms: “intrusion, avoidance, negative alterations in cognitions and mood, and alterations in arousal and reactivity,” as outlined in the most recent fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders* (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs). In order to begin to cope with such trauma, scholars emphasize the value of catharsis (Freud), rendering the victim’s experiences into words, which turns coping into an “articulatory practice” (LaCapra 22). This largely accepted paradigm provokes multiple questions: What if the event is not singular and specifically locatable in time and place, but rather has a long-ranging trajectory? If one or one’s people have been subjugated for centuries, as the Vietnamese have in racial and colonial terms, then does not that also constitute traumatic experience? Or, what if one, forced into exile from one’s homeland (whether it is self-imposed or not), desires to assimilate to their newly adopted foreign country, but finds s/he cannot? Do not the myths of America being the land of the free and plenty also give emigres false hopes that inevitably subject them to being racialized and subsequently deemed inferior in the US? Surely, those conditions would qualify as traumatic experience. When women authors use silence as a method for self-reinvention and as a way to protect themselves from openly sharing their own traumatic memories, they show us that traumatic experience, one that is long-lasting and far-ranging, manifests itself in layers that are exacerbated by oppressive sociocultural constructs and therefore tends to get even more deeply internalized in the victim. When trauma is that entrenched in one’s

identity and history, articulating the experience defies language. Thus, these victims must use silence to begin to approach its intricacies, for as Cheryl Glen claims:

silence is too often read as simple passivity in situations where it has actually taken on an expressive power. Employed as a tactical strategy or inhabited in deference to authority, silence resonates loudly along the corridors of purposeful language use. Whether choice or im/position, silence can reveal positive or negative abilities, fulfilling or withholding traits, harmony or disharmony, success or failure. Silence can deploy power; it can defer to power. It all depends. (xi)

By thoroughly incorporating silence into their protagonists, these women authors deploy the power of silence to demonstrate that these characters can begin to cope with their trauma on their own terms through the use of quiet introspection. Silence, then, becomes its own mode of expression, becoming neither language or anti-language but something in between that allows these women to gain a sense of agency that patriarchal regimes of power have continually denied them. What's more, through the use of silence, these women also rescript what we consider to qualify as traumatic experience.

Silence as a Strategy for Self-Reinvention

Mai in Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* claims that she has no history due to her positioning as a 1.5 generation Vietnamese-American. Thanh, Mai's mother, was forcibly separated from her father and Mai's grandfather, Baba Quan, on the day of their departure from Vietnam to the United States. Cao's novel, then, recounts the traumatic story of this separation as Mai searches for Baba Quan so that the family may be reunited in America. What gets revealed to Mai in her mother's suicide letter at the end of the

story, though, is the fact that this reunion could never take place, for Baba Quan is “a Vietcong from whom [Thanh is] still trying to escape” (227).

Reviewers seem to agree that the novel’s title functions as a metaphor for Mai Nguyen’s subject position (Banerian 692, Schinto 26). “A slender bamboo suspension crossing rural canals, the monkey bridge (*cầu khi*) serves as a metaphor for the tenuous span the immigrant must traverse as she balances her life in two worlds” (Banerian 692, emphasis original). While Jeanne Schinto calls Cao’s first novel one that is filled with “memorable characterizations” (26), James Banerian provides a critique. He claims that geographical and historical inaccuracies in Cao’s work resembles common American misperceptions. “Like many Americans, [Cao] inaccurately places Vietnam south of the equator, and those familiar with the language and habits of the Vietnamese might question her rendering of certain terms and mannerisms” (692). Although Ian Duong largely praises the novel, he cites another flaw with Cao’s work: “it is filled with ethnographic information about the customary aspects of an ‘exotic’ culture: food, ritual, holidays, religion, and mythology” (377). As a result, Cao tends to overexplain the differences between Vietnamese and American cultures (Duong 377). Even though Banerian faults Cao for perpetuating common American misperceptions about Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American people, Michele Janette claims that rhetorical moves such as these are purposeful, for they disrupt readers’ tendency to rely on authors for authentic representations of life. Janette argues that “Cao deploys irony to disrupt understandings and expectations of sincere, authentic, or sentimental narratives of Vietnam” (50). *Monkey Bridge*, for Janette, is entrenched in a purposeful irony that

“signals to readers that her narrative is not available for appropriation or absorption. More than that, her novel actively disrupts ‘knowing’ as practiced within Orientalist discourse” (74). “Rather than offering comforting assurance of authentic cross-cultural expertise, Cao leaves readers with the uncanny feeling of knowing that their knowledge is a problem, is partial, and comes to them pre-scripted” (74). These ironic challenges to Orientalist thinking provide a “thrust-and-parry” representation of diasporic experience, which she calls “guerilla irony” (53). In my reading, her story reveals two different modes in which the two protagonists – Mai and Thanh – use silence for different rhetorical purposes. Thanh uses silence to shield her daughter from their shared familial painful and traumatic past, which will be investigated in the next section of this chapter, whereas Mai silences the “truth” of her heritage and Vietnamese identity in an attempt to better assimilate to American culture.

Situating her project in trauma studies, Michelle Satterlee contends that *Monkey Bridge* challenges dominant conceptions of trauma as articulated by the West. She specifically questions how well Freud’s, Cathy Caruth’s, and Pierre Janet’s theories can map onto characters like Mai. For Satterlee, the novel shows its readers “that trauma is not experienced in universally similar ways, but tied to specific historical periods and places” (138). One of the major contributions the novel lends to trauma studies is that “rather than claiming that trauma shatters identity, the novel argues that trauma disrupts and causes a reformulation of previous conceptions of self and relations to the world” (139). Claire Stocks also applies trauma theories to Cao’s novel. Stocks asserts that Thanh’s traumatic past in Vietnam becomes an unavoidable inheritance for Mai.

“Thanh’s mythic distortions, erasures, and unspeakable silences testify to the difficulties of narrating both a personal and national history that has serious negative implications for the present and future, but the symptoms of her evasions also serve to restore the history she attempts to erase” (99).

Although these scholars note the prominence of trauma in the novel and offer suggestions that negotiate trauma’s presence in these characters’ lives, what they fail to consider is how silence is used as a medium to convey the painful memories of that traumatic past, and to negotiate Mai’s interstitial subject position in American society. Mai even confesses that she “had become the intermediary” (88), translating English into Vietnamese and explaining away American cultural differences to her mother. This presents a significant problem for Mai, for her “dilemma was that, seeing both sides [American and Vietnamese] to everything, I belonged to neither” (88). Evidence of Mai not belonging to either world – Vietnam or America – yet still bodily and spatially incorporating both is particularly seen in her very name. Waiting to be called in for her college interview, Mai’s name is called:

“Mai Nguyen,” I repeated to myself. In the prevailing hush of the room, it had an especially clumsy ring, *an undertone of impermanence*. It felt, in fact, like *a borrowed name*, on loan to satisfy my teachers’ insistence on rhyme and order. “Mai Nguyen” was my American name, or at least the American spin on my name. But *it sounded unnatural*. After all, tradition dictated that “Nguyen,” a family name, be granted pride of place, a position at the beginning. “Mai,” an individual name, should tag a few respectful steps behind. (125, emphasis mine)

The reordering of her name from Nguyen Mai to Mai Nguyen reflects not only the cultural disparities of life and identity between Vietnam and America, but this new

“American spin” on her name also feels foreign, “unnatural,” “borrowed,” and “impermanen[t].” It is as though Mai is from both worlds, yet belongs to neither. This reordering of her name marks her as different, unique from the rest. To foster a “sense of self-uniqueness” is one of the potential meanings for the use of silence (Johannesen qtd. in Glenn 16). This renaming, and thus silencing the original incantation of her name, is not something that she finds cumbersome in the extreme. Although she notes how her own name feels unfamiliar in the previous scene, she also tells her readers that “‘If you have to be different, you have to be acceptably different,’ I would think to myself. Stereotypes aren’t my enemy, as long as we tinker with them in a way that strikes an American chord” (147). This is precisely her dilemma: striking a balance between what is “acceptably different” in her new adopted homeland and yet remaining unique and independent from the ethnic past that follows her into this new geography. What is also interesting is the pronunciation of Mai Nguyen’s name. When Amy Layton, the interviewer, calls her into the office she asks if her name is pronounced “Mai” or “May.” Mai affirms that it is indeed “Mai.” This pronunciation homonymically reflects the Vietnamese word for America: “Mỹ.” Thus, the very naming of this protagonist demonstrates how Mai is both American and Vietnamese; however, in each culture she is not considered as such, given the interviewer’s questioning of its pronunciation and how similarly “Mai” reflects the Vietnamese word for America.

In an attempt to straddle both worlds and maintain her acceptable uniqueness, Mai maintains and incorporates silence to better reflect what American society wishes to see. Through articulations of silence and revisions of language, Mai attempts to assimilate

into American culture, even though that itself is impossible.³¹ Mai finds that a certain power comes with the ability to translate this new American world to her mother. “Inside my new tongue, my real tongue, was an astonishing power,” Mai narrates (37). “For my mother and her Vietnamese neighbors, I became the keeper of the word, the only one with access to the light-world. Like Adam, I had the God-given right to name all the fowls of the air and all the beasts of the field. [...] The right to name, I quickly discovered, also meant the right to stand guard over language and the right to claim unadulterated authority” (37). This power and authority, however, does not come without a cost. She realizes that “we only have to let one thing go – the language we think in, or the composition of our dream, the grass roots clinging underneath its rocks – and all at once everything goes” (36-7). The cost, therefore, of having such power – of naming, telling, translating, and revising – is the relinquishing, the silencing, of one’s native language, the one “we think in.”

Given that Mai has such power to reinvent not only herself in reordering her name to fit American naming traditions, but she also has the power to instill American principles in daily life when she translates conversations and television programs for her mother. In one particular scene of the novel, Mai translates the plot of a Bionic Woman episode to her mother, revising it to align with her newly adopted Americanized dogma:

³¹ Lisa Lowe in *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* has articulated how racialized immigrants, particularly Asian Americans, have been denied full cultural assimilation by white America throughout American history, especially in terms of how they have been excluded from being considered citizens in the eyes of the law.

And since my mother couldn't understand half of what anyone was saying, television watching, for me, was translating and more. This, roughly, was how things went in our living room:

The Bionic Woman had just finished rescuing a young girl, approximately my age, from drowning in a lake where she'd gone swimming against her mother's wishes. Once out of harm's way, Jaime made the girl promise she'd be more careful next time and listen to her mother.

Translation: the Bionic Woman rescued the girl from drowning in the lake, but commended her for her magnificent deeds, since the girl had heroically jumped into the water to rescue a prized police dog.

"Where's the dog?" my mother would ask. "I don't see him."

"He's not there anymore, they took him to the vet right away. Remember?" I sighed deeply.

"Oh," my mother said. "It's strange. Strong girl, Bionic Woman." (38)

As Michele Janette points out, Mai revises the story in this episode "to suit her own purposes," to reflect a "strong, independently acting and heroic young woman" (71), depicting a type of womanhood that is more valued in the United States than in Vietnam.

In post-revolution Vietnamese society, Lisa A. Long demonstrates that women

recast the four traditional virtues of "industry, appearance, speech, and behavior" to focus on the woman's role in a modern industrialized world: women should, first, work hard; second, they should appear gracious, courteous, and intelligent to be a "female leader to solve successfully all affairs"; they should speak sweetly and patiently to "increase their powers of persuasion and the effectiveness of work"; and, finally, they should behave in a stereotypically feminine fashion to work for "the welfare of other people." (6)

Rather than telling her mother what really happened in the Bionic Woman episode – that a mischievous daughter openly acted against her mother's wishes and as a result almost

drowned from not heeding her mother's advice – Mai revises the story to reflect American values: strong womanhood, valiant behavior, and independent thinking. Her mother even finds this revision persuasive when she calls the Bionic Woman a strong girl. Thus, Mai's agenda is accomplished in convincingly articulating and inculcating American values in her own home. What is important to note, however, is that in this revision, she also silences the truth, what actually happened in the television episode. By subverting the truth, she permits herself the opportunity to reinvent the story. As a result, she highlights different values and principles in how one thinks about oneself in America; the emphasis changes from how women are expected to act “for the benefit of the culture” (Long 6) to how women are expected to act as independent, free-thinking agents.

While Mai highlights these American values in her translations, she still finds it quite difficult to fully assimilate into American society, given that her body bears racial markers that serve as a reminder of the horrible war the US lost in Vietnam. This point of contention between attaining the American Dream and being racialized is particularly noted when Mai narrates,

Not only could we [Vietnamese-American immigrants] become anything we wanted to be in America, we could change what we had once been in Vietnam. Rebirthing the past, we called it, claiming what had once been a power reserved only for gods and other immortal beings. [...] There was, after all, something awesome about a truly uncluttered beginning, *the complete absence of identity, of history*. (41, emphasis mine)

To “become anything [one] want[s]” is a staple belief in the construction of the American Dream, something in which Mai puts much faith. At the foundation of this myth,

America is positioned as the land of the free, of new beginnings and bright futures. Admittedly, this is not the first time that an author has created a character that so staunchly believes in the American Dream. Philip Beidler asserts that a host of American Vietnam War authors have a common “recurrent focus”: “the desire, born of their immediate sense of the impact of the American experience of Vietnam upon American cultural mythology at large, to reconstitute that mythology as a medium both of historical self-reconsideration and, in the same moment, of historical self-renewal and even self-reinvention” (*Re-Writing* 5). However, Mai was not an American participant in the war. What remains for her is the belief in these American mythologies of self-reinvention and self-renewal as a kind of inheritance bequeathed to her as a newly arrived immigrant in the US. What is different for Mai, as a 1.5 generation Vietnamese-American, is that she is not permitted the luxury of building upon a nationally-shared dark past to create a brighter tomorrow. Instead, for Mai and other immigrants like her, they must “rebirth the past.” In order to do so, one must relinquish one’s former history, and thereby rewrite one’s identity.

This effacement of history and identity is also dictated by the social forces at play in America, something Mai must negotiate:

America had rendered us [Vietnamese immigrants] invisible and at the same time awfully conspicuous. We would have to relinquish not just the little truths – the year of our birth, where we once worked and went to school – but the bigger picture as well.

“We’re guests in this country. And good guests don’t upset their hosts,” I had been told. I was not ignorant of history. We would have to go through the motions and float harmlessly as *permanent guests*, with no more impact on our

surroundings than the mild, leisurely pace of an ordinary day. We would have to make ourselves innocuous and present to the outside world *a mild, freeze-dried version of history*.

After all, there was a difference, especially in 1975, between being a mere foreigner and a Vietnamese. *Foreigner was quaint, but Vietnamese was trouble*. Once, not long ago, Vietnam was just a country. *But in America, Vietnam meant war, antipathies*. I didn't want to parade an unpleasant American experience in America. (42, emphasis mine)

Even though Mai does not wish to conjure up unpleasant recent memories for Americans, she cannot help but do so since her body bears racial markers that only serve to remind Americans of the war they lost in Vietnam. In 1983, the setting of the novel when Mai is a young adult contemplating about going to college, “antipathies” toward the war were still high and those angry feelings were often displaced upon Vietnamese immigrants. Following the fall of Saigon, scholars have classified how Vietnamese persons immigrated to the US into three waves. The first wave commenced in 1975 and brought about 1.5 million Vietnamese persons to America (Pelaud 8). Pelaud notes how this first wave of immigrants was “the fifth largest Asian American group in the United States and the most important population of Vietnamese in the diaspora” (8). The second wave, from 1978-1980, brought more “large numbers” of what came to be called “boat people” to the US (Pelaud 10). Finally, from 1979-1996, during the third wave, America witnessed another estimated 135,000 Vietnamese immigrants come into the country (Pelaud 12). These people dispersed across the American nation, upsetting many white citizens at home. Pete, a character in Bobbie Ann Mason’s novel *In Country*, describes pervasive sentiments about Vietnamese people at home and abroad when he tells Sam

Hughes, the novel's protagonist, that America's Vietnamese enemies "were sneaky, the sneakiest little bastards you ever saw" (135). He further warns Sam that "There's nothing as devious as the Oriental mind" (135). Not only was the enemy seen as "sneaky," but many of the Vietnamese civilians were viewed as those who refused to be saved from their "backward" ways. These debilitating stereotypes – those that insist Vietnamese people are "sneaky," "treacherous,"³² and backward inevitably follow Vietnamese immigrants into the US. Mai, too, cannot escape these debilitating labels. These tenuous and strenuous sociocultural constraints position her as a "permanent guest" who must present "a mild, freeze-dried version of history" so as not to remind the American public of the loss of the war.

Thanh also understands the imperative of not upsetting their American "hosts" and teaches Mai the importance of maintaining a silence in doing so. "'Keep what you see behind your eyes, and save what you think under your tongue. Let your thoughts glow from within. Hide your true self,' my mother warned" (41). Mai interprets and takes this advice as something that will help her fit into American society with as little disruption as possible. All she would have to do is convey characteristics that paint her as the "quaint" foreigner, the model minority, rather than the hostile, communism-toting bad subject. She tries to change how white America views her by adopting American values. However, she can never fully belong in American society due to her racialized

³² Lan P. Duong notes how Vietnamese characters have been positioned as the "treacherous subject" throughout American literary and filmic representations, casting them as those who are steeped in betrayal and as those who should not be trusted.

subject position. Given her racialized interstitial positioning, Mai becomes the “outsider with inside information” (41).

Forcibly removed from Vietnamese society at a relatively young age, seventeen, Mai finds no other recourse than to reinvent herself in her new, adopted homeland. Under the circumstances of self-imposed exile, Mai thoroughly incorporates silence to allow this reinvention to take place. She even admits, “I’d concocted a habit of silence where Vietnam was concerned” (127). Adopting this “habit of silence” not only points to how she has internalized such a position of unspeakability given that silence has become a “habit” of hers, but it also demonstrates how this desire to assimilate is not achievable due to language’s inability to express this kind of permanent manifestation of trauma. As a Vietnamese-American, Mai is placed into a precarious position. Pelaud explains the various racial inequities these immigrants faced in the US:

The forced nature of their initial immigration patterns, the inequities in refugee policies, the erasure of Vietnamese Americans from history, and the violence against them as refugees and as people of color, as well as the voluntary formation of large ethnic enclaves with strong attachments to home politics and culture contrast sharply with commonly accepted views of America as a country of freedom and what it means to be American. From the perspective of refugees, Asian American immigrants and transnational subjects absent from the normative narrative of the nation, the production of Vietnamese American literature is often deeply entangled with national dissemination of images of America as a successful multicultural society and fighter for the free world. Such representations gloss over racial inequalities and tensions and are part of a powerful national revisionist effort in America to forget and forgive itself in order to justify the occupation of other countries through military, economic, and cultural means. (20-1)

The racial inequalities that characters like Mai are subjected to on a daily basis, ones that demand she be “acceptably different,” give her no reprieve from the initial trauma of immigration. Rather, she must revisit this trauma that gets confounded daily by the inequities she experiences in America. Having no time or space away from these conditions, she internalizes a silence that gives her the power to concoct “a truly uncluttered beginning,” one that induces an “absence of identity, of history” so that she may reinvent herself (41). For Mai, this reinvention of her history and identity is necessary because it allows her to break from her traumatic past in Vietnam to create a new life in America. Although that past haunts her in her present world and she can never achieve a state of uncluttered beginnings, what matters for Mai is attaining that break from the Old World.

Silence as a Protective Strategy

Whereas Mai has no “history” or “identity” due to the relinquishing of her voice to adopt American principles, Thanh, her mother, is effectively split by her immigration to the United States. She belongs to the Old World – Vietnam, yet she lives in the new – America, as evidenced in the sudden appearance of the double life-line on her palm (210). To negotiate this double kind of existence, Thanh maintains her silence as a protective strategy, for she does not want the traumas of her old life to infiltrate and contaminate the new one, especially when it comes to passing such traumas down to her daughter. This transference of trauma is something that Thanh considers a real and

present threat, as seen in her explanations of how karma works. In her diary, a medium she uses to communicate with her daughter, Thanh explains to Mai:

No one can escape the laws of karma. [...] Karma is the antithesis of Manifest Destiny, the kind of Manifest Destiny they teach my daughter in her history book about the great American West. Ours is not a nation of pioneers. I truly don't understand the American preoccupation with cowboys who win and Indians who lose. It must be the American sense of invincibility, like a child's sense that nothing she does can possibly have real consequences. (55)

Nations, and surely people as well, can never escape the powerful forces of karma, “[f]or every action there is a reaction” Thanh tells us (55), a view that starkly contrasts with American notions of progress that Mai espouses. Whereas Mai uses silence to highlight the tragedy of America's loss of the war in Vietnam and thereby subjugate her own personal loss of life and history in her immigration to the US, Thanh uses silence to protect her daughter from the destructive karmic forces of their familial history.

The story of Tuyet and Baba Quan, Thanh's parents, is slowly revealed to the reader through Thanh's journal writing that is episodically laced throughout the narrative. As tenant farmers to the most prosperous landowner in the area, Uncle Khan, we learn that Baba Quan and Tuyet are the only ones in the village who are not eventually evicted from their property. Instead of being able to pay Uncle Khan their share of crops due to multiple consecutive years of bad harvests, Baba Quan and Uncle Khan strike up a different kind of deal: Tuyet will become a concubine to Uncle Khan. Having no other choice than to accede to these demands, Tuyet eventually becomes pregnant by Uncle Khan, and the resultant child is none other than Thanh. Thanh's illegitimate birth sets

into motion the malignant karmic forces that follow her throughout her life and presents the danger of affecting her subsequent generations. The circumstances of Thanh's birth so enrage Baba Quan that while the war with the Americans intensifies in Vietnam and under the auspices of killing bourgeois puppet-agents of the South, Baba Quan murders Uncle Khan, plunging a knife into his body. Thanh witnesses this violent murder. Even though this bloody scene and the circumstances of her birth are traumatic enough, what Thanh is most concerned about is keeping this horrendous familial history from Mai because she does not want to harm her daughter by enfolded her into the karmic forces at play in learning that she is a child born of illegitimate birth. However, to break this traumatic cycle, Thanh must reveal the truth of their family's past, which she eventually does in a suicide letter. In this letter she also explains why she could not have told Mai these truths while she was alive:

There are so few words I could have said while I was still alive that could have explained my heart to you. Though I have often thought of revealing that hidden world for you, I also wanted to protect you from the phantoms and apparitions that come with it. In the end, my conflicting desires have left you with an invisible silence that slides like a soft whisper beneath the double shadows of our lives. [...] The silence I feigned does not mean you are not in my thoughts. What worries me perpetually is how to best love and protect you from the karma that divides and subdivides like a renegade cell in the malignant darkness of our lives. (228, 229, italics original³³)

Thus, Thanh uses silence to protect Mai from their traumatic, cancerous past. This past results in an "invisible silence" between her and her daughter and comes to reveal the

³³ Cao uses italics in her text to differentiate between the two narrative strands in her novel. Thanh's voice is marked by italics and Mai's is presented in plain text.

“double shadows” of their lives, lives that are effectively split by their migration to the US. The dark truth of phantoms and apparitions remains hidden, silenced, and thereby kept safe because it remains in the Old World. By revealing that past, however, it begins to infiltrate their new one. Thus, revealing the truth by rendering her traumatic experiences into words only incites and inflicts more harm that is passed on transgenerationally. In other words, coping as an “articulatory practice” only invites more dangers into their lives. To safeguard her and her daughter from them, she must remain silent. Unlike her daughter, she is not concerned with how Americans perceive her and her daughter as Vietnamese-Americans, but rather she uses silence to shield her daughter from the karmic return of a traumatic past.

It is also important to note that these revelations only come out after Thanh’s death. She does not give these familial, historical truths voice. Rather, she writes them down and delivers them to her daughter from beyond the grave in a suicide note. Given the “potential dangers of language” (Stocks 97), this is the only appropriate way Thanh feels she can deliver these unspeakable truths to her daughter. Satterlee explains why this message can only be delivered after death, after Thanh has become permanently silent: “The traumatic past is rendered as intruding upon and invading the present – the past is too close for the protagonists. For this reason, Thanh must write, not speak, her memories of the traumatic past to Mai, because speaking them would be painful and might invoke terror that Thanh attempts to suppress” (143). Thanh supports Satterlee’s reading when she tells Mai in her suicide letter: *“Our reality, you see, is a simultaneous past, present, and future. The verbs in our language are not conjugated, because our*

sense of time is tenseless, indivisible, and knows no end. And that is what I fear. I fear our family history of sin, revenge, and murder and the imprint it creates in our children's lives as it rips through one generation and tears apart the next" (252). As implicated here, Thanh uses silence as a protective strategy to keep the hauntings of a traumatic past from being transgenerationally passed on to her daughter through the forces of karma. Rather than using silence to reinvent the self according to American customs as Mai does, Thanh uses silence to protect her daughter from the initial wounding woven within their family history, the one that began with Thanh's illegitimate birth.

Of all the traits that Thanh could pass down to her daughter, the one inheritance she wishes to bequeath Mai is her Buddha ears. Not only do these ears with their elongated lobes denote beauty and good fortune for those who have them in Vietnamese society, but Thanh's ears also have special powers:

And most of all, I must give her the ears with which I was born, a set of ears so miraculous that they contain all the other senses combined. Ears that can not only hear inaudible sound waves, but see, like a falcon, the most minute flea from far above; that can feel even the smallest change in atmospheric equilibrium; that can unmask the rhythmless rhythm of danger and betrayal and strip open the stenchless guiles of a two-faced face; ears so keen that they can sense through the thickest fogs, smell the faintest scent; taste the flavor of poison on another's breath; distinguish the pungent zest of a grain of salt from the honey-sweetness of a grain of sugar without either grain's touching the tongue. Those are precisely the kinds of ears my mother gave me.

My awesome ears, that's what I want to pass down to my daughter. (58, italics original, emphasis mine)

Since Thanh's ears hold these "awesome" powers that allow her to tap into her other senses, she places primary importance on listening as the vehicle with which she

interprets and contends with her (traumatic) life experiences. Her ears can hear “inaudible” sounds so that they may sense “danger and betrayal,” such as when she witnesses her biological father’s murder at a distance from the scene. The two-faceness that Thanh senses with her ears is in direct relation to how her father, the one who raised her, Baba Quan, was a Viet Cong agent. In this sense, he, too, has betrayed her by keeping the truth from her for so long. What’s more, she can only realize this truth once she recognizes and appreciates the power of her ears. Speaking the truth only exacerbates the wound. Listening to the silences that are embedded within this knowledge, on the other hand, gives her the power to come to terms with this traumatizing observation and these familial truths on her own.

Rather than using silence to protect others from transgenerationally transmitted trauma as Thanh does, Keith Walker’s *A Piece of My Heart: The Stories of Twenty-Six American Women Who Served in Vietnam* demonstrates how women use silence to protect themselves from their own traumatic experiences that were initiated during the war. This oral history provides a way of understanding how women use silence in relating their stories to express discomfort and/or guilt, to convey a loss of thought in the logical progression of storytelling, or to avoid or repress reliving painful memories. When scholars talk about women’s oral histories, they often put Kathryn Marshall’s *In the Combat Zone: An Oral History of American Women in Vietnam, 1966-1975* and Walker’s works in conversation with each other. Susan Jeffords writes that these two texts “still present women’s narratives as if they were compensatory and marginal, having already been excluded” from the dominant masculinist discourse of the war (49).

Robert H. Berlin applauds Marshall's work for "successfully" providing "impressions of what twenty women did in Vietnam and what the Vietnam War did to them," but he faults Marshall for not providing "[a]ppropriate documentation and current oral history methods" (103). Marshall also fails to disclose what questions she asked of her interviewees (Berlin 103). Barbara Melosh criticizes Walker's work on similar terms; she accuses Walker of providing a "naïve and uncritical presentation" because he does not disclose "any information about how he edited the interviews" (201, 202). Overall, Berlin finds that Marshall's text demonstrates how these narrators' war experiences are similar, even though their individual reactions to their experiences vary (103). Linda Kelly Alkana contextualizes her review of Marshall's oral history with not only Walker's work, but also Lynda Van Devanter's *Home Before Morning*, noting that Van Devanter reminded Vietnam War historians and literary scholars that American women were also a part of the war effort. Alkana agrees with Berlin in that Marshall's oral history "gives the reader a sense of the shared experiences many veterans had" (1393). Ultimately, she reads Walker's work as one that "gives a sense of the general experiences of the American women veterans and participants," whereas Marshall's work "gives a sense of the particular" (1393). In a later, combined review of Marshall's oral history and *Women and War* by Jean Bethke Elshtain, Alkana notes how Marshall has for the most part remained silent in the text to allow the participants tell their own stories (517). Ostensibly, this is done so that she may allow the women she interviews the authority to speak on their own behalf. Even though critics often pair Marshall's and Walker's works together largely because of the similarities in genre and subject matter, I read these two

works differently, for they perform different kinds of work. Walker's oral history showcases how women use silence for various rhetorical purposes, whereas the women interviewed in Marshall's text repeatedly call out for rhetorical listeners and become rhetorical listeners for each other.³⁴

A Piece of My Heart demonstrates how American women who served in Vietnam have been traumatized and use silence as a way to deal with the pain of their memories. Walker does so mainly by pointing to what these women do *not* say. In the introduction to his text, he explains that,

During many of the interviews there were long silences on the tapes. They are indicated in this book by a series of dots. But the dots can't possibly describe a moment when, at a dining room table late at night with tears welling in a woman's eyes, a sentence would drift away. There were times when the flow of a memory would take the person to such an unpleasant place that she would hesitate and then shift her trend of thought to avoid it. Some pauses lasted until the silence in the room became impossible to endure. (4)

These long pauses, indicated by ellipses in the text, convey different meanings dependent upon the context in which they occur. At times, these ellipses express discomfort on behalf of the speaker, as though she is experiencing extreme grief or guilt over something that transpired in her Vietnam War experience (29). Other times, these ellipses demonstrate a simple loss of one's train of thought (34). Other women, like Pat Johnson and Anne Simon Auger, use silence so that they will not have to face their painful memories and the intense emotions that come with that territory. As Johnson admits, "I've never really talked about the painful part of Vietnam to anyone. Mostly because I

³⁴ Given Marshall's emphatic call for rhetorical listeners, her work will be discussed in the next chapter.

don't want to think about it myself" (64). Auger simply refused to look at Walker while he interviewed her; she had "put one hand over her eyes, and it stayed there during our entire ninety minutes the tape recorder ran" (94). Refusing to think about one's experiences in the war and averting from maintaining eye contact classically demonstrate avoidance. For other women, they explicitly note how the pain of their past defies articulation,³⁵ which, for me, also includes emotional pain. Army Nurse Cheryl M. "Nicki" Nicol recounts a story from working on Vietnamese children civilians. On her final day in country, she remembers, "The little Vietnamese boy and girl on the litter each had both hands chopped off by the VC. I remember everyone was still just standing there as I walked out. What was there to say?..." (366). Not knowing what to say in response to such a scene as this points to how even emotional pain defies language. Finally, these ellipses can also function as a way to understate, and thus repress one's feelings about a particular memory. Nicol also uses silence in this way: "we had one woman come in, and we had to amputate one arm and one leg. She was about five months pregnant, and she'd caught a piece of shrapnel right through the uterus and it killed the baby. I had to carry those all out...and it was...I don't know, I guess from then on that was something that just really bothered me" (354). Forced to handle physically what we can assume is a mixture of a woman's arm, leg, and her dead fetus is something that almost defies the imagination. To deal with this situation and its accompanying emotions, she understates her experience, naming it as something that "bothered" her. While critics note that Walker's text gives the reader a sense of the general experiences behind what it means to

³⁵ Elaine Scarry in *The Body in Pain* argues that physical pain resists articulation.

be an American woman in Vietnam – and I would largely concur with this assessment – what this text also gives us is a sense of how silence is used by women in relating their experiences. In other texts like Van Devanter’s and Smith’s, we see how women are silenced by others in a way that functions as a double-wounding of a traumatic experience, as I discussed in Chapter Two. With Walker’s text, however, we see how women in similar positions to Van and Winnie use silence years after the event in order to protect themselves from their horrifying memories, often by use of defense mechanisms such as avoidance and repression.

Carol Acton argues that because women are gendered as people who do not “know” war, they subsequently cannot “see” war. For Acton, this is true even if they participate in it, as these two women veteran authors have. Acton compares World War One frontline nurses with Vietnam War nurses and finds that in their writings these women have to “divert the gaze”: “the common element in all these narratives is the connection between the traumatic knowledge, the impossibility of a stable relationship between ‘seeing’ and ‘knowing’ war, and the paradoxical presence of an unseen text which represents that which cannot be told” (75). This “unseen text” is “all the rest that can never be written” (75, 76). Yet, by shifting the focus from sight to voice, I contend that these women’s texts convey a new understanding of how these women negotiate and reconcile their war experiences with a public who often does not consider them participants in the war. Given that masculinist war rhetoric often scripts women veterans and their experiences out of the war’s narrative, women like those in Walker’s text need to find another mode to express not only their horrific experiences, but also one that

conveys how misogynist narratives efface the ones they try to tell. What better way to portray the inequities of the masculinist dominant discourse of the war than to use silence to subvert such sexist narratives? If the silences that these women use become “impossible to endure” as Walker claims (4), then that exposes both how traumatic their memories are and how being silenced is just as traumatic. In order to undermine how patriarchy uses silence as a tool of subjugation, these women appropriate that very tool to express how painful their experiences are as *gendered* participants of the war.

Like the women interviewed in Walker’s text, the protagonist of Monique Truong’s *Bitter in the Mouth* also uses silence to avoid and repress her traumatic memories so that she is better able to cope with her diasporic experiences on her own terms. The novel recounts the story of Linda Hammerick, a young gustatory-synesthete, a condition that enables the protagonist to taste words. Initially, readers assume that Linda is a white woman born and raised in the American South, specifically Boiling Springs, North Carolina. However, halfway through the novel, our protagonist clandestinely reveals to her audience that she is in fact a Vietnamese refugee, having come to America in 1975 at the age of six. Waiting to disclose such seemingly-pertinent information not only undermines the racial violence of the novel, but it also points to how Linda uses silence, secrecy, and choice in divulging only the information she wants her readers to know in order to avoid and repress the painful memories of her past, especially when it comes to her pre-1975 life experiences. On July 5, 1975, Linda and her birth parents were caught in a house fire in which both her mother and father were killed and she was the sole survivor. Thomas Hammerick saves her from being an orphan and

adopts her into his childless family with his wife DeAnne. The only memory that Linda has of this house fire is a bitter taste left in her mouth when someone whom she does not remember spoke a word she cannot recall.

Michele Janette reads Truong's novel palimpsestically and claims that the novel centers on three secrets that are carefully and slowly disclosed throughout the novel: Linda's synesthesia; her rape by her best friend's cousin, Bobby; and her race. "Combined, the novel's three secrets expose the racialization of vulnerability within sexual assault and the violence of double-consciousness" Janette argues (156). Further, she notes that "[s]ignificant beyond the workings of the novel itself, these palimpsestic portraits of race, gender, and (dis)ability redistribute the labor of racialization, placing the burdens and responsibilities of racial formations on the culturally dominant rather than conventionally racialized subject" (Janette 156). Begoña Simal-González argues that Truong's narrative stance "wavers between [...] a need to fill the 'void' in the protagonist's past – the primordial 'fixed origins' – and the narrator's silence about the actual fact of her transracial adoption" (12). This wavering results in a "willful silence" for Simal-González, one that "can be read as merely a narrative strategy intended to build suspense and keep the reader going, or as the 'ideological mobilization of formal devices' to endorse an anti-essentialist agenda" (12). While I do not doubt that Linda's "willful silence" also works in this second way – one that advocates for an anti-essentialist position – I still maintain that this use of silence also functions as a way for Linda to protect herself from her traumatic past. Carefully and slowly revealing only what she wants her readers to know, and admitting along the way that she is not cognizant of how

exactly she became Linda Hammerick as opposed to Linh-Dao Nguyen, or more properly Nguyen Linh-Dao as she would have been named in Vietnam, demonstrates how selective memory functions as a shield that separates Linda from her past. That shield is silence.

Amanda Dykema also speaks about Linda's synesthesia, but in a different way than Janette and Simal-González. Dykema connects Linda's condition to the idea of an embodied archive. This reading is particularly interesting, for it allows me to make further claims about traumatization and the willful use of silence. Dykema notes how "[t]he mystery of the bitter taste resides at the core of Linda's search for her history; it signifies both the word she cannot identify and the traumatic event whose details are lost to her memory. The synesthetic residue of the memory haunts her" (110). It is this "synesthetic residue" that functions as an embodied archive for Dykema, for the archive is ever-elusive and one that induces nostalgia (106). Quoting Derrida, she explains that the archive fever's characteristics "are numerous: 'It is to burn with passion. It is never to rest, interminably, from searching for the archive right where it slips away. It is to run after the archive.... It is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement'" (106). This unquenchable desire to return bears great resemblance of the imperative to tell one's traumatic history, as explained in Caruth's definition of the repetition compulsion. However, the perpetual slipping away of the archive marks the failure of language in that very telling. This is precisely what happens to Linda, and although she may function as a representative of the

embodied archive, I argue that she moreover serves as an example of the failure of language. It is this failure, one that results in silence – or at least a selective telling – that works to safeguard her from her traumatic past.

As noted prior, her traumatic experience of the house fire and a word spoken to her during that calamity produced a bitter taste in her mouth. Throughout the novel, Linda searches for the corresponding word, but continually falls short. “My first memory was a taste,” Linda tells her readers. “The mystery had two halves. The halves had within them other chambers and cells. There was something bitter in the mouth, and there was the word that triggered it” (15). This disclosure to her audience carries multiple revelations. First, she clearly delineates that she has gustatory-synesthesia, a condition that she does not consider a disability, but a different way of perceiving the world, effectively marking her as different from the majority. Second, in naming this experience as her first memory, she points to how any other memory prior to this experience has been extinguished. Only after we come to learn that this experience takes place in America, during a house fire, and that she is a Vietnamese refugee, are we able to see how her past life in Vietnam has been erased from her memory. However, even that is not enough, for she tells us that she has no clear memory of the house fire itself. “If the sky before a tornado could be bitten into and swallowed, then it might have the bitter taste that was my first memory. My second, third, fourth, and fifth memories following in quick succession were a flash of light, a trailer home with windows of flames, gravel crunching underneath feet, but they weren’t my own, then darkness” (163). Much like she cannot recall the corresponding word that produced the bitter taste in her

mouth, she also cannot remember what caused the fire, who saved her from it, or all who perished in it even though she is told later that that was how she lost her parents. Instead, all fades to “darkness.” This memory of the fire, much like the word that produces an unidentifiable bitter taste (15, 117), is unclear because it is rooted in a traumatic experience.

Truong complicates what precisely this traumatic experience is, however. On first glance, one would assume that it would be the trailer ablaze. However, given that Linda keeps her Vietnamese heritage a secret from her reader for the first 158 pages (Janette 163), one could also read that Linda’s traumatic experience is in becoming Asian American. Since the fire prompts Thomas Hammerick’s adoption of Linda, it is as though she is reborn, like a phoenix rising from the ashes. She even likens herself to Athena, having come to Thomas and DeAnne “fully formed” and “born with the English language already in my mouth and a sixth sense but no memory of my first six years of life” (163). As such, she situates herself interstitially, already American, but “*looking*” Asian in the American South (169, emphasis original). This positioning of in-betweenness locates her nowhere, for she does not and cannot belong in any of the worlds that she finds herself, much like Mai in *Monkey Bridge*.

Even though Linda states that she was born with the “English language already in [her] mouth” and it is tinged with a Southern accent, strangers still bombard her with inappropriate and racist questions:

Since leaving Boiling Springs [having gone to Yale for law school], I was often asked by complete strangers what it was like to grow up being Asian in the South.

You mean what was it like to grow up *looking* Asian in the South, I would say back to them with the southern accent that revealed to them the particulars of my biography. [...] For me, pointing out to them the difference between “being” and “looking” was the beginning, the middle, and the end of my answer. (169)

By cutting these inquisitors short by pointing out the difference between “being” and “looking,” Linda shows them through a twist of logic how racist their presumptions are and in so doing she effectively ends the conversation to silence these presumptuous “complete strangers.” Further, for her, she is not Asian; she is Southern. However, this is not how people view her, especially the black women in her hometown. “These women actually saw me,” Linda tells us, “and what they wondered about me – why one of my own hadn’t taken me in – made their hearts tender” (170). Not wanting to face that she is no longer with her birth parents, Linda “learned early on not to meet their eyes, dark and deep as a river. If I saw them, I would have to see myself. I didn’t want a mirror. I wanted a blank slate” (170). Unfortunately, she can never be the blank slate she desires since she indeed “*look[s]*” Asian, despite her attempts to achieve this state of being through repressing memories of the first six years of her life.

Similarly, she can never be fully American since she is racially marked. Having been called racial slurs throughout her childhood, she comes to realize that by “the age of fourteen, I had figured out that I was neither a Chink nor a Jap” (216). While reading about the Vietnam War, an event that scarred the American nation historically, she tries to locate herself within this turbulent history. But, this too, fails her. “In the other four paragraphs about Vietnam in my history book, I learned that the war was still in progress in 1968, the year of my birth, and that it ended for the Vietnamese in 1975, the year of

my second birth at the blue and gray ranch house,” Thomas and DeAnne Hammericks’ home (216). All she knows about the war is what is presented within these four paragraphs in a historical text written for an American high school audience. No memories of the havoc the war wreaked upon the American nation are available to her. What’s more, no memories of the despair and devastation the war caused the Vietnamese nation(s) come to her either. “All that I learned about Vietnam had to do with war and death and dying. At the time, I had no body, which meant that I was impervious and had no use for such information” (216). Situating these dates – 1968, an infamous one tied to the Tet Offensive that ultimately spurred more Americans to oppose the war, and 1975, one that most Americans associate with the end and loss of the Vietnam War – in conjunction with the years of her births dissociate her from the event. She has no memory of the war, whether those perceptions are from American or Vietnamese perspectives. Thus, she cannot be fully American or Vietnamese since she cannot historically or bodily tie herself to either camp.

Pelaud advocates that “Vietnamese American authors function and respond to a culture in which Viet Nam represents [...] a thorn in the psyche of the nation. Those who write in English [as Truong does] are well aware that reviewers tend to look for and emphasize connections to the Vietnam War” (136). By refusing to situate Linda historically or bodily in the Vietnam War, with Linda having repressed her memories from that turbulent time, Truong effectively uses silence to expose the inequities of how Vietnamese Americans are written, remembered, and thought about in American discourse. As Linda narrates at the beginning of the second and final part of the novel,

“There were two kinds of absences: the void and the missing. The void was the person, place, or thing that was never there in the first place. The missing existed but was no longer present. One was theoretical loss. The other was actual” (161). Bearing much resemblance to Dominick LaCapra’s distinction between absence and loss, Linda shows us the difference between “being” and “*looking*” Asian American. “Being” Asian American is a void, something that does not and cannot ever exist, for this label implies not only willful and successful assimilation, but also the idea that integration into majoritarian society can happen. “*Looking*” Asian in America, on the other hand, is a loss, for it is a subject position that will always be overwritten by historical import (as in being contextualized by the Vietnam War and only seen as a product of that historical moment). What “*looking*” Asian loses, what was once there but is no longer, at least in Linda’s case, is her ethnic heritage. With that, she loses her past – erasing the first six years of her memory in order to avoid dealing with that traumatic childhood experience. In this way, Linda forces silence upon herself – for if she is not able to recall the past then she cannot use language to recount it – in order to protect herself from not only the fire that claimed her parents’ lives, but also to protect her from having to look at her racialized body and how it does not fit into idealized perceptions of the American nation, whether that is in the South or not. As Linda herself readily admits, “I was still taken aback, startled, I suppose, that it was the outside of me that so readily defined me as not being from here (New Haven, New York, New World) nor there (the South)” (169), whether that is the American South or South Vietnam.

Breaking Silences to Deconstruct American Mythologies

Whereas texts by Cao, Walker, and Truong point to how silence can be used to either reinvent the self or to protect their characters from their traumatic pasts, Fitzgerald's, Emerson's, and Lâm's works use the presence of silence differently. Women like Mai, Thanh, Linda, and those interviewed by Walker use silence for their own purposes: to reflect on their experiences and after deliberation of them, selectively decide what to share with their audiences. Only after these choices have been made, ones that imbue these women with their own sense of agency, can women then critique patriarchal regimes of power. In other words, one must be aware of and fully consider masculinist constraints before she can speak out against such abusive regimes of oppression. This awareness develops through these silent reflections. After these considerations have been made, authors like Fitzgerald, Emerson, and Lâm expose the presence of silence in masculinist constructions of war to demonstrate how these constructs continue to subjugate women and their voices.

Frances Fitzgerald's *Fire in the Lake* remains one of the most highly valued texts to come out of the Vietnam War, at least in popular circles. In 1972, *Fire* remained on the Best Sellers lists for a stretch of at least ten consecutive weeks (Marr 564). That same year, Fitzgerald's work won the Pulitzer Prize, a National Book Award, the Bancroft Prize for History, a George Polk Award, and the Sidney Hillman Award (Hoffman 189). However, in academic circles, there is a decided split as to whether these prizes, acclaim, and even the royalties she received from the sales of her book were merited. David A. Wilson lauds her book as "journalism at its best" and "a book of brilliance and passion"

(264). Another unnamed reviewer also praises Fitzgerald's work, calling it "a study of rare insight" and "a remarkable and most valuable book" ("Rev. of *Fire*" 402). Even though Wilson concedes that Fitzgerald has "subordinated [her sources] to her interpretation" and therefore makes her interpretation "too strong to be entirely reasonable" (265), he still praises Fitzgerald's work overall. Other scholars are not so congratulatory. David G. Marr claims that the book fails in its attempt to argue "that the traditional father-son relationship led many Vietnamese to accept, even to prefer autocratic rule by the powerful foreign demigods" (565). While this, in Marr's view, is a major drawback to the study, he still admires her work as "perhaps the best example in the field of Asian studies" (564) at the time of its initial publication. Another reviewer, P. J. Honey, one more critical than Marr, claims that *Fire* does not deserve the acclaim it has received because it is "sloppily researched" (672). Fitzgerald tends to "get personal names, place names, Vietnamese words, dates, and much else wrong," which results in an "inaccurate, pretentious, and politically biased" work (Honey 672). Aside from these blunders, Honey still admits that "Miss Fitzgerald writes English with a true feeling for literary style and the use of words. The book [...] is a pleasure to read" (672). Marvin E. Gettleman chides Fitzgerald for not making use of the "hundreds of books, pamphlets, memoirs, historical sources and narratives, poems, stories and novels which have been translated from Vietnamese" (80). Marr makes a similar complaint when he faults her for not knowing the "language nor the literature of the people whom she intends to characterize" (564). Jean Grossholtz is not even as conciliatory as Honey. Grossholtz vehemently criticizes Fitzgerald's work, claiming that the "book adds nothing new to the

information we already have about the Americans in Vietnam, does not present the Vietnamese point of view as the jacket implies, is confusing in its organization and lacks a clear and compelling argument” (199).

I read *Fire* much differently than Grossholtz does, for Fitzgerald’s work does have a clear thesis. Fitzgerald tries to change how Americans view the war when she asserts that “the Vietnam War was not a civil war; it was a revolutionary war that had raged throughout the entire country since 1945” (Fitzgerald 146). Although this revelation is buried in the monograph, it is a point that she argues throughout (188, 216, 222, 302, 368, 369, 441). This striving for unanimity and reunification leads Fitzgerald to further argue that the Americans and the Vietnamese were fighting in geographically the same space, but for different aims and principles.³⁶ To the Americans, they were fighting to preserve democracy in the face of an encroaching Communist world domination. The Vietnamese, however, saw Americans as “colonialists” (Fitzgerald 302, 368, 369), as just another extension of imperialist power much like the Chinese and French before them. Since Americans tend to “ignore history” and believe the “national myth [...] of creativity and progress, of a steady climbing upward into power and prosperity, both for the individual and for the country as a whole” (7-8), the American war effort in Vietnam was doomed to fail, precisely because Americans refuse to think of the Vietnamese beyond the state of savages. What’s more, Americans presumed that the Vietnamese wanted a democracy, but according to Fitzgerald, democratic principles were

³⁶ This is a viewpoint that is also articulated in Laura Lâm’s *Late Blossom*, which shall be discussed later.

not in accordance with Vietnamese culture. R. B. St. John supports Fitzgerald's claim when he writes,

Even in the twentieth century, most Vietnamese peasants found the idea absurd that a government should give the people a say in its makeup. If the government did not know what it wanted to do, then it was no government at all. The Vietnamese recognized, of course, that a bad government could exist and make poor decisions, but in their mind, the concept of majority rule offered nothing more than chaos and confusion. (820)

In short, as Bates puts it, Fitzgerald's work "is a rich and complex book about Vietnamese culture and how it was misunderstood by American policymakers" (267). According to Fitzgerald, the United States' policymakers acted as a Prospero to a defiant Caliban – the National Liberation Front (NLF) and People's Revolutionary Party (PRP) – while trying to use the "bad puppets" (Fitzgerald 303-322), an Ariel of sorts, of the Government of (South) Vietnam (GVN).

Rather than singing the same old tune, one that promotes America's image of being the world's policeman because American political aims and tactics are always right(eous) and justified, Fitzgerald challenges and refutes the then-pervasive perception that American democratic civilization was a superior mode of existence in comparison with the communist-driven imperatives backed by the "backward," "small" country of North Vietnam. By describing various ways in which Americans went wrong, she not only proposes that democracy is not the answer for Vietnam, but also insists that democracy cannot be simply instituted in certain places where there are distinct and substantial cultural differences from the Westernized world. Proposing that America was

wrong, both in its motives and in its directives, she openly challenges political institutions of power, decrying that Americans are more ignorant than they assume they are. In shattering this myth, she breaks the silence that surrounds it. For a myth of this nature to exist in the first place, there has to be a widespread cultural assumption of its truth. Any viewpoint that speaks otherwise – like one that claims America and democracy are not right(eous) – must then be enshrouded in silence for the myth to prevail. Thus, she uses her voice to break this silence that substantiates the vitality of myth to offer a different perspective.

In presenting views contrary to mainstream public opinion by blatantly discrediting American mythologies, authors like Fitzgerald and Gloria Emerson expose the dangerous silences imbued in those very myths. In breaking this silence that blindly adheres to American mythological principles and beliefs, Fitzgerald and Emerson challenge American institutions of power that work to subjugate the disenfranchised. As we have seen in the above literature reviews, historians often discredit Fitzgerald's claims on the basis that she did not represent her historical matter and sources fairly (Gettleman, Marr, Honey, Grossholtz). I argue that it was not her intention to rigorously apply and follow the codes of historian writerly conduct; she is a journalist after all. Rather, this discrediting on the behalf of these historians functions as an exercise of academic power to silence a woman who challenges politically powerful men and their enclaves, those such as Lyndon Baines Johnson, Richard Nixon, Henry Cabot Lodge, Dean Rusk, Robert McNamara, Clark Clifford, as well as the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) and the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV).

This challenge to political institutions of power is most readily seen when Fitzgerald, echoing sentiments of many Vietnamese, names Americans as “colonialists” and “Imperialists.” After explaining the basic fundamental difference between how Americans and Vietnamese view the war in Vietnam – Americans tend to think of it as a civil war (15), whereas the Vietnamese perceive their efforts as engaging in a revolutionary one (146) – she proceeds to explain how Vietnamese view other Vietnamese who side with the Americans. As a Buddhist student writes in a letter to a friend, those who politically or militarily align with the GVN and the US “are accused of valets of Imperialism, of pure Colonialism – You are in [sic] the side of foreigners, of the people who kill your people, who bomb your country, with the eternal foreigners who always wanted to subjugate you for thousands of years” (Luce and Sommer qtd. in Fitzgerald 302). Thus, Americans, like the Chinese and French before them, embodied the ultimate evil of imperialism; the Vietnamese thought that if the US won, they would once again be turned into a colony. However, the Vietnamese were fighting a revolutionary war for independence, sovereignty, reunification, and unanimous political and cultural cohesion under the one nation of Vietnam. To explain how the American government was so misled in its war aims, Fitzgerald unapologetically writes:

The Americans were once again embarked upon a heroic and (for themselves) almost painless conquest of an inferior race. To the American settlers the defeat of the Indians had seemed not just a nationalist victory, but an achievement made in the name of humanity – the triumph of light over darkness, of good over evil, and of civilization over brutish nature. Quite consciously, the American officers and officials used a similar language to describe their war against the NLF. According to the official rhetoric, the Viet Cong did not live in places, they “infested areas”; to “clean them out” the American forces went on “sweep and

clear” operations or moved all the villagers into refugee camps in order to “sanitize the area.” Westmoreland spoke of the NLF as “termites.” [...] The Americans were white men in Asia, and they could not conceive that they might fail in their enterprise, could not conceive that they could be morally wrong. (368)

Not only does Fitzgerald describe the fallacious and racially-motivated language and logic of the American fighting forces in the excerpt above, but she also points to how General Westmoreland also used such racist language and logic. She continues,

Covered with righteous platitudes, theirs [the Americans’] was an essentially colonialist vision. [...] When their ‘counterparts’ [the GVN and ARVN forces] did not take their instruction, these advisers treated the Vietnamese like bad pupils, accusing them of corruption or laziness, and attempted to impose authority over them. And when the attempt at coercion failed, they retreated from the Vietnamese entirely, barricading themselves [...] behind the assumption of American superiority and the assumption that the Vietnamese were not quite human like themselves. (369)

Within these passages, Fitzgerald does not simply claim that America and its political leaders, policymakers, and military generals were misguided. Rather, she blatantly accuses them of racist mentalities, delusions of grandeur, and of being demagogues that openly practiced brutality, destruction, and horror in a war that was not theirs to begin with.

Fitzgerald admits in her Afterword that even though she finished writing *Fire* in 1971, “and though I returned to Vietnam several times [...], I never wanted to update it. Books have a certain structure, and when they’re finished, they are, for better or worse, finished. Also, they are the product of a particular time in history and in the life of their author, and the time can’t be recaptured” (443). Although Fitzgerald writes a revisionist

history for her audience, the piece culminated as a result of a journalistic enterprise, not a historical one. We must keep this in mind when we read products of a certain time and place. Further, we should remind ourselves that works of this sort are often filled with vehement protestations against powerful forces that exercise authority over what they perceive to be subhuman subjects. This is precisely what makes Fitzgerald's work so powerful; it scathingly, and rightfully so, points to the misperceptions and faulty errors of logic that have the capacity to claim several hundred thousands of lives in their misled pursuit of nation-building.

Unlike Fitzgerald who presents a revisionist history of the war in Vietnam, Gloria Emerson gives her account of the war in *Winners & Losers: Battles, Retreats, Gains, Losses, and Ruins from the Vietnam War*, a New Journalistic piece. She conducts "three years of interviews" in "twenty-four states" (88) to provide a wide range of views, touching on people's experiences of the war from various cultural and political positions on and involvement in it. Readers encounter stories from Vietnamese participants – those who willingly oblige their service and those seemingly innocent civilians who get caught up in the horrors of war and are imprisoned in tiger cages for perceived threats to the American effort there. She also provides excerpts of interviews from high-ranking American military officials, enlisted men, veterans who are now paraplegics and their parents, educational authorities on the war from the CORDS program, history teachers, antiwar activists, and many more. The difference in genre is significant, for it functions differently than revisionist history. New Journalism invites the reader into the story. Readers can easily imagine the characters Emerson constructs because they are the ones

that we see and meet on a daily basis. It is much easier to imagine a downtrodden veteran than it is to imagine General Westmoreland. Revisionist history, on the other hand, provides more a bird's-eye view of the conflict. This distanced perspective does not necessarily mean that revisionist history has less of an impact upon one's readers; it just has a different kind of an impact. This kind of history asks its readers to consider the long, temporal strands that set up the conditions for such a brutal, destructive enterprise such as war. New Journalism, on the other hand, allows readers to see the devastating effects war can have on a personal and communal basis.

This difference in genre does not mean that there are not certain parallels between Emerson's and Fitzgerald's works. Emerson, like Fitzgerald, also challenges commonly held perceptions of the Vietnam War amongst the American public. Similar to Fitzgerald, Emerson's work received mixed reviews, but her new journalistic text is not nearly as condemned as Fitzgerald's. Some scholars, like Joyce Hoffman, claim that Emerson's work "remains [as] one of the classics of Vietnam-era journalism" (380). This is quite high praise, and some in keeping with this, tend to pair her work alongside Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (Bonn, Herzog, and Neilson), a text that has reached canonical status in Vietnam War literary criticism (Bonn 29). In this kind of a comparison, critics tend to cite Emerson's work as more "flawed" (Neilson 146) than Herr's because she "tends to moralize" (Learman qtd. in Neilson 146), implying that Herr does not. Andrew J. Pierre also calls Emerson's work "Powerful, if flawed" (647) in his two-sentence review of the book. Philip D. Beidler also compares Herr and Emerson: "Where Herr depicts characters who were, for good or ill, simply what they were and

nothing more, Emerson would seem to prefer caricatures – the Commie-hating chaplain, the patriotic judge, the sensitive, draft-resisting expatriate. Where Herr tells the story, Emerson is often too eager to supply the gloss” (*American Literature* 150). Other critics tend to give Emerson more credit, claiming that her work “does a much better job in portraying the anguish of the many on both sides who were trapped by the senseless violence” (Taylor 62). Maria S. Bonn shows how Herr has become canonical, whereas Emerson has receded into relative obscurity. Bonn claims that Emerson’s work did not achieve the notoriety that Herr’s did because Herr “gives us that traditionally masculine view of war and reassures us that war has a wild and violent beauty,” whereas Emerson “undermine[s] that kind of representation of war and wants us to see Vietnam as unredeemable, a cultural crisis from which the U.S. is still suffering” (47).

Philip Beidler elsewhere discusses *Fire in the Lake* and *Winners & Losers* as “feminist” texts, ones that “elect not to center themselves within various established value and meaning systems of a dominant discourse” (“The Good Women” 523). In other words, Fitzgerald’s and Emerson’s texts both write against the masculinist discourse of the Vietnam War and war writing in general. Operating against this discourse imbues both of these women authors with an agency that allows them to “address the experience of Vietnam from within the configurings of American institutional thought at large and thus also on a ground of inquiry extending backward from the domain of the battlefield and command post through intermediate structures of language, administration, and control, to the most fundamental assumptions of culture itself” (Beidler “The Good Women” 523). Thus, by working within the structures of

“American institutional thought” in order to write against their prescriptions, these women’s works make their readers question American objectivity in Emerson’s book, and make room for a revisionist history that calls the war out for what “it *really* was: pure hygienic murder, clean and simple” in Fitzgerald’s (Beidler 532, emphasis original). I would argue, however, that Emerson does this same work that Beidler claims Fitzgerald’s *Fire* does; *Winners & Losers*, too, blatantly blames the United States – its government, its people, its educational system, its cinema, and so forth – for endorsing a senseless slaughter that maimed and killed not only many of its own citizens, but also millions of Vietnamese. Both, to her, are despicable and atrocious acts. By inserting charts that tally American and Vietnamese deaths (197, 357), charts that are spatially set apart from the prose of the text and positioned as ones that take up considerable space, she demonstrates visually and numerically the toll war exacts from its participants. In essence, Emerson, in a similar fashion as Fitzgerald, exposes the silence that surrounds the myth that reinforces the idea that Americans were the only ones who suffered a severe loss in the Vietnam War.

Like Fitzgerald, Emerson also challenges American institutions of power, and she does so most poignantly when she takes historical textbooks to task. After quoting long passages from contemporary historical texts that devote as much as six pages to the conflict in Vietnam, Emerson notes how these writings tend to harbor a hawkish quality to them. In reaction to this, she writes, “It is an astonishing assessment; *it has nothing to do with the country and the war I knew*” (104, emphasis mine). Within this seemingly simple reaction what becomes clear is not only is she challenging what Americans teach

their children, but she also differentiates the war from the country of Vietnam. Often, when the word “Vietnam” is invoked in American society, images and connotations of the war overshadow, or even eclipse, the idea that Vietnam was a land, a culture, a nation, full of its own citizens, long before Americans ever arrived. She points to this erasing of a nation in the Foreword to the book, claiming that “In our country Vietnam is not the name of a small nation with its own rivers and mountains” (vii). Instead, given our long occupation there, “Now Vietnam is our word, meaning an American failure, a shorthand for a disaster, a tragedy of good intentions, a well-meaning misuse of American power, a noble cause ruined by a loss of will and no home front, a war of crime, a loathsome jungle where our army of children fought an army of fanatics” (vii). Not only have Americans appropriated the word “Vietnam” to reflect our own “failure[s],” but we have also nullified the existence of a country replete with its own culture, poetry, intellectuals, and ideology in our appropriation of that word. Paul Connerton points to how place names have the power to rewrite the significance of those spaces in memorialization practices. “Memorial places,” like that of Vietnam, “are so powerfully evocative of incidents in well-known stories, they act so effectively as the mnemonics of a moral geography conjuring up exemplary behaviour, that the mere mention of a place-name encapsulates a well-known narrative” (*HMF* 10). In pointing to this obliteration of a distant culture, Emerson notes how what we teach our children in textbooks, Vietnam’s “well-known narrative” of American tragedy and loss, is false. This writing against historical writing and teaching is her unique way of challenging America’s powerful systems of education.

Not only does she challenge these systems in jabs to the American educational institution like the one above, but she also questions what constitutes war writing when she includes an interview she conducts with “a famous professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology” (88) within her text. This “famous” man claimed that she had no clear methodology for producing *Winners & Losers*. “He did not see the joke when I told him half the book would be blank, to show there was no effect [of the war] at all [on Americans]. Twenty-four states, I said, three years of interviews. He said it did not seem a precise or serious way to go about it. Most of the time I wandered about, talking to those who would talk to me” (88). Given its lack of precision, or even seriousness, this man of educational stature suggests that Emerson has immersed herself in a lost cause, a lost project. However, by including this brief exchange within her book, she demonstrates how she uses the constraints of war writing to write against those very constraints. Her project is not (revisionist) historical writing, for she is not a historian. Her project is not a novel or memoir, for she is not a creative writer. Rather, since she is a journalist, she writes in the mode of New Journalism, a mode that enables her to include her interviews as well as one that permits her to write herself into the text. As she explains,

Winners and Losers is not a history of the war or an analysis of its origins or U.S. policies. It is only the account of a woman who first went to Vietnam two years after the French lost all of it and the American “advisors” and CIA men were moving in. [...] This is only a book by an American who witnessed the war for two years and came home with memories to harm the strongest heart, needing to love her country again and to listen to its people as she had never listened before. (ix)

In making her presence known to the reader, Emerson is able to position herself as “witness,” as a rhetorical listener,³⁷ and as one who was traumatized by her experiences there.

Dori Laub argues that witnessing can happen on three distinct levels: “the level of being a witness to oneself within the experience; the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others; and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself” (Felman and Laub 75). Any and each of these levels of witnessing holds the power to render the witness to the event powerless before it, bestowing an inescapable “imperative to tell and to be heard” which “can become itself an all-consuming life task” (78). In view of Laub’s three levels of witnessing, Emerson’s work demonstrates each of these positions; she is a witness to the war itself given that she was a journalist working there for two years, she is a “witness to the testimonies of others” in her three years of interviewing those who participated in or were affected by the war in some way, and she invites her reader to be a “witness to the process of witnessing itself” through the reading of the text she has produced. Even though Laub distinguishes three levels of witnessing, he also claims that there is never a “true” witness to a traumatic event, for this kind of witness would have to occupy two impossible positions: being both inside and outside of the event while it is occurring. “No observer could remain untainted, that is, maintain an integrity – a wholeness and a separateness – that could keep itself uncompromised, unharmed, by his or her very witnessing” (81). Further, it is “also the very circumstance

³⁷ Further investigation of what rhetorical listening demands of its participants will be explored in the fourth chapter of this project.

of *being inside the event* that made unthinkable the very notion that a witness could exist, that is, someone who could step outside of the coercively totalitarian and dehumanizing frame of reference in which the event was taking place, and provide an independent frame of reference through which the event could be observed” (81, emphasis original). In view of this logic, Emerson and her readers both do and do not qualify as witnesses to the event, for even though Emerson occupies the first two levels of witnessing, she cannot both be inside and outside of the event, the war, as it is taking place. This does not mean, however, that she does not suffer from what she has witnessed. She notes that despite people advising her to “Turn the corner” and “Forget the war,” she “*could not stop writing about it*” (6, emphasis mine). Even her friends tell her, “you are the only one who cannot overcome your Vietnam experience. There is an acute lack of forgetfulness in you about Vietnam” (9). This imperative to tell, to write, to communicate with others about their experiences in the war, portrays a psychic wounding on Emerson’s part. But she does not suffer this alone. Rather, she points to how traumatic experience in war is communal, one that calls out for communication, for witnessing – via interviewing for her – and one that demands rhetorical listeners. This kind of traumatic experience starkly contrasts with those whose lifelong experiences of pain, suffering, and subjugation constitute traumatic experience, given that Emerson’s event is specifically locatable in time and space – when she worked as a journalist in the Vietnam War. Characters like Mai and Thanh in *Monkey Bridge*, Linda Hammerick in *Bitter in the Mouth*, and Winnie Smith in *American Daughter Gone to War* express a different kind of traumatic experience, one that spans most of their lives. Given this blatant difference, their

experiences must be communicated in a nonverbal way, one that is different than what Emerson is calling for, because these other women characters have thoroughly internalized silence to cope with these life events.

However, Emerson continually finds that she is not and will not be afforded rhetorical listeners, simply because no one wants to hear what Emerson *really* has to say. As Krista Ratcliffe explains, rhetorical listeners are those that adopt “a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture” (1). In this position, “rhetorical listening in a place of non-identification *may* precede conscious identifications; as such, rhetorical listening may help people consciously navigate troubled identifications and disidentifications” (74, emphasis original). It is this stance of openness that Emerson desires, but it is continually denied, for her audience refuses to listen to her rhetoric of difference when it comes to her experiences in the Vietnam War. For example, while give a public talk, her audience continues to lambast her, discrediting her and her experiences:

Once, after speaking at a small lunch given at the University of Missouri, a woman came up to me and said it was shaming to have had to listen to what I said, when everyone knew the Americans were a kind and generous people – and I spoke so harshly of what they had done in Vietnam. Her son was in the Special Forces, the lady said, and all he had done was try to help poor weak backward people defend themselves. (241-2)

This unnamed woman shames Emerson for challenging the woman’s views on what the US is doing in Vietnam and how the woman’s son, her own flesh and blood, is implicated

in that endeavor. When Emerson is heard and subsequently denied, what she says is taken as an affront to the public consciousness of the war and America's motives in it.

Not only does Emerson expose how she has been silenced and shamed by her divergent views on the war that she lends to the American public, but she also points to how others who remain in a position of generational privilege use silence to deploy power. Paradoxically, she exposes this silence to subvert that deployment of power. This is markedly different than what Fitzgerald offers her readers. Emerson not only points to how silencing women's standpoints and positions can be damaging – invoking shame, denying truths, and so forth – but she also demonstrates how silence can be invoked to portray and maintain a position of power, and how breaking that silence does similar work. When interviewing a World War Two veteran, pseudonymically named Max Wilson, Emerson notices how not once, “in the hours we talked, did he ever mention a close friend in his unit or talk about the wounded and the dead. There were those, but he skipped over them” (259). By “skip[ing] over” the carnage of war, Wilson is able to paint a different portrait of war than what is commonly expressed by Vietnam veterans. Instead of pointing out the blood, gore, and the bodily and mental sacrifices war extolls of men and women, the war, for Wilson, was an honor, a way to demonstrate masculinity qua bravery and patriotism. According to Wilson, “Today's kids don't have patriotism and they're very selfish” (260). Viewing Vietnam era veterans as “selfish” (260) and “unpatriotic” (261) positions these participants as weak, passive, and effeminate. What is worse is that, in Wilson's view, this younger generation is cast as malingerers, those that *choose* to be “destroyed” by war. “I wouldn't be destroyed because I've been in war,”

Wilson explains, “I know that in war there’s death” (260). Thus, by refusing to mention any casualties and by scripting Vietnam-era veterans in such a malignant light, Wilson props himself up as superior to those crybabies who allow themselves to be “destroyed” by war. His superiority, he justifies to himself, is rationalized by understanding one’s duty to one’s country, by manifesting a sincere patriotism within oneself. Given such rationalizations, the myth of the “good war” (Adams) is reinforced and the generation war (Bates) is exacerbated. Rather than arguing with Wilson, Emerson simply makes room for this exchange within *Winners and Losers* to expose how Wilson uses silence to deploy power. To undermine that power, she breaks his silence to underscore his fallacious logic, a logic that works to support and reinvigorate the myth that claims WWII was the “good war,” while Vietnam was horribly “bad.” Breaking that silence and surrounding this exchange with hundreds of stories that speak to war’s ills, she implies that no such “good war” exists or had ever existed. In other words, in exposing the fallacious qualities of these myths and how they use silence to reinforce people’s beliefs in them, she thereby refutes these mythologies. In this way, Emerson uses silence to subvert American adherence to and staunch belief in these mythologies.

Laura Lâm also points to silence’s incarnation in the inconsistencies of popular beliefs of the war to highlight Jasmine’s different perspective. She exposes the presence of silence imbued in conventional American narratives of the war to demonstrate how Vietnamese recollections of the war are quite different than American ones. One of the viewpoints she highlights is the role Vietnamese women played in the revolution for their country’s independence; women and men were seen as equals in this effort to reunify

their country. Quoting a popular saying that denotes the Viet Minh's dedication to expel the French, she writes: "One row of men, one row of women / Who works faster tonight? / Oh! Brothers and Sisters, we must be speedy" (95). This passage reflects how women and men were seen as both equally capable of working arduously, steadfastly, and quickly to defeat the French. Neither gender is positioned as weaker than the other in this enterprise, something that starkly contrasts with American narratives that often position women as only capable of doing certain care-taking jobs or performing these jobs to a certain degree in the American military, as can be seen in Van Devanter's and Smith's memoirs discussed in my second chapter. She also ensures that there is space within her narrative to speak about Vietnamese heroines within her memoir, such as Nguyen Thi Dinh, the woman who masterminded the General Uprising, a successful effort that broke the strategic hamlet program in the South (153). In a continued effort to expel the American imperialists, she notes how the Women's Army of the Coconut Jungle was renamed the Long Hair Army in the 1960s. The Long Hair Army "welcomed women of all ages from various backgrounds" and by 1968 "the province of Ben Tre had more than three thousand women in the regular army and sixteen thousand in the irregular force, responsible for the transportation of food, supplies and ammunition to battlefields. The Ben Tre women's army was considered a role model" (156). In fact, these women's garrisons were so important to the nationalists' efforts to defeat and expel the Americans that Ho Chi Minh even proclaimed, "Without the women there will be no victory" (157). Women's efforts, dedication, and strength were considered vital to achieving victory for the communists. This is staunchly opposed to how conventional American narratives

portray women – American or Vietnamese. American women, as I have discussed in the first chapter, were viewed as either sexual objects or positioned as the femme fatale.

Vietnamese women, on the other hand, embodied the ultimate threat as carriers-of-death.

What Lâm shows her audience is quite different, though. Vietnamese women dedicated to the war effort were not only essential to winning the war, but they were also good, steady workers in this endeavor.

Lâm also reminds her readers that there were two starkly different aims of the American War. In fact, she argues that the two sides – the Americans and those who backed their military aims and the nationalists/communists – were so different in how they viewed the conflict that they “were fighting different wars” (116):

The Americans were fighting to contain a communist monster they saw as intent on world domination and enslavement to the State. The Vietnamese, in contrast, were fighting to reclaim their right to self-determination and self-rule, a war of independence. From the perspective of the Vietnamese, how Viet Nam would be governed and whether it would prosper were *not* issues for “outsiders” to decide. For them, the issue focused on the decisive return of its “self-evident” right to be free from imperialist domination. In waging their crusade against Communism, the Americans were seen as new imperialists clinging to an old position. (116, emphasis original)

There are evocative parallels between this passage and Fitzgerald’s writing. Both call the Americans “imperialists,” both see the Americans as “outsiders,” both contend that the Vietnamese were engaged in this war to attain independence and sovereignty for their own nation. While Lâm even includes Fitzgerald’s *Fire* in her appended “Select References” at the end of the book, she takes this different viewpoint one step further when she maintains that Ho Chi Minh was a patriot more than he was a communist (339).

Jasmine narrates, “My father said Western powers never seemed to understand that the primary driving force of the Vietnamese people has always been *nationalism*.

Westerners failed to acknowledge and accept the fact that the Vietnamese simply wanted to get rid of the foreigners and to run their own country” (339). In the appended interview with the author at the end of the text, Lâm explains that she produced this book so that she may correct the “numerous inaccurate Western views” about the war as produced by Americans (358). Thus, not only is she defiantly arguing that Americans had the wrong perspective about the war when they engaged in it, but she also contends that the Americans also completely continue to misunderstand the Vietnamese people and their motivations for waging such a war. In a mode similar to Fitzgerald and Emerson, Lâm clearly articulates these dissenting viewpoints, and breaks the silence that surrounds the myth that America and Americans are always right in not only how they deal with world affairs, but also in how they conceive of marginalized, colonized peoples. Breaking this silence allows her to thereby shatter this myth for her readers.

For Lâm, these different perspectives are rooted in cultural differences between East and West. Once Jasmine moves to Sai Gon,³⁸ she begins to attend a much better school which ultimately gives her access to a wider range of reading material. Faced for the first time with different types of world literature, she explains to her audience that there are distinctive stylistic differences between Eastern and Western novels. “A

³⁸ In the “Author’s Note” that precedes the memoir, Lâm clarifies that “[t]he name of my country, Viet Nam, should be written as two separate words [...] The same rule applies to all Vietnamese names of cities, towns, buildings, persons, and animals. [...] In the Vietnamese language, each noun, each verb, each adverb, and each adjective carries only a single sound” (6). Given that this is how the author writes of these names, I have also adopted these spellings when it comes to discussing her text in order to remain true to her imperative to shed light on Vietnamese perspectives of the war and life in Viet Nam.

Western novelist usually paid a great deal of attention to the psychology of the characters in the book, while in an Eastern novel all the characters were stereotypes representing concepts. In other words they symbolized roles understandable in the local culture, and these fitted into surrounding roles to make the full pattern of Vietnamese social life” (186). In Eastern societies, then, one looks to literature to learn valuable moral lessons about social life, whereas in Western spheres, literature is often used to point to psychological introspections about certain individuals. Vietnamese society values the social over the individual, where the reverse can be found in American society. American mythologies stress that if one is to become a better person, one should rely on notions of progress, notions that are deeply imbedded in the future. Conceptions of Vietnamese society, on the other hand, are intricately woven into notions of the past. Quoting Nguyen Trai, “a prominent scholar of the 15th century,” Lâm writes, “*Our people long ago were established as an independent nation with its own civilization. We have our own mountains and rivers, customs and traditions, and these are different from those of the foreign country to the north (China). We have sometimes been weak and sometimes powerful, but at no time did we suffer from a lack of heroes*” (125, emphasis original). Noting how this directly relates to Jasmine’s own life, she narrates, “*Thay* [her teacher] reminded us that Vietnamese culture had been developed in the Red River Valley long before China established its rule over Viet Nam and that future generations should try to preserve our country’s cultural authenticity” (125, emphasis original). Having such heroes and heroines as role models, Jasmine seeks to be the best Vietnamese citizen she can be. (Sadly, she feels that she fails in this effort, as discussed in Chapter

Two.) What is important to note here, though, is by including these passages – quoting a 15th century scholar and weaving it into her own present generation – we can see how her history is inextricably tied to her nation’s history. Jasmine’s history, her identity, is founded upon her nation’s history, one that never “suffer[s] from a lack of heroes” (125).

This is not the only time that Lâm includes passages from scholars and historians about her country. In fact, there are four chapters interlaced throughout the memoir that are largely devoted to supplying historical background. She also weaves paragraphs and sections into her narrative chapters to describe the historical climate of the time of which she writes. This focus on historical material and the past rebels from traditional Western narratives, ones that tend to focus on character development and plot progression. Lâm, I would argue, makes these writerly choices to highlight the place of history in Vietnamese culture, for this is a society that values the past and the moral lessons they can garner from it.

By focusing on the past and how it affects the present, Lâm contributes a narrative that is quite different from American ones that investigate the war in Vietnam. Conventionally, Vietnam War writing focuses on the American experience of the war, one that profoundly and permanently changes white male protagonists. Giving such prominence to these white male voices ultimately casts a shadow of silence on those who do not fit that subject position. As Michel Rolph Trouillot explains in *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, “history reveals itself only through the production of specific narratives. What matters most are the process and production of such narratives” (25). When specific narratives are considered authentic and all-encapsulating

as white men's narratives typically are in this subgenre, other voices are silenced. "Silences are inherent in history," Trouillot warns us, "because any single event enters history with some of its constituting parts missing. Something is always left out while something else is recorded" (49). That something that is "always left out" is women's voices and their accounts of war. It is authors like Lâm, Fitzgerald, and Emerson who consciously work to expose and exploit this presence of silence imbued in conventional narratives and popular conceptions of the conflict to open up new avenues for dialogue and consideration.

Conclusion

Whether women use silence to protect themselves or others from racialized and/or gendered traumatic experience or to subvert masculinist dominant discourse of the war, what becomes clear is that when a traumatic event is not necessarily locatable in time or place, but rather extends beyond national boundaries and specific temporal parameters, trauma becomes a part of one's existence, one's identity. So thoroughly incorporating such experience demands new methods and modes of expressing such a deeply entrenched long-ranging experience. If this kind of experience is different than what is commonly perceived as being "traumatic" and dealing with such experiences typically demand rendering them into language, as far as psychoanalysts are concerned, then those experiences that stretch the confines of these parameters would logically need a different mode of expression. This new mode, as these protagonists have shown us, is conveyed through silence. Given that language and explanation continually fail these characters,

they rely on silence and the pain it carries to relate their stories. In this way, they use a tool that is commonly used to suppress and subjugate their experiences for their own agenda – to highlight how their traumatic experiences are different from what is commonly believed to constitute trauma, for their experiences are not only immersed in a violent episode of history – war, but these experiences also are compounded by racist and sexist regimes of power that work to keep their narratives at bay.

CHAPTER V
RHETORICAL LISTENING ENACTED THROUGH STRATEGIC
CONTEMPLATION

[E]verybody wanted to talk about the war but nobody wanted to hear about it. Yeah, nobody wanted to hear but everybody wanted to talk. (Marshall 255-6)

Strategic contemplation involves engaging in a dialogue, in an exchange, with the women who are our rhetorical subjects, even if only imaginatively, to understand their words, their visions, their priorities whether and perhaps especially when they differ from our own. (Royster and Kirsch 21)

If non-identification is a place that assumes the existence of gaps and if gaps in discourse provide spaces that a person may choose to fill and, thus, assert personal agency, then non-identification offers people a place to assert personal agency. (Ratcliffe 74-5)

While many may consider keeping a person's trauma to oneself an unhealthy practice because it prevents locating oneself within a community of others,³⁹ I argue that, for some, maintaining a silence about one's trauma provides a necessary step in dealing with one's traumatic experiences. Silence affords the victim time and space away from others in order to deal with the event on one's own terms so that they may fully consider certain socio-cultural factors that exacerbate the event's traumatic effects, like sexism and racism imbedded in certain institutions of power. In other words, silence opportunes the victim introspection, something that is much needed if one is to gain a sense of agency

³⁹ Susan J. Brison in *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* maintains that a necessary step in coping with trauma is remaking the self "in connection with others" (xi).

and self-empowerment. As Kennan Ferguson claims in “Silence: A Politics,” “silence [...] must be rethought as not only a site of repression but also a nexus of resistance or even as a potentiality for creation” (114). This idea was originally expressed by Cheryl Glenn in *Unspoken* who advocates that silence “can serve both as ‘resistance and creation – acts that refuse compliance with the destructive rhetoric and those that create alternatives to it’” (154). Thus, women authors of the Vietnam/American War engage silence and use it for their own purposes, so that they may introspectively consider their own experiences. But it does not end there. These authors also ask their audiences to do the same, for their readers must also adopt a position of silence so that they may intimately consider the different rhetorics and experiences of war these women have to offer. When I think about silence in this way, I rely on Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch’s formulation of “strategic contemplation,” the second step of four in their critical terms of engagement they name in the process of rhetorical assaying. For Royster and Kirsch, “[s]trategic contemplation involves engaging in a dialogue, in an exchange, with the women who are our rhetorical subjects, even if only imaginatively, to understand their words, their visions, their priorities whether and perhaps especially when they differ from our own” (21). Thus, audiences as reader-listeners must allow themselves time and space in order to engage in strategic contemplation so that they will not react blindly, immediately, and negatively to these women’s experiences when they first learn of them. While this does not mean that an audience member must distance oneself from the speaker/writer, it does mean that the audience should maintain a degree of silence, at least initially, so that they may fully consider the positions of difference

these women have to offer. Ultimately, the writer and her reader-listeners need to engage in these moments of silent pause and reflection so that the narrators can have access to rhetorical listeners and decide what they want from such listeners.

According to Krista Ratcliffe in *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness*, rhetorical listening “signifies a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture” (1). To explain more fully what this “openness” constitutes, she invites her reader to reexamine what “understanding” means. She advocates that,

understanding means listening to discourses not *for* intent but *with* intent – with the intent to understand not just the claims but the rhetorical negotiations of understanding as well. To clarify this process of understanding, rhetorical listeners might best invert the term *understanding* and define it as *standing under*, that is, consciously standing under discourses that surround us and others while consciously acknowledging all our particular – and very fluid – standpoints. Standing under discourses means letting discourses wash over, through, and around us and then letting them lie there to inform our politics and ethics. (28, emphasis original)

In order to promote a “standing under” of discourses, Ratcliffe encourages her readers and fellow teachers to adopt a place of non-identification, a “place that assumes the existence of gaps” (74). If rhetorical listeners assume that there are gaps in experience, knowledge, and discourse, then other people may “choose to fill” those gaps and thereby assert their own “personal agency” within the discourse at hand (74, 75). This investment of personal agency and listening with openness is beneficial, for it challenges speakers and listeners alike to “reconsider previous identifications and disidentifications and decide whether to say ‘yes’ and/or ‘no’ and/or ‘maybe’ to them. They may contemplate

the existence of that-which-they-cannot-see and even of that-which-they-cannot-yet-hear” (75). Further, and perhaps most importantly when considering the cultural and literary market contexts that surround American and Vietnamese women authors, this place of non-identification may persuade rhetorical listeners to “consider how personal agency competes with discursive agency and cultural agency – that is, how cultural discourses and structures delimit personal agency just as personal agency *may* interrupt cultural discourses and structures” (75, emphasis original). This kind of interruption, one that inserts itself within what appears to be conventional Vietnam War writing, is precisely what is significant about these women’s texts, for they use convention to subvert convention, thereby undermining the mythological belief that war writing is a man’s duty, occupation, and/or compulsion. Specifically in this chapter, I consider how Lynda Van Devanter, Winnie Smith, Bobbie Ann Mason, Đặng Thùy Trâm, and Kathryn Marshall use convention to subvert convention and thereby make room for women’s voices and narratives of difference to resonate with their audiences via a process of strategic contemplation. Adhering to conventional standards of Vietnam War writing has its drawbacks though. In the second chapter, I pointed to the problem with publishing houses not wanting to publish the “kind” of books that Van Devanter had to offer. Perhaps this is because she deviated too much from what conventional Vietnam War narratives looked like in the memoir’s early form. Making Van Devanter hunt for a publishing venue through multiple houses in effect forces her to adopt a particular mode of expression, structure, vocabulary, and tale in order to give her voice a chance to be heard. As Paul Connerton notes, “the power to silence others resides not simply in the

power to prevent them from talking; it lies also in the power to shape and control the talking that they do, to restrict the things they may talk about and, more specifically, the ways in which they are permitted to express their thoughts” (*Spirit* 77). Thus, in order for voices like Van’s to be heard, Van Devanter must adopt a specific mode of relation, and only in this application of conventional war writing may she highlight differences of experience in gendered terms. Ultimately, forcing women authors to adhere to conventional war writing (for the most part) is just another display of patriarchal power in force.

Authors like Van Devanter and Smith mainly adhere to conventional war writing in the structure of their texts. Both texts start at very early points in their Vietnam War experiences. For Van, we first meet her at home, being raised to value patriotism, much like Ron Kovic, and the Christian church, which is akin to Chris Starkmann in Philip Caputo’s *Indian Country*. In *American Daughter Gone to War*, readers are first introduced to Winnie as the new girl in country, which is similar to how we first meet characters like Deadeye Dosier in *Close Quarters* or Tim in Tim O’Brien’s *If I Die in a Combat Zone*. Van Devanter and Smith’s memoirs then progress to recount their tour of duty in Vietnam and all the horrors those experiences carry with them – the seemingly infinite amount of bloodshed, the corpses, the bombs and bullets, the unsanitary conditions in which they work and live, the endless sleepless nights, and so on. Depictions like these can be found in nearly any Vietnam War narrative. Van Devanter and Smith then complete the conventional narrative arc by describing the injustices and incomprehensibility they face upon returning home.

What is different about Van Devanter and Smith's memoirs in this quite predictable plot progression is how they interlace expressions of silence in their texts. At times these silences speak to how discrimination and prohibiting them to speak acts as a double-wounding of their traumatic experiences in war. At other times, they use silence to deploy their own power and agency to deal with their trauma on their own terms. By allowing themselves time and space to cope with their experiences on their own, they are also depriving others of the power and authority to tell them how they ought to think about and deal with their trauma. Thus, the use of silence in this sense both resists and creates, delimits and empowers. It resists giving others the power to determine and demand how one ought to work through their trauma. Psychoanalysts often offer prescriptions for coping that include verbally articulating experiences in therapy. Explaining away one's experiences to a professional outsider, then, permits this person who is not bound up within the event the authority to tell the patient-victim how she ought to feel about and cope with her experiences. Keeping these traumatic experiences to oneself, then, creates a space that allows these women to cope with their trauma on their own terms and in their own ways that refuse others access. In other words, moments of silence give women authors, like Van Devanter and Smith, the chance to own their experiences and work through them in ways that position themselves as the primary agents of dealing with their own trauma.

Only after these women take moments of silent reflection can they begin to craft narratives of difference. They express these differences in their repeated emphases of how silence has marked their experiences in ways that either "defer to power" or "deploy

power” (Glenn xi), as examined in my second and third chapters. Invoked as a trope in these narratives, these rhetorical silent strategies ultimately result in a plea for rhetorical listeners. For example, at the beginning of my second chapter, I quoted a scene from *Home Before Morning* at length wherein Van has an exchange with a fellow male veteran while they prepare for a protest march. In their conversation, this man negates Van’s veteran status, claiming that since she does not “look like a vet” (272) she cannot participate in the march. Within this scene, we can see how Van confronts a person who refuses to listen rhetorically to her. She needs someone to “*stand[] under*” her discourse (Ratcliffe 28, emphasis original) so that others, like this male veteran, may adopt a stance that values similarities and differences through adopting a stance of non-identification. This refusal to do so on the male veteran’s part is reinforced by popularized depictions in the media and the White House⁴⁰ of what war veterans look like, something Van is excluded from simply because of her gender. If this male veteran had adopted a position of reflective silence, he probably would not have had that knee-jerk reaction of barring her from participating in the march. Rather, a moment of silent contemplation would have allowed him to consider her words and position as a fellow veteran. In an effort to open up a dialogue about their experiences in country many women, like Van, plead with their audiences to take a momentary pause so that they, too, may become rhetorical listeners. This silent pause places them in a position that points to the necessity of engaging in a practice of openness and contemplative consideration.

⁴⁰ The male veteran explains his rationale for not allowing Van to participate in the march when he tells her, “If we have women marching, Nixon and the network news reporters might think we’re swelling the ranks with nonvets” (272). The implications of this justification are further explored in my second chapter.

Elaine Scarry in “The Difficulty of Imagining Other Persons” advocates that imagining other persons, whether they are intimately familiar to oneself or complete strangers, is a difficult task, for when we imagine others, images become “thin,” “dry,” “two-dimensional,” “inert,” “schematized” and “banal” (Sartre qtd. in Scarry 44). She also argues that in the attempt to imagine Others, it is much easier to imagine oneself “*as weightless as*” an Other (51, emphasis original). “By [the self] becoming featureless, by having a weightlessness, a two-dimensionality, a dryness every bit as ‘impoverished’ as the imagined Other, the condition of equality is achieved. One subtraction therefore has the same effect as a hundred thousand additions” (51). This reduction of the self is imperative to imagining Others not only on a personal day-to-day basis, but also on a scale of “constitutional design,” an institution that reifies “the inherently aversive structural position of ‘foreignness’” (40). Situating the latter as the key to resolving the former, she speaks about constitutional design in terms of the law and citizenship.

In my reading of both Scarry and Ratcliffe, I see these two theories as ones that speak to the same problem, one where people often find themselves speaking to (or being silenced by) those who cannot imagine their subject positions due to the difficulty in imagining Others. This problem is further compounded when the one being imagined is a marginalized person. Too often stereotypes mandate how we treat other people, whether we are conscious of our actions, words, and/or thoughts, or not. Thus, like Scarry, I find that the “constitutional design” is intimately bound up with day-to-day interactions with people, but in a different way than she elucidates. While many unjust practices are written into and codified by law, institutionalized racist and sexist notions

that pervade our conceptions of the Other influence our everyday rhetoric. Given that our everyday rhetoric is precisely that – everyday, commonplace, often uncontested in the public sphere – it solidifies these racist and misogynist assumptions at an institutional level. Thus, these two concepts – the institution (macro) and day-to-day interactions (micro) – result in a vicious cycle, reinforcing each other and further debilitating marginalized peoples along the way.

Should one rhetorically listen to what these authors have to say, one would find that they often use their narrators to rebel against such debilitating institutions of power. Van Devanter and Smith produce narratives of difference in their subversion of conventional Vietnam War writing to point to the inequities embedded within masculinist discourse. In this way, they challenge patriarchal regimes of power in the American nation. In crafting a different kind of protagonist for a war novel – a seventeen year-old woman who has no combat experience, Bobbie Ann Mason in *In Country* challenges institutions of mental health that purport that trauma can only happen to and posttraumatic stress disorder can only surface in an individual that directly experiences a traumatic event. In presenting Sam Hughes as a transgenerational trauma victim, Mason combats this myopic view of trauma largely supported by psychoanalysts of the 1980s. Đặng Thùy Trâm's *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace*, a North Vietnamese woman's diary, challenges the political and ideological institution of communism by working within and against the confines of the epic-propagandistic style of war writing popular in Vietnam. Finally, Kathryn Marshall's *In the Combat Zone: An Oral History of American Women in Vietnam, 1966-1975* demonstrates how women veterans rhetorically listen to each other.

They provide a model for the process of rhetorical listening by describing how they designed networks of access to each other, those who already had adopted a stance of openness.

Army Nurses' Challenge to Patriarchy

Given that Van Devanter's and Smith's narratives are shaped so that they forcibly adhere to certain conventions of war writing (in structure, in language use as shown in the proliferation of profanity found in these texts, in depicting a tale of horror), women authors often find that they have no other recourse than to use convention to subvert convention, for they can only work within and against the constraints that currently shape the genre in which they are working. They often work within and against these constraints by directly pointing to the discrepancies inherent in delineating who can and cannot speak about an experience. This calling out of sorts is a political move; it is "an act of resistance" (hooks 8). bell hooks in *Talking Back: Talking Feminist, Talking Black*,⁴¹ reminds her audience that "true speaking is not solely an expression of creative power; it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless. As such, it is a courageous act – as such, it represents a threat. To those who wield oppressive power, that which is threatening must necessarily be wiped out, annihilated, silenced" (8). The "truth" to which Van and Winnie speak is one that calls out sexist regimes of power – masculinist discourse – and holds them accountable for the debilitating and disciplinary act of silencing. Breaking

⁴¹ Although hooks is specifically arguing for a critical consciousness of black feminism, her argument that a "collective resistance" needs to be borne out of recognition of oppression and exploitation can still be applied to the inclusion of women veterans in American public memory.

that silence with meaningful and emotionally-charged language, these women also demand that their discourses be stood under by their readers. They insist that readers adopt a stance of non-identification, a stance that is crucial for engaging in rhetorical listening.

Ratcliffe sets forth her theory of rhetorical listening, wherein listeners adopt a “stance of openness” (1) that allows them to understand themselves and others through identifications across “*commonalities* and *differences*” (26, emphasis original). She argues that rhetorical listening, when it is put into practice, may emerge in one or more of the following four functions: “(1) it is driven by an openness to terms, both negative and positive; (2) it is motivated by a cultural logic that recognizes differences as well as commonalities; (3) it offers functional rhetorical stances of recognition, critique, and accountability; and (4) it proceeds via the interpretive trope of listening metonymically” (94). Though I agree that this is a good start to approach and listen to others who are different from oneself, especially when these writers challenge common conceptions of a traumatic event, I still think there is more empathetic work to be done. I continually ask myself if *listening* to others (e.g.: marginalized peoples) is enough. While listening rhetorically opens up dialogue and promotes “*standing under*” discourses (28, emphasis original), I argue that it also carries the power to do much more influential and controversial work. By calling attention to oppressive regimes of power, adopting a stance of non-identification allows one to begin to dismantle the debilitating effects those institutions have on marginalized peoples. Only by beginning *conversation* and considering life experiences and viewpoints different than our own can we begin to

discuss freely the implications imbedded within certain institutions of power. This kind of conversation is the necessary starting point for dismantling these abusive regimes.

To begin such a conversation, however, one needs an audience. To gain such listeners, women find that they have to begin speaking in the dominant mode of discourse. In essence, they adopt conventional modes of telling their war stories only to divert from such modes once they have gained their audience's attention. Van and Winnie both adhere to conventional structures of war texts and uses of language and images, only to subvert the very act of writing conventionally by diverting from it with gusto. For example, Van in *Home Before Morning* makes explicit reference to how American women were not considered participants in the war either in cultural memory or in literary representations. When she meets Bobby Muller, the executive director for the Vietnam Veterans of America organization, she mentions that she, too, is a veteran. To this revelation, Bobby exclaims, "Holy shit, [...] *Women veterans!* We forgot all about *women!* [...] *Women veterans, of course*" (341, emphasis original). Bobby, ecstatic about the prospect of finally including women veterans' experiences of the war in his radio documentary, even admits that "[t]he thought [of including women] never crossed my mind" (341). Not only is Van pointing to a large discrepancy between what American public memory remembers about the conflict and the fact that American women served in Vietnam, but she is also specifically calling attention to this discrepancy and pointing to a need for women veterans to be heard. Van makes Bobby realize as he speaks with her and a couple of other male veterans he is interviewing for his documentary project *Coming Home, Again*, "She's a veteran. She has a right to be

heard” (341). Further, she links this discrepancy between what is remembered and what happened specifically to hearing, to listening. By introducing a rhetorical listener at the end of her text in Bobby Muller’s character, Van Devanter illustrates how long and arduous a process of finally finding *one* rhetorical listener has been in her experience.

Similar to Van, Winnie in *American Daughter* also calls out for rhetorical listeners. However, she seeks such listeners who she thinks, and understandably so, ought to be able to stand under her discourse, emotions, hardships in readjusting to civilian life, and wartime experiences. She continually desires that her father become a rhetorical listener for her, since he is a veteran of WWII and a disabled one at that. However, she is confronted with the fact that even he cannot understand her, despite her repetitive reaching out to him. While having an argument with her mother, her mother tells her, “You can’t spend the rest of your life moping around. [...] Honestly, anyone would think you had just lost your best friend” (282). When her father joins the heated conversation, he sides with Winnie’s mother. In an attempt to placate Winnie, he adds, “It’s time for you to get on with your life. [...] You’re too young to be sitting around the house day in and day out. You should be going to parties and dating” (282). This advice tells Winnie and her readers that he does not understand his daughter at all, for repeatedly throughout the memoir she states that she does not “want romance” (93) and she hates when men gape at her (93) and catcall her (14, 44).

Eventually, though, Winnie’s father begins to listen rhetorically to her, but only after she had reached out to one of his fellow veteran comrades, Linn. Only after realizing that his daughter is suffering from PTSD and from being silenced, which only

exacerbates the wound inflicted by the initial trauma itself, does he make small gestures to reach out to her to signify that he understands her position as the “forgotten” veteran (326). One such gesture is when he sends her a “bronze replica of a woman in jungle fatigues, a miniature of the statue being debated over for inclusion at the National Vietnam Veterans Memorial” (336). By sending her this gift, he recognizes that women have indeed been forgotten in memorializations and conventional representations of the war. In other words, this gesture shows his support for including remembrances of American women who fought, nursed, and/or died in the war, which is in stark disagreement with “some on Capitol Hill” who say that “[a] woman doesn’t belong in a war memorial; it is inappropriate” (336). This allegiance to his daughter grows stronger over the years. Yet, her relationship with her mother, the one who continually silences Winnie, deteriorates. Winnie explains, “My father has stuck by me for almost two years now, staunchly defending me, even against my mother, who doubts that a war so long over could affect me as it has. [...] Mother and I aren’t talking these days” (341). Silencing and marginalizing people and their experiences holds the power to destroy important relationships, even ones between a mother and a daughter. On the other hand, listening rhetorically fosters relationships and understanding, as evidenced in the relationship between Winnie and her father. Listening rhetorically also carries the power of challenging institutions of power, such as public memory, the media, and the federal government.

Even though Winnie finds a rhetorical listener within her father, this does not necessarily mean that he provided her the strength and courage to commit her

experiences to print. Rather, that impetus came from Lynda Van Devanter. The same year in which *Home Before Morning* was originally published, Winnie's cousin gave her a copy of the book as a gift. By the end of the first page she begins to well with tears. As she continues reading, she notices how her "tears fall in a torrent. From deep within me, from a lake of sorrow that I have long since forgotten existed, a desolate spirit breaks loose like a great sea serpent. I feel it rise to the surface, and I clutch my sides in a desperate hug as if I could hold it in. Unbidden, unwanted, its moaning wail escapes my lips" (297). Perhaps unconsciously, this experience of reliving her traumatic past, brought on by reading Van Devanter's memoir, makes her "discover [that] writing helps me regain control of my mind. The reels won't stop, but I can slow them enough to record portions, and once they're put to paper, they fade back into the past, change from experience to memory" (299). This "change from experience to memory" indicates how she works through⁴² her trauma by way of strategic contemplation, for the scenes she records fade from reliving them in the present – inescapably reliving the past – to recognizing that these scenes are in the past. In Smith's Acknowledgements' page, the first person she thanks for *American Daughter* is Lynda Van Devanter because she "opened the door for me" (7): Van Devanter launched the Women's Project through the Vietnam Veterans Association and in that capacity paved the way for other women veterans' voices to be heard. In this way, through reading and writing, we can see how

⁴² I am using this term "working through" in Dominick LaCapra's sense. For more information on the distinction he makes between acting out and working through, please see his *Writing History, Writing Trauma*.

rhetorical listening can extend across space and time, creating a community of conversation in which women can share their experiences.

In response to the outcry that the American public and American Vietnam male veterans had “forgot[ten] all about *women!*” (Van Devanter 341), Bobby Muller proposed that Van become the founder for the Vietnam Veterans Association (VVA) Women Veterans Project (342). Since then, she has been recognized as *the* spokesperson for American women veterans (Alexander 17). This gives Van a great sense of pride as she describes below:

These days, in spite of my work with others who are in pain, I can say that I am no longer unhappy.⁴³ Why? Because I can see, little by little, that progress is being made. I am optimistic. Other women vets are beginning to learn that they are not alone. They are forming groups, getting counseling and, in some small measure, being recognized for the contributions they have made. When each new woman tells me she’s made her peace with Vietnam, I know I’ve helped in some small way.

We’ve been able to show the public that women deserve better treatment. Before we started the Women’s Project, the V.A. had not, in more than half a century of existence, ever published anything that gave the least idea that women were entitled to veterans benefits, although the Armed Forces had been spending millions annually to bring women into the services. In 1981, the V.A. published its first booklet on a study of women’s use of V.A. educational benefits. I began teaching counselors in the Vet Center training programs, and the centers began doing outreach to women vets. More and more of them came into the centers for counseling. (Van Devanter 357)

Not only does Van express her happiness that she, along with the help of other workers and activists, helped to create a women veterans’ community in which women no longer feel “alone,” but she also makes explicit reference to how much progress and what kinds

⁴³ She makes this remark in reference to her battle with depression.

of progress have been made. Undoubtedly, this is a step in the right direction, for it fulfills a need for these women's voices and experiences to be validated, appreciated, and heard. Winnie expresses a similar desire to be heard and to have her experience validated when she visits Washington D.C. on Veterans Day, 1984. While there, she is barred from standing within viewing distance of the dedication of the Unknown Soldier memorial and after Ronald Reagan thanks the *men* who served their country in Vietnam, she cries in outrage, "*The women! What about the women?*" (326, emphasis original). After other women start angrily chanting this refrain with her, she solemnly narrates, "The hundreds of thousands on the other side of the stage hear, firsthand, how the service of women to their country is so carelessly forgotten" (326). Culminating in a screaming match between women veterans and the President, Winnie demonstrates how much of a necessity it is to be heard. It is Van, a fellow woman veteran, who answers this plea with the foundation of the Women's Project.

bell hooks also points to this need to be heard, for it begins a process of radical movement. In her discussion of the popular slogan "the personal is political," she advocates that "naming one's personal pain was not sufficiently linked to overall education for critical consciousness of collective political resistance" (32). While "naming one's personal pain" may begin such a process of recognition, it does not satisfy the demands of reform, for simply naming does not engage "critical consciousness." Rather, hooks argues that,

A complete vision of self-recovery, of the process by which the dominated and exploited individual would experience a new and different relationship to the

world, was lacking. Without a doubt, contemporary feminist movement has enabled women to become more aware of the impact of sexist domination and sexist oppression in our lives. This awareness has not led masses of women to commit themselves to feminist struggle, precisely because it is not fully linked to education for critical consciousness, to collective resistance. (33)

In this vein, I have to agree with hooks, for naming one's pain is a critical step in the process, but it does not alter patriarchal conditions of the nation or the world. This does not mean that "naming one's personal pain" is not important work in its own right, though. This "naming," as a recognition of pain is the crucial first step to reformation. First, one must recognize how and why one has been rendered as secondary, her experiences as inferior, and who qualifies her as lesser. Only once this recognition has been made can political change be enacted to rectify these injustices.

In relation to Van's role in naming her own personal pain and setting up a venue – the Women's Project – to give other women the space to do the same, we must recognize that there are problems latent within her VVA work. Founding the Women's Project does give women the chance to name their pain, but this organization does not rewrite American collective memory of the conflict, which needs to happen for these women's voices and experiences to be validated and appreciated. Still, women are largely left out of popular discussions of and texts about the war. Part of this problem is the fact that Van Devanter founded *women* veterans' groups. Rather than advocating for women's inclusion into ones that were already in place, like the VVA, or even the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, she created new ones solely dedicated to women veterans and their issues. While I understand that forming this project as separate from the ones that

were already in place may have helped some women to come forward and seek help (like counseling), it still reinforces their separateness from the mainstream. The Women's Project marks women and their experiences as different and apart from their male counterparts and by extension from common cultural perceptions of the war. What's more, by creating *women's* groups, this does not allow others who may disidentify with these women's narratives access to what these women have to say. Instead, groups like the Women's Project should be integrated, just like the narratives women write about the conflict should be recognized as valuable and meaningful articulations of what war is and what war does to a *person*, and not just a woman.

A second critique I offer in thinking about Van Devanter's position as the founder this project is that it identifies Van Devanter as *the* spokesperson for women veterans. Positioning her as such carries the potential to essentialize Van's experiences as similar to *all* women veterans, both within the historical context of the Vietnam War and outside of those confines. In such a way, all women's experiences are collapsed into those that Van experiences. She is indebted with carrying the burden of being *the* voice for *all* women veterans. While many women express their gratitude for Van paving the way for their voices to be heard (Walker xii, 30, 107, 148, 403), it still carries the potential of marginalizing or even discrediting experiences that may be different than Van's. When people are placed into such a position as Van is, Ratcliffe argues that they function metaphorically, which problematically "invites readers to assume that one member of a group represents (i.e., is practically identical to) all other members; further, it invites readers to commence down the slippery slope to unfair generalizations and, worse, to

stereotyping” (92). Despite these critiques, I applaud Van for founding this project. She has created a community of listeners, albeit ones who share many similarities and identifications with each other. In creating this community of listeners, she has also initiated the creation of an audience of speakers, those who have the potential to portray their own narratives of difference, which is a necessity for beginning any sort of radical change as to how we, scholars and critics, and the American public remember the Vietnam War, or war in general.

Metonymic Positioning and the Challenge to Institutions of Mental Health

At the time of the original publication of Bobbie Ann Mason’s novel *In Country*, 1985, posttraumatic stress disorder had only recently been added to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in the III-Revised edition (DSM III-R) that appeared in 1980. Those who would qualify for such a diagnosis at the time was quite restricted, as Laura S. Brown notes in her article “Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma.” In her argument, Brown especially challenges the definition of what qualifies as a traumatic experience. The DSM III-R defines a traumatic experience as such: “The person has experienced an event that is outside the range of human experience” (qtd. in Brown 100). This is a problem because, as she notes, it sets up a prototype for what constitutes “‘normal’ traumatic events”:

This picture of “normal” traumatic events gives shape to my problem as a feminist therapist with the classic definitions of appropriate etiologies for psychic trauma. “Human experience” as referred to in our diagnostic manuals, and as the subject for much of the important writing on trauma, often means “male human experience” or, at the least, an experience common to both women and men. The

range of human experience becomes the range of what is normal and usual in the lives of men of the dominant class; white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men. Trauma is thus that which disrupts these particular human lives, but no other. War and genocide, which are the work of men and male-dominated culture, are agreed-upon traumas; so are natural disasters, vehicle crashes, boats sinking in the freezing ocean. (101)

This vision of normalcy then excludes women because “[f]or girls and women, most traumas *do* occur in secret” (101, emphasis original). In my reading of *In Country*, I argue that Mason takes this critique of “‘normal’ traumatic events” one step further by creating a protagonist who has not directly suffered the traumatic effects of war but inherits the war’s trauma all the same. By positioning Sam as a second-generation trauma victim and as one who functions metonymically for the collectively traumatized American nation, Mason explicitly challenges the idea that trauma can only be experienced by an individual who directly witnesses an event. Rather, as Sam demonstrates, traumatic experience can be inherited and affect collectivities of people, not just the individual.

Sam Hughes in Bobbie Ann Mason’s *In Country* functions metonymically in contrast to Van Devanter, who functions metaphorically for Vietnam War women veterans, or even Danner in *Machine Dreams* who acts as a metaphor for the traumatized American nation examined in Chapter One. Ratcliffe argues that listening metonymically carries the power to subvert metaphorical listening, which is essential since the use of metaphor inhibits adopting positions of dis- and non-identification. On the other hand, when readers adopt a metonymical stance to reading and listening, they assume that

a text or person does not share substance with all other members of its/his/her cultural group but, rather, is associated with them. In other words, this trope invites listeners to assume that one member of a group (say, one woman) does *not* speak for all other members (say, all women); as such, this trope helps listeners avoid the trap of unfair generalizations and stereotyping. (98-9)

In this way, metonymical listening and reading promotes cultural and communal bonding through articulations of difference.

Sam Hughes, the protagonist of *In Country*, functions in two ways, which both support this notion of working metonymically. First, she acts as a “speaking corpse” (Schwab 33), one who ties the “I” into the discourse of the traumatized “we” of the deceased and traumatized American participants of the Vietnam War. Second, she also positions herself as a metonym for the nation’s traumatic experience in the war. In a previous publication, I argued that Sam is a second-generation trauma victim, one who must masculinize her identity and actions in order to begin to work through her inherited trauma (Johnson). While I still subscribe to this interpretation of the novel, I would like to expand on those ideas in this section and in the context of social trauma theory. In reexamining Lisa Hinrichsen’s argument that that “the novel investigates the belated accounting of trauma” (237), she advocates that this kind of trauma begins with the individual and extends to imaginings of the American nation, which suggests that Sam functions as an American implication in the nation’s “participation in the work of an empire” (238). Hinrichsen investigates national and global interpretations and consequences of trauma, but this also positions Sam as metaphor. Rather, in my view, Sam functions metonymically as a cultural representation of the trauma the American

nation suffered due to the loss of the war and as an individual representation of the “haunting legacy” (Schwab) of transgenerational trauma.

These two ideas of cultural trauma and transgenerational trauma are closely related. As Gabriele Schwab articulates in *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma*, “Violent histories generate psychic deformations passed on from generation to generation across the divide of victims and perpetrators” (3). This divide is also somewhat bridged, at least tentatively, by a communal sharing of traumatic experience. If trauma can be passed from one generation to the next, then trauma also has the power to reach beyond the spatial realm of the event to affect those who did not witness the event firsthand but still felt the traumatic reverberations of the event, such as the American populace at home. This is not to belittle or deride those non-participants or their inherited traumatic experiences; rather, it goes to show how trauma extends beyond the individual’s psyche to inflict violence upon the communities who share a traumatic experience. Schwab further argues that signs of transgenerational trauma are exposed through “silences and gaps in language” (4), for these silences bear the “lacunae of trauma like raw scars” (5). At the same time they also provide “a more protected space to explore the effects of violence from within multiple voices embedded in imagined daily lives” (5). Given the pervasiveness of silence she finds in the texts she examines throughout her monograph, she notes that “[t]raumatic experiences are often sealed off from communal communication and exchange; related conflicts thus remain hidden and unresolved” (32). In order to expose this breakdown in communication, she recognizes that several characters, in relating experiences of transgenerational trauma, are figured as

“‘speaking corpses,’ whose voices emerge from within a horror of the void that comes from facing death in life” (33). These “speaking corpses” have the capacity to “counter[] the work of death and breathe[] life back into the silences haunted by dead words” (34).

In my revised reading of *In Country*, I see that Sam functions as a representation of this attempt to “breathe[] life back into the silences haunted by dead words.” In finding her own name inscribed on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial at the conclusion of the novel, she positions herself as a “speaking corpse,” one who can relate stories of trauma to an audience on behalf of the deceased. In relating her traumatic history, marked by losing her father in the war while she was in utero, a history that is inextricably bound up with her father’s fate and her uncle Emmett’s life as a Vietnam veteran and the social stigmas that carries with it in 1980s Hopewell, Kentucky,⁴⁴ she is able to breathe life back into these “dead words.” As a second-generation trauma victim, she positions herself as an interlocutor for the dead and the psychically split returnees from the war, while still functioning as a metonym for the tragic loss the American nation has suffered.

In the culminating event of the novel, Sam, along with her uncle Emmett and Mamaw, her father’s mother, visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. They take this trip so that Sam can envision the war, her father’s legacy, and the tragic loss of her father. In these final scenes, Sam does not function metaphorically in Mason’s novel, for all the names inscribed on the Wall are the names of the dead, rather than the communally

⁴⁴ There are rumors that pervade Hopewell, Kentucky about Emmett that are directly related to his Vietnam veteran status. These rural citizens accuse Emmett of being the “leading dope dealer in town,” sleeping with his niece, being unable to support himself and living off his sister, seducing underage girls at the local high school, and in stereotypical fashion, killing babies in Vietnam (Mason 31).

traumatized citizens of the US who are very much alive. While gazing upon those names etched into the Wall, she finds her own: "SAM A HUGHES. It is the first on a line. It is down low enough to touch. She touches her own name. How odd it feels, as though all the names in America have been used to decorate this wall" (Mason 244-5). Although Sam uncannily feels as though "all the names in America have been used to decorate this wall," the fact remains that not all American names are inscribed within its black granite. If that were the case, then the wall would stretch on *ad infinitum*. Rather, she locates *her* name, as though she, too, is part of the war's memorialization. This is a distinct positioning of difference. As a second generation trauma victim who happens to also have her name engraved upon the wall's surface, she "does not share substance with all other members of [her] cultural group" (Ratcliffe 98) when we assume that that group is other second generation trauma victims of the Vietnam War or even the collectively traumatized American nation. Thus, Sam functions metonymically as a representation of the haunting of this war's legacy, a victim who has inherited her father's and her uncle's trauma as her own and comes to find integration in that temporally removed cultural moment.

On the other hand, Sam also represents the torn American nation given that last line in the quote above. Not only does the wall seem to be etched with "all the names in America," but more specifically, the Wall is covered with "all those country boy names" (245, 235), which infers that this war was a working-class war as Christian Appy has argued in *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam*. In other words, this is a war that has tragically influenced a particular subgroup of the American

population: working-class citizens and those who live in rural areas. The regional and economic similarities Sam shares with these kinds of “country boy[s]” only strengthen the associations she holds between herself and those who actually fought and died in the war. As Suzy Clarkson Holstein writes, “no one is exempt from what the wall represents” (334), which inevitably includes Sam and those who did not directly participate in the war. By examining the similarities and differences between Sam, a character who is generationally removed from the conflict, and one who differently portrays which gender can be affected by war’s trauma, we can see how she functions metonymically in a place of non-identification. Non-identification is crucial to Ratcliffe’s theory of rhetorical listening, for “[i]f non-identification is a place that assumes the existence of gaps and if gaps in discourse provide spaces that a person may choose to fill and, thus, assert personal agency, then non-identification offers people a place to assert personal agency” (74-5). The personal agency one must assert when dealing with the horrific trauma of war, whether it is an “inheritance” (Mason 89) or not, is to facilitate mourning either on an individual or a collective level.

Memorialization processes, like the erection of memorials, are failed attempts at mourning. Schwab argues that “[t]o facilitate a collective mourning, communities and nations develop the need to establish a culture of memory” (79). This “culture of memory” may include narrativization, media depictions, popularized photographs, and so on. An essential part of establishing this “culture of memory” is through erecting memorials, such as the Wall. When memorials are built and made public, collectivities of people, in this case the American nation, witness a process that is often performed and

scripted to convey a certain narrative of the traumatic event. As Connerton notes, “when a nation feels itself to be no longer a place where history on a grand, a truly memorable scale is being made, it turns inward to cultivate its own memorials” (*Modernity* 28). This is the case with the Vietnam War. Prior to the war, especially in comparison to WWII, America believed itself to be the benevolent beholder of grandiose gestures, a nation working to free the disenfranchised peoples of the world, particularly from concentration camps. However, when it comes to the Wall, a different narrative was related to the American public. In adopting Maya Lin’s design, the nation was presented with something “like a giant grave, fifty-eight thousand bodies rotting here behind those names” (Mason 239). Cut into a hillside and projecting shiny black granite in which visitors can see their own reflection in its surface, we can see why Sam would describe the Wall as such. This is different than other popular American memorials like *The Raising of the Flag on Iwo Jima*. *Iwo Jima* depicts a notion of teamwork, camaraderie, and even heroics. As such, it projects a myth, a historical absence. When heroism is tied into reality, for war tends to foster a sense of camaraderie and teamwork, it conflates war into portraying a narrative of solidarity and national superiority. This conveys an absence, for as Dominick LaCapra explains, “absence is the absence of an absolute that should not itself be absolutized and fetishized such that it becomes an object of fixation and absorbs, mystifies, or downgrades the significance of particular historical losses” (50-1). For LaCapra, absence is lacking something one *never had*, whereas loss is lacking something that one *once had* before but now no longer does. Given Americans record of annihilating peoples, cultures, and other life forms, I would be hard pressed to

say that they are “heroic” in their aims and deeds of waging and engaging in warfare. Thus, *Iwo Jima* signifies an absence since it conveys a notion of heroism in its structure. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, in comparison with *Iwo Jima*, signifies a loss; those names inscribed on the Wall have been lost (are now deceased) due to their participation in the war. However, in the case with memorials like *Iwo Jima*, a narrative of freedom-loving American saviors are depicted to the public. Connerton further explains how certain narratives are supported and how others are wiped out in memorialization practices:

The relationship between memorials and forgetting is reciprocal: the threat of forgetting begets memorials and the construction of memorials begets forgetting. If giving monumental shape to what we remember is to discard the obligation to remember, that is because memorials permit only some things to be remembered and, by exclusion, cause others to be forgotten. Memorials conceal the past as much as they cause us to remember it. This is evidently so with war memorials. They conceal the way people lived: where soldiers are directly represented in war memorials, their image is designed specifically to deny acts of violence and aggression. They conceal the way they died: the blood, the bits of body flying through the air, the stinking corpses lying unburied for months, all are omitted. They conceal the accidents of war: the need to make past actions seem consolingly necessary impels people to make sense of much that was without sense. And they conceal the way people survive. (*Modernity* 29)

The Wall conveys a loss as opposed to an absence, enabling Sam to function as a “speaking corpse” for the dead, since her name is there too. As a “speaking corpse” and as a metonym for the cultural trauma the American nation has suffered due to its involvement in Southeast Asia, Sam is able to show us effectively how second generation trauma victims and the Wall function as a “crypt,” a space that “harbor[s] the repressed or denied memories of violence” (Schwab 84) to which only Sam can speak. Sam, privy to

such “repressed or denied memories” in her function as a metonym for the traumatized American nation, expresses how she in particular, and the nation in general, have suffered such a horrible violence. The tragedy in the loss of the war is not rooted in loss of the land of Vietnam, or even in that nation’s subsequent fall to Communism; rather, the loss can be explicitly seen in all the “country boy names” that decorate its surface.

Thus, as metonym for the communally traumatized American nation and as a “speaking corpse,” one who has transgenerationally inherited trauma, Sam’s character challenges the idea that traumatic experience resides solely within the individual, a theory supported by the DSM III-R, the American Psychological Association who publishes the DSM, and other psychoanalysts who used the DSM III-R in their practices at the time. To undermine the power with which these institutions are invested, Mason diverts from constructing a conventional protagonist. Rather than creating yet another white male central character and conveying his story of his direct experiences of the war, Mason gives her readers a narrative of difference. Given Sam’s gender and how she is generationally removed from the war, Sam demonstrates how the inequities embedded within certain institutions of mental health exclude her from being considered a trauma victim in 1985 America. In this way, Mason extends Brown’s critique of classifying mental health disorders, like PTSD, beyond the exclusion of women. The confines implicated in the definition of who may qualify for the disorder also excludes those who have inherited trauma or those who experience it on a social, rather than individual, scale.

A North Vietnamese Woman's Challenge to Socialism

Đặng Thùy Trâm's diary *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace* is one of the most popular texts in Vietnamese literature to come out of the American War. It has been translated into fourteen languages and sold more than 450,000 copies within the first two years of its publication (Fitzgerald Introduction xviii; Vỡ 197), all this "in a country [Vietnam] where the average publication run is 1,000 to 2,000 copies" (Vỡ 197). Scholars supply various reasons for the popularity and success of her diary. Vỡ Hồng Chương-Đài claims that Đặng's diary is a "catalogue of deeply personal reflections about love and war, sacrifice and hardship, nostalgia for home and devotion to country," which appeals to Vietnamese readers "both young and old" and audiences abroad (197). Hanh N. Nguyen and R. C. Lutz cite four other reasons as to why Đặng's diary has surpassed other diaries' sales in contemporary Vietnamese literature: its authenticity, its being a "genuine record of a pure Socialist heroine," its humanity, and the fact that it is a "rare surviving document" of the war from a North Vietnamese woman's viewpoint (91). Scholars like Vỡ argue that this text achieved the notoriety it did because at the time of its publication (2007) both nations – Vietnam and America – were supporting various rhetorics of reconciliation between the two nations. Đặng's works so well in this respect because "[f]irst, behind its discovery⁴⁵ and preservation was an irresistible story of

⁴⁵ This war diary was initially discovered by Fred Whitehurst, "a lawyer who served with a military intelligence detachment at the American's base in Duc Pho" (Fitzgerald Introduction xvi). About to cast it into a fire, a Vietnamese interpreter stopped him and told him not to destroy Đặng's diary because "[i]t has fire in it already" (Fitzgerald Introduction xvi). He took the diaries home with him and gave them to his brother, Rob, to translate them. After nearly forty years and with the help of an Air Force veteran, the Whitehursts were able to return the diaries to Thùy's family in 2005. The diaries were published as one book in July of that year (Fitzgerald Introduction xviii).

mythical proportions, and second, its protagonist made for the perfect goodwill ambassador” (Võ 200). As a North Vietnamese doctor dedicated to the revolution for independence and sovereignty for her nation (the Democratic Republic of Vietnam [DRV]), Đặng Thùy Trâm treated mainly civilians that were hurt in the crossfire. Ready to make the ultimate sacrifice for her nation (218), Thùy, as she refers to herself in her diary,⁴⁶ was unluckily caught by an American Division while she and three others were moving medical supplies to a safer location. They shot and killed her on 22 June 1970. One of the items she carried with her on her way to relative safety was this diary. Given her noncombatant status in such a noble profession – medicine, this perfectly set Đặng Thùy Trâm up as a “martyred patriot” of Vietnam (Miriam Lâm 173).

Scholars tend to agree that since *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace* is indeed a diary, it was not “necessarily intended for public consumption” (Lâm 174). Along these same lines, Đoàn Cẩm Thi contends that her diary “became a refuge for who she really was, a way of resisting the collective ‘us’ and the ‘masses’ that dominated her life” (210). Thus, the pages of her small notebook⁴⁷ were transformed into “an experimental space for ‘I.’ She analyzed, examined, and questioned herself” (Đoàn 210). While Đặng may have used the pages in her diary for this reason, I suggest that her diary was not as private as

⁴⁶ As noted in my third chapter, Vietnamese people often write their names in a different order than Americans do. The sequential order for a writing person’s name in Vietnam is: last name, middle name, first name. Since all of the children of the Đặng family had the first name of Trâm, Đặng Thùy Trâm and her family often called her by her middle name, Thùy. Although the translator writes her name as Thuy in the text, I refer to this character as Thùy since this is how she writes her name at the beginning of the diary. I have chosen to include the diacritical marks in reference to Đặng Thùy Trâm to reflect her ethnic heritage and culture, especially since her Vietnamese patriotism is a great source of pride for her as she indicates throughout her text.

⁴⁷ Đặng interchangeably refers to this surviving document and others like it (the diaries her comrades also kept while at war) both as a diary and a notebook throughout the text.

Đoàn claims, for as Thùy admits to her audience, “this diary is not only for my private life. It must also record the lives of my people and their innumerable sufferings, these folks of steel from this Southern land” (Đặng 158). In fact, Thùy even records moments of diary exchange between her and her friends. She tells her audience that she “flip[s] through [Tan’s] notebook” and subsequently finds “brief letters I hastily wrote to him on pages torn from a notepad. [...] Keeping my letters shows that he reserves a corner in the page of his life for me” (154). Since she reads Tan’s diary, we can assume that she also shared hers with her closest friends, like Tan. She even writes directly to her friends in her diary, as evidenced when she wishes Tan “a safe journey. I will welcome you back with the deep love of a sister” (154). The use of second person combined with heartfelt wishes demonstrates how she directly addresses her comrades in her writing. Thus, her diary becomes a medium that she and her close friends use so that they may communicate more easily with each other about delicate and potentially dangerous subjects. Given that they would read each other’s entries, I argue that *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace* functions as a tool Thùy uses to negotiate and reconcile her individual notions of self within the larger confines of communist doctrine, an ideology that triumphs a collective “we” over the “I.”

I am not the first to suggest that Thùy was not just writing to and for herself. Nguyen and Lutz make a similar claim, but they contend that her assertions of “self-valorization” present a “woman assured of her own relevance” in her own time and in a war torn land (95, 96). To differentiate myself from Nguyen and Lutz’s reading of Đặng’s text, I maintain that she used her diary as a tool to express what one could not

have spoken in this ideologically tumultuous time. In other words, Đặng uses her diary to speak the unspoken, to give voice to the emotions that she feels she must suppress since they could be interpreted as speaking out against communist doctrine. In this way, she also differentiates herself from her compatriots, not only through writing, but also by naming herself as different, for she continually notes how she is reprimanded and deprived of certain statuses because she is considered too “bourgeois” by the Communist Party. Having come from a relatively elitist family, Đặng was educated and surrounded by the arts, namely classical music, at home. As Fitzgerald notes in the introduction to the text, “Her parents weren’t rich – no one was in North Vietnam at the time – but they were cultured people who filled their small house on Giang Vo Street in Hanoi with books and flowers. Her father played Western classical music to relax after surgery and taught Thuy to play the violin and guitar” (v-vi). With a background such as this, Thùy was considered “bourgeois” by many, including those in the upper echelons of the Communist Party. They even use this reason to keep her from joining the Communist ranks: “It seems everyone is always saying: ‘Tram truly deserves to be a Communist member,’” she writes (16). “And yet I am still not in that rank. The more I wish to be accepted, the more miserable I feel” (16). She wants to join the Party so she may more fully work toward Vietnamese independence and liberation. No matter how much she strives to join the Party, however, she finds that her “bourgeois attitudes” and “sentiments” remain (33). This difference in class background differentiates her from many of her compatriots, those of the simple farmer (33), the peasant. Eventually, she is admitted into the Party. However, she finds that these “bourgeois” attitudes persist. One

of the criticisms from the Party⁴⁸ names this characteristic as one of her weaknesses (71). A year and a half later, “Big Brother” claims that “[c]ertain bourgeois characteristics remain” (215). Since neither she, nor her critics in the Party, clarify explicitly what constitutes “bourgeois characteristics,” “attitudes,” or “sentiments,” we can assume that her somewhat privileged background is the culprit for producing these criticisms.

Her class difference from her compatriots sets her apart from them in personally distressing ways. As she lamentingly writes,

Oh, my dear ones! What can I say so that you can understand my heart? [...] What makes me so different from others? My way of life? My sentimental life, a life rich with meditation and a touch of the bourgeois?... What is all this? This is precisely what differentiates me from other people. I feel pain when others around me are jealous and critical. They think they are good, that they are modest... Oh, Thuy, be calm and firm, admit mistakes, and correct them at the roots. Don't be sad. (204)

Her uses of ellipses here denote how she incorporates and uses silence to mark her difference from the “jealous and critical” others that surround her. This silence affords her time and space to articulate how she views herself as different from the masses. What's more, she explicitly makes reference to how people do not understand her simply because of her class difference. The Party's and her friends' reluctance to listen rhetorically to her makes her “sad.” To combat this misunderstanding, she searches for words by taking momentary pauses, as indicated by the ellipses, to ask her readers, her

⁴⁸ As Andrew X. Pham, the translator of the diary, explains in a footnote: “‘Three Pro, Three Anti’ criticism and self-criticism sessions were ubiquitous in Vietnamese communist organizations. Usually called *Kiem Diem* or ‘examining your points,’ they were a regular part of Party meetings. [...] At the time of Thuy’s writing, both military personnel and civilians participated in the process” (70-71).

friends, to stand under her discourse, if only she could find the words that will allow them “to understand my heart.”

This rhetoric of difference is not only noted in how she perceives herself in class difference, but also in her articulations of the war. Rather than propagating the narrative of Vietnamese invincibility, she emphasizes the frailty of humans throughout the text. As Fitzgerald notes in her introduction, “Thuy’s diaries broke the mold. Here was a brave, idealistic young woman, but one with vulnerabilities and self-doubts: a romantic in spite of all her discipline. Her descriptions of the pathos of the soldiers, as well as of their heroism, reminded readers that those who had died for their cause were people much like themselves” (xviii). Vương Trí Nhàn explains how Đặng’s diary diverts from and simultaneously adheres to the epic-propagandistic style popular in Vietnamese writing. This formulaic style demanded that artists “(1) present a comprehensive picture, (2) maintain some distance from the subject observed, and (3) conclude positively” (186). According to Vương, Đặng’s diary “is more akin to the epic-propagandistic war literature that society left behind” because it “conveys the simple-minded innocence of a young idealist driven to action by a righteous cause” (190). The text diverts from this style of writing because it does not conclude positively, nor does it have many positive things to say about her occupation – since she continually works with maimed bodies and perpetually witnesses death – or about the Communist cause – due to the reluctance of the Party to admit her into its ranks and even after it does it continues to fault her for individual “bourgeois” habits and frame of mind. Given her individuality and the tension it causes her in reconciling it with the value placed upon the collective “we” in

communist doctrine, Đảng supplies a different rhetoric of the war, one laced with “pain and anguish” (Vương 190), all while espousing a different kind of Vietnamese citizen and patriot – one who strives to retain her individuality in a communal paradigm.

In order to fit more nicely into the Communist Party, Thùy determines that she must muffle her sentiments. She often writes of how she has to silence herself because she does not want to stand out as markedly and negatively different from the collective. She confesses,

within this pregnant silence I’m trying to hold back the tears. My patients only want to talk to me. They care for me, but the more they say, the deeper I sink into misery. They ask me why I don’t fight for my political rights, why am I worthy to be a Party member, yet I am not acceptable to the Party sub-branch?

Why, why, why? Who can answer that, my dear friends? Frankly, I cannot answer it. *I can only offer you my silence to speak of that impasse.* (16, emphasis mine)

Silence works here in two different ways. First, she uses silence to convey her loss for words when she contemplates why she is not and cannot be accepted into the Party. Second, she is silenced by the Party itself. Fearful of reprimand, or worse – the loss of her life,⁴⁹ depending on how much she outrages the members of the upper echelons of the Party’s sub-branch, Thùy is placed into a position of silence. After attending a “Party review” of another member, Thùy warns herself: “I tremble at a comrade’s mistakes. Never, Thuy! Never let the sub-branch of the Party hold a review meeting like that for

⁴⁹ Le Ly Hayslip’s autobiography *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* notes how dangerous being “called to a meeting” was at the time. Le Ly was called to such a one for a falsely perceived infraction against the National Liberation Front. Originally sentenced to death, her executioners spared her, and settled for raping her and forcing her into exile from her home village instead (88-95).

you” (179). Unable to tell the Party sub-branch committee herself that she is “bourgeois only in sentiments” (33), she uses her diary to confess her conflicting feelings about the Party and the decisions the Party makes as to who can and cannot be admitted into its ranks. Thus, her diary becomes the only medium in which these articulations of difference – being bourgeois while still being dedicated to the Communist cause – can surface; her diary is a way she communicates these moments of tension to her friends. At the beginning of her writing, she tells us that she wants “to confide my anger in dear ones, but I stay silent. Would anyone understand me?” (22). Believing that no one could understand her position of being both bourgeois and communist, she resorts to silence. It is only after finding and making friends who rhetorically listen to her, those who can understand her subject position, that she allows herself to share these experiences of being caught in the middle with them. As Andrew X. Pham claims in his “Note on the Translation” of the text, “In such a raw composition, the things left unsaid are as telling as those articulated” (xx). What these initial silences tell us is that Thùy needs to take a moment of introspection, something only silence can afford her, before she is able to articulate in writing the conflicting feelings that communist ideology and “bourgeois sentiments” turbulently engender within her. These pauses, these moments of silence and contemplation, afford her time to seek out those who will rhetorically listen to her, friends like Tan. In sharing her diary with her close friends, she is able to speak out against the unfairness of such classist labeling, especially when she writes lines like, “Everyone loves and respects me, but the Party remains so hard and ungenerous to me” (17).

Although she recognizes the inability to express one's individuality within the ideological framework of communism, she also values the principle of social cohesion and working as a collective "we" that underlie these politics. Eventually, she recognizes the important part she plays in the revolution and this gives her a great sense of pride. After receiving accolades from a Party review, she writes, "Last year's review cites the Duc Pho clinic's achievement as an example to the whole province for achieving the best results in treatments and other matters. And *I* am among those recognized. *I* have a part in this group victory" (63, emphasis mine). She realizes that she is part of a group, and a victorious one at that, one dedicated to independence and liberty for the nation of Vietnam. This collective, if they continue to work arduously and successfully, has the potential – at least at this point in late 1968 – to carry the North to victory. Ultimately, the goal is to achieve a very specific dream of peace:

Last night I dreamed that Peace was established, I came back and saw everybody. Oh, the dream of Peace and Independence has burned in the hearts of thirty million people for so long. For Peace and Independence, *we* have sacrificed everything. So many people have volunteered to sacrifice *their* whole lives for two words: Independence and Liberty. *I*, too, have sacrificed my life for that grandiose fulfillment. (27, emphasis mine)

When she writes of her own sacrifice here, she is referencing the fact that she left her family in Hanoi to join the war effort to treat injured civilians and soldiers. Even though she tends to accent the "I" in the "we," as seen in the last two quotations, the historical import of the Indochina Wars begins to weigh heavily upon her. She claims that this dream is "not mine alone, but it's the dream of Peace and Independence burning in the

hearts of thirty million Vietnamese and in millions of people around the world” (111). Extending the significance of the American War beyond the borders of Vietnam, this remark demonstrates how Thù and other Vietnamese like her viewed this war as one primarily concerned with expelling the “invaders” (83, 119), the “bloodthirsty devils” (210), the Americans, for they were viewed as simply an extension of the French as colonialists. If they could be so successful as to rid themselves of such imperial forces, then they could provide a model of liberation for other subjugated peoples around the globe.

I have noted how Đặng supports certain tenets of communist doctrine – like the collective struggle for independence – to demonstrate how she challenges ideology from within. If she were to vehemently protest against social values, then she would not have access to a Vietnamese audience, much like Duong Thu Huong as discussed in Chapter One. Rather, similar to Van Devanter and Smith, Đặng uses convention to portray a different narrative of the war and in doing so subverts convention. Her emphasis on the collective struggle of the war denotes how she maintains “some distance from the subject” (Vương 186) because she is finally able to see how the “I” meets the needs of the collective “we.” However, her inability to “conclude positively” due to her premature death detracts from one of the standards of the epic-propagandistic style of writing popular in Vietnam. Further, since she decidedly portrays the Communist Party in a realistic fashion, one that examines their successes and their faults, she conveys a different rhetoric of the war than what postwar Vietnamese readerships are accustomed to. Subversively, Đặng both uses and diverts from this popular formulaic style of writing

to challenge socialist doctrine from within its ranks, and she can only do so once she has allowed herself silent introspection.

The Question of Audience: Finding Rhetorical Listeners in Women Veterans

While texts like Van Devanter's, Smith's, Mason's, and Đặng's call out for rhetorical listeners so that they may present challenges to institutions of power that further subjugate disenfranchised people's experiences, women's oral histories like Kathryn Marshall's *In the Combat Zone* demonstrate how women function as rhetorical listeners for each other. Two of the most noted oral histories concerning women's experiences in the Vietnam War are Marshall's and Walker's.⁵⁰ The credibility of the oral history genre is often questioned in the academy due to the unreliability of the narrators' memories and the issue that the interviewer can function as an interlocutor and editor that shapes these narratives perhaps even more than the speakers themselves.⁵¹ Despite these criticisms of the genre, Patrick Hagopian suggests that oral histories carry several benefits:

The narratives present the authoritative witness of those who served and who are thus especially qualified to speak about the war. Secondly, they reveal previously

⁵⁰ Patrick Hagopian cites these two texts as “[t]wo of the three most frequently used works on women in Vietnam” as indicated by a 1993 survey he conducted. In this survey of eighty-nine courses that had the Vietnam War as its main subject of inquiry he found that many of such courses use oral histories to “provide both a sense of what the war felt like that official documents and secondary sources do not capture and evidence of hard truths that some other sources evade” (“Voices from Vietnam” 594).

⁵¹ Hagopian also questions the line between authenticity and “parable” (“Voices from Vietnam” 596) in oral history narratives due to the “wannabe phenomenon” (594-5) and the emphasis on chronology in storytelling (597). In doing so, he exposes the problem that “[e]very oral history takes place in a context and against a background of mutual expectations on the part of interviewer and interviewee. In any interview, the oral historian must reflect on how those factors shape the narrative, and she or he must decide whether to treat that shaping as a ‘bias,’ and hence an obstacle to knowledge, or as an element that is usefully amenable to interpretation” (600).

concealed truths. Thirdly, they function cathartically for those whose stories have previously been ignored, both the speakers and readers who may recognize their own experiences in what is narrated. Finally, they function analogously for the wider society, providing the focus for a process of reconciliation often described as personal and social 'healing.' ("Oral Narratives" 135)

For these reasons he supports the use of oral histories within the collegiate classroom and champions the genre as one that can provide information previously hidden from public consciousness to readers. For Hagopian, these narratives convey "a social process of transaction and exchange" between the narrators and their readers ("Oral Narratives" 145). I would further argue that as a result of what Hagopian names as the third function of the genre the narratives also convey an exchange of understanding between speaker and listener, for the women in Marshall's text often find rhetorical listeners amongst other women veterans.

Hagopian further speaks about the relationship between narrating, publishing, and reading experiences of these stories and the rhetorical power these narratives carry. He maintains that,

The recording of an oral narrative implicitly positions the narrators in relation not just to the interviewer, but to other listeners as well. The presupposition that an audience is willing to hear the stories they tell brings with it an invitation to speak and a legitimization of the veterans' experience. This in itself can be beneficial for veterans who have previously felt shunned and ignored. [...]

The scene of testimony and confession in the oral narrative resonates with many other scenes in which a speaker reveals previously hidden truths to an interlocutor. As readers, we are invited to take up a position reverberating with these: we are positioned as confessors, forgiving the narrators' sins; as therapists, healing their wounds; as inquisitors, searching out the truth; as comrades, feeling kinship with their words; as judges, condemning and pardoning their crimes; as partners in a 'rap session', echoing their words with our own. The comfort for the

readers is that we are positioned in a posture of exculpability. The exposure of the dirty secrets of the war can lead to closure first through the condemnation or, more likely, a benign forgiveness of the veterans, which then leads to a more generalized reconciliation of the nation with its past. If all the sins of the past are taken on by them, we can redeem this past and absolve ourselves by exonerating the narrating veterans. (“Oral Narratives” 146-7)

If what Hagopian says is true, that readers take on these various roles as readers of and listeners to oral histories, then this positions the audience as agents who carry a hefty responsibility, as those who are able to absolve narrators of their multifarious sins.

However, I counter this proposal by suggesting that not all readers feel that magnitude of accountability. In another essay, “Voices from Vietnam: Veterans’ Oral Histories in the Classroom,” Hagopian ends his piece by asking that interviewers and readers alike strive to listen to these stories “critically,” for “[l]istening critically [...is] not devaluing what was said or skeptically distancing oneself from the narrator, but being more fully attentive to his words” (601). While I agree that readers should strive for this kind of reading, a kind of rhetorical listening to these narrators, a particular problem arises when readers are removed temporally and spatially from these speakers. If this distance in time and space is too great from the speaker, this removal has the power to distance readers from the subject who speaks, particularly since this distance continues to grow in time.

Daniel F. Schultz and Maryanne Felter note how “Americans are notoriously ignorant of history – their own and others’” (142). To combat this ignorance, they emphasize the necessity of historical context when reading literature, for they find that literature often functions as a vehicle for realizing that history is more than just names, dates, and places. A literary complement to historically understanding our world makes one “able to study

history in a form that allows them to see how it applies to real people in real life situations (ironically in fiction)” (144). Providing historical context, particularly when introducing readers to an event that has the potential to be very different than the reader’s own life experiences, is paramount in teaching war literature, even if this literature is only a few decades removed from the reader’s current historical moment. Given this distance and incomprehension of the event as we move farther and farther from it with the passage of time, I am led to believe that readers often do not take on the roles Hagopian prescribes, even though the narrators of oral histories may ask their readers to take on those positions. If these narrators did believe that readers adopt those various positions of agency when they read, then there would be no need to include a plea for rhetorical listeners. On the contrary, women interviewees often ask readers to take on this role of rhetorical listening because heretofore many readers have not adopted such an open stance toward their stories. Given that readers often do not function as rhetorical listeners for these women, they find that they have to turn to others like themselves – other women veterans – in order for their stories to be understood.

Once they have found rhetorical listeners amongst each other, these narrators of oral histories present a new understanding of the war by demonstrating how trauma can be socially constructed. The American participants of the war often note how they have been traumatized as a group while in country, fighting on behalf of an American government in which they do not necessarily believe, and upon returning home to a

public that chastises them and hurls insults such as “baby-killer” at them.⁵² What women’s oral histories provide their readers is a way of talking back to those who refuse to talk to them (Marshall). In noting how the women’s narratives in Marshall’s work speak to the “particular[s]” (Alkana 1393) of the war, what is most striking is how these women express a compulsion to talk about their experiences, but, unfortunately, they feel they have no one they can talk to. These women often express an all-encompassing loneliness when it comes to their experiences in the war, for they cannot talk to the civilians back home, the men who also served in Vietnam, or even the other women who served alongside them. This presents a problem because these women express a need to talk either to explain how they are proud of their service or to proclaim the simple fact that they were there, despite the prevailing American public consciousness that refuses to imagine them as participants in the war.

This compulsion to talk coupled with the limited access to a listening audience raises the question: If these women could have any particular audience at their disposal who would listen to them, then what kind(s) of audience(s) would they prefer? In Van Devanter’s case, she wants women veterans to listen to each other, as evidenced in her founding of the Women’s Project with the VVA. Marshall’s and Walker’s works, however, desire a larger audience – the American public. Walker’s oral history was published “to help give some public recognition where it’s long overdue – to the American women who served so admirably in Vietnam” (ix). These women seek

⁵² This questioning of the American government and the picture of a hostile, unwelcome home is especially portrayed in oral histories of the conflict that have received canonical status in Vietnam War literature, such as Al Santoli’s *Everything We Had*, Mark Baker’s *Nam*, and even Wallace Terry’s *Bloods*.

recognition not only for their participation in the war, but also for the “admirabl[e]” work they did there. The interviewees in Marshall’s work, on the other hand, express a more personal motive for sharing their stories. They do so in order to combat the “invisibility” and “silence” they have sustained as a result of being gendered participants of the war (Marshall 12).

They had been trained to take care of people – wounded people, sick people, children. And they “did” for men because, in the military and elsewhere, that’s what women did. By training and by habit they downplayed their own feelings and denied their own needs. The men’s experiences, or the patient’s or the child’s feelings, came first. They were used to being minor characters even in their own lives. (Marshall 12)

In order to reclaim their own agency, their right to tell their version of the Vietnam War story, these women deliver their own personal narratives to combat the stereotype of woman-as-caregiver so that the American public may begin to view them – and by extension any woman – in different, more fluid terms, ones that do not staunchly support or justify stereotypes.

Sadly, however, these women often feel as though they do not have a listening audience once they initially return to the States and are once again surrounded by their civilian friends and family who have not experienced war. Mary Stout, like Van in *Home Before Morning*, often finds that conversations about the war with American civilians are truncated. Carl, her husband and a Vietnam War veteran himself, “always told people, at parties and things, that I was a Vietnam veteran, too. And they would say, ‘Oh, you are?’ And I’d say, ‘Yes.’ And that would be the end of it” (Marshall 89). Other women, like

Jill Mishkel, find it too burdensome to even tell most people that she is a veteran because they would think that she was “really weird” (144). Others, like Cherie Rankin and Leslie McClusky would not tell anyone that they had been in Vietnam. As Rankin explains, “I felt I just couldn’t talk about it except with people who had been there” (77). Even for those that did divulge that information to civilians, like Saralee McGoran, they find that they are met with an awkward and meaningless exchange: “everybody wanted to talk about the war but nobody wanted to hear about it. Yeah, nobody wanted to hear but everybody wanted to talk” (255-6). These silencing exchanges and withholding the information of being a Vietnam veteran harken back to similar experiences expressed in Van Devanter’s and Smith’s works. What is differently conveyed in this collection, however, is how prevalent those experiences are. One must keep in mind that the repetitive nature of these stories signals what Myra MacPherson calls a “suspension of belief.” As Hagopian poignantly writes, “The salient question is not whether they are true, since one can assume that they did happen [...to] at least some of the speakers, but what the repeated stories are intended to convey, and how they achieved their folkloric status” (“Oral Narratives” 143). The conclusion that we can draw from the prevalence of these women withholding information is that many of them were *made to feel ashamed* of their service and what they had accomplished in Vietnam. Contrary to popular belief, many women attest that their accomplishments in war were not shameful ones; rather, they were ones that evoke a strong sense of pride in what they could do and under what conditions they could perform. Instead of asking for pity, these women simply wish for this experience of difference to be recognized and understood.

While it might seem a bit odd that a Vietnam veteran would be proud of one's service there, it is not that strange when we take into account the capacities in which many of these women served in Vietnam. As indicated in Marshall's introduction,⁵³ women served in various capacities in Vietnam. Cherie Rankin, a Red Cross volunteer in the Supplemental Recreational Activity Overseas (SRAO) Program, tells us, "There is a sense of wanting to be identified as having been in Vietnam. Not because I supported the war. No, I want to be identified because I feel that what I did over there was valuable. I want to be proud of that. Because for so long I was ashamed" (78). Women like Rankin were made to feel ashamed of their experience largely because the American public misunderstood what kind of work many American women did there. Sure, some, like Van, went to Vietnam because they initially *did* support the war or because they wanted to answer John F. Kennedy's call pronounced in his "Ask Not" speech (Marshall 206), but once they were there, they often focused on saving as many lives as possible – either through nursing or gentle acts of kindness.

Civilians are not the only ones to misperceive these women, however. Men who served in Vietnam also demonstrate how these women felt alienated in country. As synecdoche, these "round eye" women in country often purely signified sex to these men. Rankin relates how, as a "donut dolly," she was mistaken for being sexually promiscuous simply because she was an American woman in Vietnam. After hitching a ride with two American soldiers, she becomes painfully aware that the passenger "started to molest me. His hands were everywhere – up my dress, in my panties. I was biting him and yelling at

⁵³ I referenced the extensive list of American women's occupations in country in Chapter Two.

him. [...] But they were both saying things like ‘Well, you do this all the time. You give it to the officers for free – what’s the matter, you gonna charge us?’” (69). She explains and somewhat rationalizes this attempted rape. “They just thought I was a loose woman and that I’d been doing it and it was no big deal. That was the idea a lot of guys had about the Red Cross women” (69). This misperception that Rankin, or all Red Cross women, or even any “round eye” in Vietnam, were “loose” women effectively has the power to distance American women from their male comrades in country, which in turn inhibits any communication they might share with each other about their experiences, especially ones that accuse upstanding American men of attempted rape. Once these women return home, they are further excluded from speaking to and even being a part of veterans’ affairs. Anne Powlas was barred from joining the American Legion on the premise that women Vietnam veterans are not really veterans (126). The members of a rap session try to stop Jeanne Christie from joining the session simply because she is a woman (185). Again, we can see how women are denied their Vietnam War veteran status, a status that carries the potential to admit them into much-needed communal gatherings and therapeutic practices.

What is perhaps most disturbing is that these women feel that they cannot even talk to each other during their service. As Marshall explains in her introduction, “The need to talk was perhaps the single overwhelming need of the men and women who had gone to the Vietnam War. But if talking was hard for the men, it was harder for the women. Because their numbers were smaller and because they had worked for such a variety of organizations, the women were more isolated from each other than the men

were” (10). This compulsion to talk emanates from a deep-seated desire to have a listening audience at one’s disposal. Even if these women were allowed to join veterans’ groups, they still felt an overwhelming desire to relate to other women who were there. Debbie Wong admits, “I associated off and on with the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, but even some of them didn’t understand where I was coming from. I wanted, more than anything, the company of women” (26). These women yearn for a feminine solidarity that they cannot find, either due to the relatively few women who served there (in comparison to men) or the disparate occupations they held while in country.

Women such as Wong feel that if they had more solidarity amongst their female comrades who experienced the war firsthand then they could more loudly proclaim that they were indeed there. This proclamation would effectively work against public memory through articulations of difference. In Becky Pietz’s concluding remarks in Marshall’s work, she says, “After this interview I’m not going to be in control of the aftermath. The aftermath is going to be in control of me. But I think the story needs to be told. And if it’s going to be told, *I want to be part of the telling*, because I was there and I know what happened because it happened to me” (108-9, emphasis mine). As Pietz demonstrates, there is no definitive story to *the* American woman’s experience in Vietnam. Rather, these women’s experiences are multifarious. She simply wants to have her “part” told. What’s more is that according to American public memory of the war, women were not remembered as a part of the conflict (Mithers). These stories “if [they are] going to be told” contest that notion. Given that these women’s experiences are myriad, this further points to how those repeated folkloric stories come under further

scrutiny. While we can conclude that many women experienced the debilitating effects of being silenced, simply stating that all women in Vietnam shared similar experiences undervalues how their differences, amongst themselves and in comparison to their male counterparts, contest and subvert conventional Vietnam War stories.

Once women's veterans groups had been formed, however, these women often found rhetorical listeners amongst themselves. As Marshall notes in her introduction to the text,

Throughout the seventies, all they had had in common was that they had gone to the Vietnam War. Back then, when no one was sure there was even a way to talk, how could these women have talked to each other as "veterans"?

The impetus to try came some five years after the Vietnam War was over. It came from both within and in spite of veterans' organizations. Former Army nurse Lynda Van Devanter, then active with the Vietnam Veterans of America, began speaking out. Women counselors in the VA-sponsored Vietnam Veteran's Outreach Program began contacting other women, and the Disabled American Veterans began seeking out women who had been disabled in Vietnam. In California, Debra DeBondt, a Vietnam-era Air Force veteran, started the Women's Veterans' Information Network, while in Massachusetts Lough O'Daly, also a Vietnam-era Air Force veteran, started the newsletter organization in Athena. Here and there, vet centers were seeking women for the first time. And after former Red Cross worker Jeanne Christie began digging letters out of trunks and making calls to distant time zones, women who had been in Vietnam with military support organizations and relief agencies began coming together. Finally, at the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Washington in 1982, women who had been military in Vietnam and women who had been civilian began – tentatively – to talk. By May of 1985, when I did my first interview, they were talking in earnest. (3-4)

These women in forming networks of access to each other begin to come together to talk and listen to voices that largely had been silenced by the American public, the government, the media, and conventional narratives about the war. In doing so, they

finally gave themselves what they had been searching for all along: recognition, validation, and pride in their service, something that could only come about through the process of rhetorical listening. At last, by articulating narratives of difference they began to see and appreciate how their stories not only came to be told, but also how these very narratives challenge the masculinist dominant discourse of the war that had silenced them for so long. Setting these stories into print only asks for that kind of audience, one who rhetorically listens, to be expanded to the larger American public. These women simply wish that the American public adopt a position of openness to their articulations of difference. In order begin this process the public would have to engage in strategic contemplation.

Conclusion

Rhetorical listening is crucial not only in understanding people's varying subject positions, but also in initiating a process that has the power to dismantle debilitating regimes of power that exacerbate trauma's effects. In order to spark such a process, it is essential for readers as listeners, to engage in momentary, reflective silence so that they may distance themselves from their own (unconscious) prejudices and strategically contemplate positions that have the capacity to be very different from their own. Only once we as reader-listeners pause, reflect, and thoroughly consider the validity of different experiences can we then begin to see how certain institutions of power – the media, the government, the family – reinforce debilitating stereotypes like woman-as-caregiver or Vietnamese-woman-as-treacherously-dangerous-Communist. Through

interrogation, critique, and critical consciousness of how our own actions and words uphold oppressive regimes of power, we can begin to engage in strategic contemplation. This kind of strategic contemplation, enacted through momentary silences, is necessary if we are to begin to dismantle these oppressive institutions that exercise their power not only to marginalize and muffle these women's voices, but also to reaffirm her experiences and, by extension, herself as inferior.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION: THE NECESSITY OF RHETORICAL LISTENING

In the last chapter I examined how women veterans of the Vietnam War plead for rhetorical listeners from a broader audience and how these women also act as rhetorical listeners for and amongst themselves. The need to have rhetorical listeners at one's disposal arises from a history of patriarchal subjugation. Women's history, or more specifically women veterans' literary history, is marked time and again by audiences' refusal to listen to their stories. Listening satisfies these women's needs not only to be heard, but also to have their experiences understood as "real" and "true" so that these women can be appreciated for the sacrifices they made. Rhetorical listening also pays much needed attention to the multifarious traumas they have undergone and had to subsequently deal with, each in their own way – by either using their voice via narrative or by using silence to protect themselves from misjudgment and misunderstanding. Using silence in this way also enables women to own their experiences, for in doing so they disallow outsiders from telling the victim how to think about and cope with their trauma. In order to stalwart the demanding and prescriptive diagnosis and prognosis of masculinist constructions of trauma, these women actively choose to deal with their traumas on their own terms. They safeguard their experiences through a deliberate use of silence.

As I have argued throughout this study, women's voices are often relegated to the margins, whether they are Vietnamese, American, or Vietnamese-American. Often when the Vietnam War is recalled in public memory, Americans tend to envision a white male protagonist who is caught in the turmoil of the war from which he cannot escape, either in country or after he has returned home. These narratives of despair and horror are reified by the proliferation of male-authored and male-centered texts that have infiltrated the literary market and film industry. What these narratives do is silence the women who have something different to add to this quagmire-immersed narrative. As Mithers demonstrates, women, historically, have been written out of the war's mythology, which subjugates any narratives of difference they have to offer and renders these female characters voiceless. This is particularly troubling because silencing, in this way, has the power to enact a double-wounding of trauma. Not only have these women experienced horrifying episodes of history firsthand, but their participation and presence in this chaotic scenario has been wiped from American public memory of the conflict, which thereby makes their own very real experiences questionable at best. In order to work against this double-wounding, some women resort to using silence not only to protect themselves from their own traumatic experiences, but also to refuse the appropriation of their experiences by patriarchal regimes of power that actively work to keep these women and their stories muted. While some keep their experiences to themselves, only slowly revealing the traumas they sustained through selective telling, to imbue themselves with their own sense of personal agency, others wither despairingly under the debilitating pressures of being doubly-wounded by silence, like Van and Winnie do in their

narratives. Either way, these conditions make these characters ripe for pleading for rhetorical listeners so that they may correct the wrongs inherent in the dominant masculinist discourse of the war.

While my project is largely concerned with Vietnam War literature, the voices that get written out of this conflict and the implications that this excising has on these women characters, there are larger issues at stake. Using the Vietnam War as my context, I have argued that this era's literature works as an exemplar of how women's experiences continue to be overwritten, and thereby diminished, annihilated by men's. This does not only happen in arenas that are traditionally considered as masculine, like that of war. It also occurs in everyday exchanges. As Sandra Lee Bartky has demonstrated, women are continually made to feel ashamed because they are considered as "lesser creature[s]" (87). This shame takes its form in a multitude of ways, from subordinating the care of oneself so that she may serve others (i.e.: in adopting care-taking roles) to partaking in bodily alterations (i.e.: shaving, wearing makeup, and so on) so that she may be seen as beautiful in the eyes of men (Bartky 100, 75, 71). In essence, women are expected to adopt certain roles and forsake others. One of these roles where women go unacknowledged, but one in which they surely have participated, is that of warrior. By committing their experiences of war to print, the women studied within this project demonstrably, pointedly, and openly challenge patriarchal regimes of power that purport that war is a man's arena. In contradicting this masculinist claim, these women not only assert that these misogynistic views are wrong, but they also claim that these very views are violently exclusionary. Through writing, these women take on a new war

of their own, combatting this exclusionary enterprise by directly forcing the American public to acknowledge their presence in this masculinized arena.

When Agents Fail to Engage in Rhetorical Listening: A Case Study

Whereas Marshall's *In the Combat Zone* serves as a model for how one may practice rhetorical listening, Le Ly Hayslip's *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* provides an example of how one can fail to engage in this necessary feminist praxis. I draw on Hayslip's first autobiography to outline how this failure occurs within the context of the Vietnam War era. What this text shows us is that when people fail to engage in and practice rhetorical listening, certain stereotypes about women are reinforced and the system of patriarchy gains a stronger foothold as an institution of power that is used to relegating women, their experiences and voices, as lesser, insignificant, and at times invalid.

Hayslip's text not only reifies these erroneous notions about womanhood, but she also takes a neocolonialist stance when it comes to her native nation of Vietnam. As a Vietnamese immigrant in America, Hayslip provides her account of the Vietnam War as she experienced it in her early childhood to young adulthood. She recounts the horrors she witnessed and was subject to: digging graves to bury soldiers that died on her family's paddy land, being raped by South Vietnamese Viet Cong cadresmen who she initially considered friends, being forced into prostitution in a one-time deal to save her family from poverty and to fund her escape from the crumbling South Vietnam government, selling trinkets and drugs to American soldiers through black market

enterprises, becoming impregnated by a married man and thus soiling herself (as she sees it) and any future prospects she may have for a future marriage, being imprisoned in My Thi prison camp infamous for having guards who regularly subject their inmates to torture, and so on. Her story has two narrative strains, one situated in the past that tells of her experience in the American War and one that takes place in the present that narrates her first return trip to Vietnam to visit her family. She ends her autobiography with an Afterword in the 2003 edition that highlights the philanthropic work she has founded and begun in Vietnam in an attempt to wrestle the Vietnamese state and its people from poverty. These ameliorations in Vietnamese public life and health are dependent upon US monetary aid, according to Hayslip.

Reviewers tend to laud Hayslip's work. Lorenzo M. Crowell calls it "a story of survival, forgiveness, and reconciliation" (356). Brien Hallett names it as "essential reading" (195) since the language is "remarkable" (194) and because it also provides an account of the war from a Vietnamese peasant's perspective. Crowell further claims that this autobiography "brings out the historical reality of the war for the Vietnamese people" (355). Judy Hefland concurs with Crowell's statement when she asserts that Hayslip "bring[s] Vietnam to life" (22). "It strengthens me," Hefland writes, "to realize that someone can go through the horrors Le Ly endured – death all around her, torture, rape, betrayal and banishment from her home – and still have compassion and believe that one simply has to go on, not be eaten alive with bitterness" (22). Given this rhetoric of self-induced perseverance and uplift, Hefland urges her readers "to read this book" (22). Other positive interpretations of Hayslip's work come from critics like Quan Manh Ha

who asserts that her work “delineates the uses and abuses of power upon her individual psyche, and most specifically upon her individual person as a subaltern, victimized by those who use and abuse power on each side of the conflict. It is a powerful human document and a significant contribution to the corpus of Vietnamese American literature” (16). For Ha, the power of her narrative resides in her “significant attempt to survive the overt exercise of power upon her own person during the Vietnam War” (2). Viet Thanh Nguyen argues for “the centrality of the body in Hayslip’s text and in the contexts of the Viet Nam War, as well as its central location in the development of global capitalism” (607). He contends that the “victim’s body that Hayslip uses has a voice and [it] demonstrates her integral, macrological importance” (607). Ultimately, however, he finds that contradictions in Hayslip’s work prevail, namely her “conclusion that ‘what [the United States] wants more than anything, I think, is to forgive you and be forgiven in return,’ [which] implies a symmetry of power that did not and does not exist” between East and West (626). These contradictions result in “an inconsistent application by Hayslip of her own belief system” of karmic return and national soul debt (627). It is these contradictions that I would like to explore to argue that, given how Le Ly performs ideology swapping, Hayslip’s autobiography *When Heaven* serves as an example of how certain people fail to engage in rhetorical listening.

Similar to my cynical reading of Hayslip, other audiences have not been so kind in their reactions to her work. Lan P. Duong gives the example of when Oliver Stone’s

film adaptation of Hayslip's two autobiographies⁵⁴ *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* and *Child of War, Woman of Peace*, was released in theatres, the Vietnamese American community in Southern California responded "antagonistic[ally]" (57). Some in Orange County, California even rallied in protest against the film (Duong 57). This community viewed her as a treacherous person, one who betrayed her community by propagating "pro-normalization politics" (57). In producing and publishing her two coauthored books, "Hayslip, as a writer, must be held accountable for the historic totality of the Vietnam War. As a woman, she is obligated to uphold the virtues of Vietnamese womanhood. As a Vietnamese refugee, she must honor the memory of southern Vietnamese soldiers and their heroism," or so the line of critique goes (Duong 58). However absurd these demands upon a writer are, there are still more useful detracting critiques to be made about her work. Leslie Bow maintains that political allegiance is dependent upon and "established through the body" in Hayslip's work (142). The body, then, "becomes a matter of negotiating between the sexual demands of opposing sides represented by Viet Cong, Republican, and American officials, soldiers, and employers. But on another level, the text's gendered discourse is intimately tied to its covert ideological agenda in which *neutrality justifies American interests*" (142-3, emphasis mine). Although Hayslip claims that she wrote and published *When Heaven* in an attempt to "heal old wounds," I suggest that she can only do so by adopting American discourse about the war, for only in that case does she open herself up to a receptive

⁵⁴ Since Hayslip uses this term to refer to both of her books, I also employ this generic terminology. As she explains, her first book is about her first life cycle, the one lived and completed in Vietnam. Her second book *Child of War* recounts her travails in assimilating to American culture and life in Southern California, her second life cycle.

American audience. In order for such an appropriation to occur, she must swap one ideology, communism, for another, capitalism. Instead of advocating difference as many Vietnamese-American women writers have (like Monique Truong, Laura Lâm, Lan Cao, and Lê Thị Diem Thùy as explored in previous chapters), Hayslip supplants a pro-communist agenda for one that pleads for American economic intervention to save Vietnam from remaining an underdeveloped, impoverished country. This ideology swapping only reifies the rhetoric of American superiority that purports that Vietnamese are inferior racially, culturally, and economically.

After recounting her travails of living in a war torn land, Hayslip ends her text with an Afterword, appended in the 2003 edition of her text. Spurred by a conversation with her brother Bon Nghe, a devout communist government official, that took place in 1986, Le Ly decides that Vietnam would greatly benefit from building a health clinic in Danang. Le Ly explains all of the benevolent work America and its veterans could do for Vietnam when she tells her brother, “There is so much America can do to help Vietnam, Bon Nghe. I can’t imagine that among out two hundred and fifty million people, we can’t find a few who want to rekindle a forgotten friendship. Perhaps we’ll build a clinic for the poor people of Danang. I used to work in a hospital – did you know that? A hospital would be a fitting place to start” (311). According to Le Ly, a hospital would not only provide much needed services to the “poor people of Danang,” but it would also create much-needed jobs, implying that this is something that the Vietnamese government cannot do for its own citizens. Instead, Vietnam and its people must rely on American monetary aid and affluence in order to spark a desperately needed initiative to

implement up-to-date medical standards, keep the clinic healthily supplied with material, and create employment opportunities. Although she speculates that this dream is far-fetched and most likely not to occur (311) because at the time the US had an economic embargo against Vietnam, in her Afterword she notes how these dreams eventually came to fruition. She established the East Meets West Foundation in 1987 and the Global Village Foundation eleven years later (371, 372). Additionally, she along with those who work alongside her in these nongovernmental, charitable organizations, established the Traditional Cultural Center in Ky La, her hometown, in 2000. While these organizations undoubtedly do good work, questions remain: What kind of work do they do? How do they receive funding? And how is that funding appropriated once it reaches Vietnam?

The answers to these questions are telling. In her epilogue, she tells her audience that an estimate of “between six and seven million Vietnamese men, women, and children are dying slowly of starvation, malnutrition, and disease because food and other necessities cannot be produced or imported in sufficient quantities from Western countries” (366). In order to curb this slow death of Vietnam and its citizens, Le Ly positions those in the West as the only ones that can save these people from their devastation. Once again, the West is positioned as masculine, as savior, while the East remains helplessly feminine, in need of saving. To implement this process of saving Vietnam from itself, she established the East Meets West Foundation in 1987. This “agency”

seeks support from the U.S. Government, Vietnamese Government, the American and Vietnamese people, corporations, charitable groups, religious organizations,

and individual benefactors in all nations to heal the wounds of war and break the circle of vengeance that perpetuates suffering in the name of justice around the world. As I write these words, work is beginning in Xa Hoa Qui to build a Victims of War Center for the homeless and rural poor. These clinics, built in cooperation with Vietnam veterans groups from across America, will be staffed and supported by volunteer physicians, dentists, and other health professionals from the United States and other countries involved in America's longest – and Vietnam's costliest – war. We are making special efforts to “reenlist” medical corpsmen, nurses, and physicians who have previously served in this and other combat zones. If you are a veteran of any war, you are especially encouraged to sign on for another “tour of duty” in service to humanity and yourself – to heal the wounds that may linger in your spirit and help the Vietnamese people, who, like war victims anywhere, are the spiritual partners of your journey. (367)

While giving the Vietnamese people greater access to medical treatment is undoubtedly a good thing, what is troublesome in this passage is how she scripts this notion of “humanity,” as though acts of kindness and dignity can only be bestowed upon “poor” and “rural” people by those who are wealthier, have the ability to travel great distances, and who are situated in the West. In other words, this “fixing” of the Vietnamese nation can only come from beyond its borders, as though the Vietnamese people are helplessly passive agents in ameliorating their own plight. Thus, giving Vietnam the medical and shelter resources that it needs is dependent upon volunteers, those who have the means and ability not only to work without pay and the time to do so, but also the financial means to travel and stay for extended periods of time in a country halfway around the globe from them.

Despite these goodwill intentions, the East Meets West Foundation did not solve all of Vietnam's problems. Thus, she founded another organization – the Global Village Foundation – in 1998. This organization's aim was “to carry our work in a new direction

– to pay off, as much as I can in this short life, the soul debt my ancestors and I created during our years on this troubled planet” (372). Its mission is “to promote the culture, arts, and vocational development of Vietnamese villagers while preserving their local traditions and national heritage” (372). In order to achieve such a lofty goal, the organization recruited teachers, philanthropists, and students to come see Vietnamese cultural life for themselves (372). “Many of these people stayed on or returned as volunteer teachers, job trainers, administrators, and assistants at various schools, clinics, vocational workshops, and construction sites” (372). As an offshoot to this culture-building and crosscultural-promoting project, the Traditional Cultural Center was established in 2000 in Ky La as a place where “the old train the young in the unique arts and crafts of Vietnamese village life” (372). These “arts and crafts” could then be exported for sale once the US-Vietnam trade agreement was signed in 2001. The sales from this cultural, commodified exchange “helped to break the cycle of poverty, illiteracy, and hopelessness that has gripped the countryside for generations,” Hayslip claims (372). What Hayslip fails to consider is how this exchange of cultural goods for American dollars situates the Vietnamese and their cultural artifacts as commodified objects. As Graham Huggan explains in *The Post-Colonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, turning such goods into marketable objects is a “fetishizing process, which turns the literatures/cultures of the ‘non-Western’ world into saleable exotic objects” (10). This is a problem because “exoticism describes [...] a particular mode of aesthetic perception – one which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to their

immanent mystery” (13). “Thus, while exoticism describes the systematic assimilation of cultural difference, ascribing familiar meanings and associations to unfamiliar things,” Huggan continues, “it also denotes an expanded, if inevitably distorted comprehension of diversity which effectively limits assimilation ‘since the exotic is...kept at arm’s length rather than taken as one’s own’” (14). Putting Huggan’s discussion of commodification and fetishization of “strange,” foreign objects into dialogue with Hayslip’s endeavors with the Global Village Foundation allows us to see how Hayslip in her dependence on American consumers, turns not only these villagers’ “crafts” into commodifiable objects, but she also, by extension, commodifies the villagers themselves as fetishized, exotic objects. Given that the villagers are the ones who produce such cultural artifacts, their value is reduced only to what they can produce and market for Western markets, namely the United States. Once again, the dependency to save the Vietnamese from despondency is placed once again upon the US and those who hold the benevolent power of the almighty dollar.

As if the East Meets West Foundation and the Global Village Foundation did not already reaffirm the West-as-savior narrative enough, Hayslip’s cultural and entrepreneurial work does not stop there. In 2003, she describes how the “plans to realize my dream of a true crosscultural center are coming together,” by way of building a “Pan Asian cultural *theme park*” in sunny Southern California (372, emphasis mine).

The park will use traditional Asian agricultural and aquacultural methods to grow and harvest crops, herbs, and flowers for local consumption. The central village, connected to the working fields and ponds by a series of picturesque canals and footpaths, will feature a market, food fair, and shops selling Asian arts and crafts,

clothing, furnishings, and musical instruments to visitors. Indoor and open-air theaters will offer a variety of authentic performances – dance, concert, drama, and puppet shows – all in traditional Asian styles. Storytellers will stroll the streets, entralling children of all ages with tales from *tu huong*, *muoi phuong*, the four corners of the mystical past.

Best of all, the Pan Asian park will showcase the cultures of not only Vietnam, but also Japan, Korea, China, Taiwan, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, India, and a dozen countries from the Eastern Pacific Rim. It will be a living bridge between the dynamic West and the timeless East. (372-3, emphasis original)

This is taking the fetishization of the “timeless” and “mystical” East to an unprecedented degree. Not only are these exoticized cultural artifacts available for sale, but so are their “authentic” cultural customs by the price of an admission ticket. In a Baudrillardian sense, Hayslip brings the “mystical past” of the Orient home to the residents of Southern California and others willing to travel there to experience the hyperreality of Asia Hayslip has built. She transplants cultures and customs in order to “pay back to Americans at least a little of what they had so generously given to us [her and those who work for her foundations] – to share with them, on American soil, a small taste of Asian culture” (372).

In order to fund these projects, readers assume that she solicits donations as well as volunteer time from the people who she asks to help her foundations – the American and Vietnamese governments, corporations, charities, individual benefactors, and religious organizations (367). But the list of potential donors does not stop there. She also petitions her readers, supplying the East Meets West Foundation’s address and contact information, should “you[] like to participate” (373). Although the word

“participate” in this request is left open to interpretation, after giving such a detailed account of the despair and poverty that runs rampant throughout the Vietnamese nation, one could surmise that “participation” in Hayslip’s terms amounts to monetary donations or voluntary work. Further, given that Hayslip, with the help of Jay Wurts wrote this text in English, specifically for an American market, she is directly addressing American audiences in her plea for help. Directly addressing an audience so firmly situated in the West, Hayslip envisions saving the Vietnamese from themselves by use of the white man’s dollar. As Chowdhury by use of Gayatri Spivak explains, relying on American aid in this way presents a kind of “rescue narrative” that reinscribes the faulty logic of “White men [...] saving brown women from brown men” (17). It is this faulty logic, one ensconced with racism and sexism, to which Hayslip ascribes when she endows America and all its magnificent monetary aid with the responsibility to save the Vietnamese from themselves.

In her critique of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Bangladesh, Elora Halim Chowdhury outlines the problems that can occur with governmental or charitable work. She admits that NGOs in Bangladesh “have been and still are central to nation-building [...], both as service providers and as vehicles for progressive organizing, often challenging government and top-down approaches to development” (3). However, NGOs are not as picture-perfect as they might have been assumed to be. “It is also true,” Chowdhury tells her readers, “that they are tied to colonialist discourses of development and donor-driven neocolonial ‘empowerment’ projects for the poor in the third world. Such discourses perpetuate dependency on ‘aid,’ prioritize external agendas over locally

based ones, and weaken and co-opt locally directed vision and capacity” (3). This is precisely the rhetoric that Hayslip falls prey to in the construction of her organizations – the East Meets West Foundation, the Global Village Center, the Traditional Cultural Center, and the Pan Asian theme park. In her very dependency on American “aid,” she propagates a pro-capitalist, pro-Western agenda and sets it up as one that can save the “poor” Vietnamese people from despondency. As Chowdhury claims, “Racist, classist, and patriarchal theories of development and empowerment tend to recast issues of freedom, rights, and justice in the global South into normative economic and technical language, and NGOs can be seen as sharing in such colonial legacies” (4). By situating the West and its wealthy inhabitants as those who have the power to “heal” Vietnam (Hayslip 367), Hayslip engages in a classist, racist discourse that casts the Vietnamese as poor, backward, underdeveloped, and as those who are helpless to ameliorate these conditions themselves.

To argue against such a classist and racist discourse, Chowdhury advocates a transnational feminist praxis to prioritize the needs of the local over the global.

A transnational feminist praxis, as I use the term, refers to women’s organizing that recognizes, in theory and in practice, the multilayered power relations shaping women’s struggles in North-South as well as South-South contexts. Again, this is decidedly different from usages of the term global feminism, which tends to flatten the diversity of women’s agency and positionality in presenting a universalized western model of women’s liberation based on individuality and modernity. [...] A transnational analysis emphasizes reflexive action and critique while consciously illuminating their temporal and spatial constitutions. [...] As this research shows, transnational feminism cannot be assumed a priori [sic] but is always contingent, shaped by its specific historical and institutional realities. (7, 9, 9, emphasis original)

Chowdhury's explanation of what a transnational feminist praxis entails emphasizes understanding the contextual needs of disenfranchised peoples on a local level rather than on a global one. This is something that rhetorical listening can help us, as scholars, activists, and reader-listeners, achieve. Had Hayslip engaged in such a practice of rhetorical listening to Vietnamese citizens themselves and practiced a transnational feminism in that way, she would not have mapped Western values and agendas onto Vietnam, a country so culturally and ideologically different from the US. Rather, she should have listened to the silences and pleas Vietnamese authors like Nhã Ca and Đặng Thùy Trâm make. Had she done so, she would have realized that war is the culprit for causing such horrible destruction to one's land, monumental cultural artifacts, people, and homes as Nhã Ca asserts in her memoir. Thus, implementing free-market capitalism, one ideology, in order to correct the errors of another is not the answer, for this perpetuates not only the mythologies that uphold America as superior, but it also ignores the crisis at hand – that war, especially ones motivated by ideological determinism, causes devastation. Ideology swapping is not the solution; the eradication of war is. While Đặng's text is not necessarily motivated by the condemnation of war, it does point to inconsistencies inherent within the socialist system. This does not mean, however, that she forsakes the Communist cause to pick up a capitalist agenda. Rather, she demonstrates that when ideology gets translated and implemented into governing policy and politics, it becomes frail, inconsistent, and at times faulty. Simply switching to another ideology to fix the leaky roofs of the old one is not an option, for inevitably similar problems will occur. Even though her solution to these trying times, especially

when engaged in war, presents its own problems, she still does not take up a pro-capitalist agenda like Hayslip does. Instead, Đặng resolves to remain steadfast to the philosophical principles that underlie socialist ideology; she remains an idealist, rather than a pragmatist or realist, in order to keep working toward and for the socialist cause.

Hayslip also fails to listen to the silences and pleas that are expressed by Vietnamese-American authors. When Hayslip adopts a Western discourse and framework for solving Third World problems, she loses something that Vietnamese diasporic writers often reference in their works: that of adopting an interstitial subject position. Even though Hayslip is racialized throughout her experiences in America as she articulates in *Child of War, Woman of Peace*, when we examine how she concludes *When Heaven*, we realize that she does not *feel* racialized. Rather, she writes of a space in which all races and creeds can come together to help the Vietnamese poor through her organizations, for those positioned as those who are able to help the Vietnamese are united as Americans. Hayslip tells us in 1989, “Today, I am very honored to live in the United States and proud to be a U.S. citizen. I do my best to honor the American flag, which I have seen not only raised in battle against me but flying proudly over the schools where my wonderful boys have learned to be Americans” (365-6). She has become an American citizen, and this position is strongly inflected with pride. This American patriotism is something that other Vietnamese-American authors like Truong, Cao, Lê, and Lâm do not feel. Rather, their protagonists are disjointed, serving as “intermediar[ies]” (Cao 88), often with their identities being overwritten by white America (lê). Some diasporic Vietnamese-American authors who write about the

aftermath of conflict, like lê thi diem thúy, create protagonists who feel that they have been silenced by white patriarchal regimes of power, which initiates a cultural, traumatic double-wounding. Others use the white man's tool of oppression – silence – to express how they wish to remain apart from white men's techniques of saving the disenfranchised from themselves, as Thanh does in Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* when she refuses to render the karmic return of her traumatic familial past into words. Finally, other authors, like Laura Lâm, feel that they have to right the wrongs perpetuated by American masculinist discourse of the war. Had Hayslip listened to any of these discourses – how white male narratives silence marginalized voices, how women refuse to conform to white discourses of healing and trauma, or how women feel compelled to fill in the gaps of discourse that leaves their voices out of this traumatic history – then, she probably would not have adopted a Western framework to offer suggestions that imply that Vietnamese people need saving from their impoverished selves. If Hayslip felt so compelled to help the Vietnamese, she could have initiated a program rooted in a transnational feminist praxis, one that serves the “local” over the “global” (Chowdhury 187). What we must remember, though, is this kind of transnational feminist praxis can only begin by engaging in rhetorical listening, for one must adopt a stance of non-identification in order to be open to discourses that are very different from one's own.

Women's Contributions to Re-evaluating Dominant Traumatic Paradigms

By advocating that we reimagine how trauma operates, in that it is not a purely individual, psychological function, but one that can also be constructed, manifested, and

exacerbated socially through gender and racial oppression, I am adamantly challenging the psychoanalytic framework in which trauma studies currently resides. This is necessary work, for the current psychoanalytic paradigm for understanding trauma is racist and misogynistic at its core, as exemplified in how the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders* (DSM) articulates how Posttraumatic Stress Disorder does and does not apply to certain persons (Brown). Given that trauma studies bases its theories on Freudian psychology, we can see how his framework for understanding the psyche and its subsequent fragmentation as a result of a traumatic experience is troublesome. As Cathy Caruth argues, a traumatic “event” acts upon a person’s psyche in a way that resists narration, in that the memory of the event is unavoidable, repetitively relived, and unspeakable (*Unclaimed Experience*).

The current understanding of traumatic experience poses multiple problems, which I see as four-fold. First, if the “event” “fractures” a person, then this implies that that person was a fully constituted subject and coherent as such prior to the event. Second, trauma theorists, like Caruth, argue that the “event” resists narration. While this is true to a degree, if it were completely true, then we would not have any accounts, written or otherwise, of traumatic experience. Rather, people who communicate traumatic experience often articulate their experiences through the manipulation and demonstration of silences within their texts. Third, in speaking of how an event “fractures” a person, theorists who base their studies on Freudian psychology, imply a white male subject. They presume that the victim was fully constituted prior to the event, that he was whole, that he was “normal.” This implies a white subject simply because

Freud was largely concerned with white patients and he, simply, did not take other subject positions into consideration when he wrote his theories on trauma. Further, this implies a male subject because Freud had already labeled women as abnormal, given their propensity to suffer from hysteria, a condition that could never affect a man. Those who were not fully constituted prior to a traumatic event do not qualify for the status of “victim”; rather, they are viewed as persons who are marginalized or underprivileged. Any traumatic experience they may have undergone is not considered “traumatic” per se and therefore this kind of trauma is not recognized as one that is valid, which in its own way demonstrates a different kind of silencing act. Finally, and most importantly, the Freudian model of trauma theory implies *abnormality* on behalf of the person who has experienced the traumatic event. This “fracturing” of the person also involves a “sickness” or an “illness” that has no cure, which is particularly evident in the very name of the diagnosis that psychologists use today to categorize such people who have experienced and continue to suffer from a traumatic event – Posttraumatic Stress *Disorder*. This inherent abnormality that the PTSD label carries is problematic because it often positions “victims” as ones who are infected with *disease*. By modeling this “fracturing,” how one psychologically deals with a traumatic event, on the white male subject, we position all traumatic experiences as though they are the same; whereas, in actuality, traumatic experience can be both individually and socio-culturally constructed, dependent upon one’s gender and subject position.

As the protagonists I have studied throughout this project have shown us, current traumatic paradigms (those predicated on the white male subject) do not map so easily

onto those who do not occupy this privileged position. Women, often subjugated as the lesser sex, relegated to stereotypes that demand their passivity and silence, cannot easily translate their traumatic experiences into words, as current trauma theorists would suggest they do. This is not to say that rendering traumatic experience into language is simple or easy to do for (white) men; it is not. What I mean to suggest is that working through trauma as an “articulatory practice” (LaCapra 22) is perhaps more complex for marginalized persons that have been historically subjected to the abusive powers of silencing. When one is so accustomed to remaining silent and then is suddenly asked (and perhaps demanded) to use language, it is considerable that one may be hesitant, falter, or be reluctant to do so, especially if she is asked to speak about a deeply personal and troubling experience. It is only logical, then, that one would resort to purposeful expressions of silence in order to communicate not only how one’s trauma affects her, but also to deny white male paradigms of power – like the current psychoanalytic framework that mandates proper diagnoses and prognoses – access to her trauma. At times, women feel as though they would be relinquishing ownership of their experiences should they continue to allow patriarchal regimes of power access to their personal, traumatic experiences, for if these masculinist institutions were given access to such experiences, then they appropriate the responsibility to dictate how one ought to cope with one’s trauma. This disappropriation, in turn, renders the woman helpless in working through her own experiences. Instead of submitting to this masculinist framework, women use silence and selective telling to give themselves agency in their experiences through self-empowerment.

The contemporary psychoanalytic paradigm is not the only institution of power that these women critique, however. Once they have used silence reflectively, momentarily, then they can begin to attack other oppressive regimes of power. Often they turn to larger institutions of control to do this work: the media (Emerson), the White House (Fitzgerald; Van Devanter), popular memory (Lâm), the family (Lâm; Smith; Van Devanter) and so on. It is only after they take this momentary, introspective pause that they can then launch flagrant critiques that aim to disable, destabilize, and deconstruct powerful American mythologies that continue to uphold these institutions as ones that lord control over the public. What these women show us is that America, contrary to popular belief, is not the only side that suffered atrociously in the war. This idea can then be extended to any war in which America has been engaged. Echoing Don Ringnalda, “Vietnam didn’t change Americans; it showed them who they always were” (206). However, Ringnalda contends that the value of Vietnam War writing lies in the fact that it speaks to a certain truth: “To an extent, Vietnam *was* unique, because for once, a dirty war was called a dirty war. [...] As a nation we can turn bad news into good news if we gather it, face it, and make new use of it” (227). This is where Ringnalda and I part ways, for I have a bit more bad news for the American nation. America continues to engage itself in wars, and in so doing they perpetuate the subjugation and silencing of marginalized – racialized and gendered – voices. This only extends this cycle of violence beyond the war zone, encircling and entrenching people at home and abroad in traumatic experience that has the power to doubly-wound its victims. However, the news is not all bad, surprisingly. What this means is that marginalized peoples have to operate outside

of the confines these institutions have established in order to relate their experiences of difference. What we as readers have to do is adopt a stance of openness and non-identification in order to listen rhetorically to them. Once we become adept reader-listeners can we begin to affect change in the power dynamics that shape our world and our lives. First, we must recognize the relations that keep certain persons (voices) in power while they continue to disenfranchise others before any political change to alter this state of affairs can begin.

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