

“The Voice in the Picture”: Reversing the Angle in Vietnamese American War Memoirs

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Vietnam in the American consciousness is a confluence of images of conflict; where Vietnamese appear they are backdrop to displays of US heroism. There is another story, which Vietnam veteran and filmmaker Oliver Stone calls “the reverse angle, what the war was like from the perspective of the people living in Vietnam.” If America’s memory of the conflict is dominated by US perspectives, this is also in images rather than in words. Pictures of monks immolating themselves and people scrambling to board US helicopters have produced a generation who know of Vietnam only through images. One of these images is a bombing mission which dropped napalm on some villagers. AP photographer Nick Ut captured a severely burned Kim Phuc running screaming in the streets; his photo won the Pulitzer Prize and became one of the most infamous images of conflict ever captured; her recently published life story is the reverse angle and, with similar texts by Le Ly Hayslip, Andrew X. Pham and Duong Van Mai Elliot, represents an emergent perspective, a counternarrative of Vietnam, and a new kind of American literature of peace. My essay explores the inscription of the Vietnamese American perspective on the conflict via life writing.

Photographs tell the moment

Inga Clendinnen, *Reading the Holocaust*¹

I ain’t never gettin’ hit in Vietnam . . . it don’t exist

Michael Herr, *Dispatches*²

As an emergent literature, Vietnamese American writing has not to date received a great deal of critical attention. Partly this is due to the peculiar circumstances of its emergence, directly as a consequence of both military conflict and the mass refugee exodus in the wake of the end of the Vietnam conflict in 1975. As late as 1997, Vietnamese American critic Monique Truong described this evolving body of works as still “loose and porous.”³

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¹ Inga Clendinnen, *Reading the Holocaust* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 174.

² Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (London: Picador, 1991), 125.

³ In line with accepted usage, “Vietnamese American” is defined here as it is by Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, *This is all i choose to tell: History and Hybridity in Vietnamese American Literature* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 8: “The term ‘Vietnamese American’

30 April 2015 will mark the fortieth anniversary of the end of the Vietnam conflict and the run-up to that anniversary provides this good opportunity to look back at the skewed history of its representation in US culture. In particular, this article will argue that an examination of the emergent Vietnamese American literary perspective, especially the body of life writing, will illuminate two important issues. First, it will broaden the hitherto largely one-dimensional Anglo-American representation of the war; second, it will bring to light the obfuscated pacifist views of Vietnamese American women's writing that have been marginalized mainly by the combination of male-centred representations and the desperate national need to justify the scale and scope of military action. This focus in turn results in a powerful counternarrative to the hegemonic masculine representation of the Vietnam conflict.

As is frequently observed by Vietnam scholars like Martin Andrew, Vietnam has overwhelmingly been remembered as America's "dirty war," as an American conflict, with American casualties and American lessons to learn and wounds to heal, from memoirs such as Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977) to iconic films like Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979).⁴ It is now a frequent and accepted observation that many of the US filmic and literary representations that emerged during the Vietnam War often portrayed racist stereotypes of the Vietnamese, derogatively named "Charlie," "Victor Charles" (VC), or "gooks." In the immediate aftermath of the war in the late 1970s and early 1980s, filmic and literary representations were wholly involved in American-centred perspectives of the war, attempting to rationalize the political and social experiences and analysing the psychological legacy of the war on the American psyche – either from the perspective of the veteran and the effects of memory and trauma, or from the perspective of the antiwar protesters and their indifference or hostility to veterans. As Tobey Herzog writes,

Unquestionably, significant portions of post-Vietnam American society and the military, unlike in previous postwar periods, felt uncomfortable with the war and its participants. Some segments upset with the country's involvement in Vietnam

commonly refers to Vietnamese refugees who came to the United States after the victory of communist forces in Viet Nam in 1975. See also Monique T. D. Truong, "Vietnamese American Literature," in King-kok Cheung, ed., *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 219–46, 219. Also see Truong's novel, *The Book of Salt* (New York: Vintage, 2003).

⁴ See Martin Andrew, *Reception of War: Vietnam in American Culture* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), especially chapter 1, for a discussion of Vietnam as America's "dirty war." The Vietnam films I mention here are Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* and Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) and *Heaven and Earth* (1993).

transferred their abhorrence for the war to the American soldiers who fought there, tagging the combatants "baby-killers" involved in an immoral war. On the other side, another segment of Americans, angered with the negative media images of American troops in Vietnam and the disappointing results of the war effort, characterized these same soldiers as "losers." A majority of Americans simply wanted to engage in collective amnesia about the war and the veterans.⁵

This active social disengagement is reinforced by Subarno Chattarji, who asserts,

Veterans from Vietnam returned with memories and monstrous recollections that they could not share with a society that had undergone its own upheavals, but was unprepared to face the people it had sent to fight its battles. They were cooped up in their memory warp, unable to reach out to non-veteran society.⁶

Furthermore, both Susan Jeffords and Paul Williams argue that American cultural representations of the Vietnam War are principally about constructing a strong American masculine virility through a mobilization of oriental femininity already present in white imperial discourses. In her examination of the Vietnam experience in film, oral history, novels and short stories, Jeffords identifies "a logic of remasculinization" that works through techniques of masculine bonding, the regeneration of the veteran, the feminization of government, and reproduction.⁷ In particular, Jeffords argues that this process of remasculinization consciously expels the feminine from the masculine realm, by identifying the feminine as a location for loss and thereby rejecting the perceived contaminating "feminine multiplicity" that challenges a masculine unity.⁸ Williams argues that "the USA's discovery of itself through the War occurs at the expense of the Vietnamese, in terms of their lives on the battlefield, and their representation by the American media," which was itself implicated in the narratives of US imperialism.⁹ Williams concludes that the most prevalent understanding of the Vietnamese was as irrelevant details in an America-centred crisis . . . existing Orientalist discursive strategies situate[ed] Asians as feminized and weak to buttress a white American masculinity whose imperial exploits

⁵ Tobey C. Herzog, *Vietnam War Stories: Innocence Lost* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 169–70.

⁶ Subarno Chattarji, *Memories of a Lost War: American Poetic Responses to the Vietnam War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 143.

⁷ Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), xiii. The mass mobilization of masculine anxiety and the cult of military masculinity in times of conflict are further explored in Kathy J. Phillips, *Manipulating Masculinity: War and Gender in Modern British and American Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

⁸ Jeffords, 167.

⁹ Paul Williams, "‘What a Bummer for the Gooks’: Representations of White American Masculinity and the Vietnamese in the Vietnam War Film Genre, 1977–1987," *European Journal of American Culture*, 22, 3 (2003), 215–34, 215.

and domestic security had been undermined by events of the period (the failure of the Vietnam War, the feminist movement, Black Power).¹⁰

Within this context, it comes as no surprise that “Vietnam” largely remains in the American popular consciousness as a confluence of images of conflict and destruction; and where the Vietnamese appear at all, they serve as the backdrop to displays of US military heroism and sacrifice: as cowering peasants in the rice fields, passive victims, prostitutes, traitors conniving with the enemy, cruel torturers, effeminate cowards, or the nameless mass of Viet Cong guerrillas lurking in the jungle.¹¹ Vietnam has, in Isabelle Thuy Pelaud’s words, been consistently represented as a war rather than a country.¹²

Yet there is another story to tell. This is the story of what Vietnam veteran and popular filmmaker Oliver Stone (*Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Heaven and Earth*) calls “the reverse angle . . . what the war – or wars – were like from the perspective of the people living in Vietnam . . . the innocent peasant farmers . . . their families and kin . . . These . . . were the wars’ most tragic victims.”¹³ Stone’s film *Heaven and Earth* sought to tell this story. Yet his film was still encumbered by a history of telling the Vietnam story visually rather than textually. For if America’s memory of the conflict is dominated by US military perspectives, then it is equally true that it has also been remembered in images rather than words. From the tragically unforgettable pictures of the Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc immolating himself in the streets of Saigon in 1963, to the worldwide syndicated images of desperate people scrambling to board the US helicopters in the final evacuation of Saigon from the roof of the US Embassy in 1975, pictures of the conflict have produced a “generation who knew of Vietnam only through media-generated images.”¹⁴ This is true even of those who lived through the conflict. In *Catfish and Mandala*, Vietnamese American memoirist Andrew X. Pham writes,

Of the Vietnam War I knew little, recalling only vignettes and images . . . the dark wet cells, the whippings, the shootings, the biting rats, and the fists of dirty rice we ate.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 234.

¹¹ Fictional and autobiographical output on the subject of Vietnam is vast, but examples here notably include Paul Reed, *Kontum Diary: Captured Writings Bring Peace to a Vietnam Veteran* (Chicago: Summit Publishing Group, 1996); Peggy Hanna, *Patriotism, Peace, and Vietnam: A Memoir* (Left to Write, 2003); Mary Sue Rosenberger, *Harmless as Doves: Witnessing for Peace in Vietnam* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press, 1988); Tim O’Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* (New York: Penguin, 1995); and Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Holt, 1977).

¹² See Pelaud, chapter 2, 31–33.

¹³ See the full essay by Oliver Stone, “The Reverse Angle,” in Michael Singer, ed., *The Making of Heaven and Earth* (Clarendon, VT: Tuttle, 1993), np.

¹⁴ Truong, *The Book of Salt*, 220.

These things I remember fogged by the intervening years. Somehow terribly vivid, irreducible. [And] I was there.¹⁵

Later in the same narrative, Pham recognizes the nature of his inability to move beyond the dominance of these disparate and incomplete images:

I had been banking on a stupid Hollywood ending . . . Too many things changed. Too much time passed. I'm different now, a man with a pocketful of unconnected but terribly vivid memories. I was looking to dredge up what I'd long forgotten. Most of all, I am wishing for something to fasten all these gems, maybe something to hold them in a continuity that I can comprehend.¹⁶

This twin urge to reconcile yet also forget the past is recurrently expressed in Vietnamese American war memoirs, as it is a recognized feature in many "survivor" narratives, a form of narrative in which, in Linda Martín Alcoff and Laura Gray-Rosendale's formulation, victims are remade via speaking out, and narrative retelling, into survivors.¹⁷ The problem with the historiography of Vietnam is that there has been no possibility to move on from the moment of withdrawal, and on a more personal level, there has been no chance to make peace with the past. In a paradigmatic exchange at the end of *Catfish and Mandala*, Andrew X. Pham asks his Vietnamese companion why the Vietnamese seem to have largely forgotten the war, forgiven and moved on, whilst the Americans – both veterans and Vietnamese American refugees – cannot. His companion tells him,

We live here. They don't . . . We make peace with each other. We build our lives, have children, and make new history together. Twenty years and you have only memories. It is not the forgetting but the new history . . . that is the difference between you and me.¹⁸

As the quotation from Pham shows, whilst Americans struggle with the memories of the war, the Vietnamese must live with the material consequences. The impetus to write, record and remember in these narratives might well be alternatively characterized as an attempt to forge a "new history," as Pham describes it. That "new history" simultaneously memorializes but moves on from the images that dominate the representation of Vietnam in both mind and media; it acts as a corrective, in Monique Truong's words, to the overwhelming "U. S.-centric conceptualization of Vietnam."¹⁹ The process

¹⁵ Andrew X. Pham, *Catfish and Mandala: A Vietnamese Odyssey* (London: Flamingo, 2000), 10–11.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁷ Linda Martín Alcoff and Laura Gray-Rosendal concentrate upon the survivors of sexual abuse, but also suggest that "survivor discourse" can more flexibly be adopted to refer to those who have lived through traumatic experiences. See Linda Martín Alcoff and Laura Gray-Rosendal, "Survivor Discourse," in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds., *Getting a Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 198–225.

¹⁸ Pham, 285.

¹⁹ Truong, 220.

of making this new history also attests to a belief in the therapeutic potential of recording the past that is recurrent in Vietnamese American memoirs.

There is another particular image of Vietnam that the world remembers. On 8 June 1972, a botched American/South Vietnamese bombing mission in Trang Bang saw a South Vietnamese pilot drop napalm on a group of villagers who were fleeing from the nearby Cao Dai temple. Associated Press photographer Nick Ut captured the heart-rending image of nine-year-old Kim Phuc running naked and screaming through the streets after being severely burned by the napalm. Ut's photograph won the World Press Photo of the Year. Ut went on to win the Pulitzer Prize for his reportage and Kim Phuc's image became one of the most unforgettable and infamous images of conflict ever to be captured. As Denise Chong observes, Kim Phuc became a "living symbol of wartime suffering."²⁰ George Esper, a former Associated Press bureau chief in Saigon, described the photograph's impact thus:

It captures not just one evil of one war, but an evil of every war . . . There were many casualty pictures, but this one was haunting . . . In her expression was fear and horror, which was how people felt about war. This picture showed the effects of war, and how wrong and destructive it was. People looked at it and said, "This war has got to end."²¹

Kim Phuc's story provides us with a differently nuanced perspective on the Vietnam conflict, the "reverse angle" for which Oliver Stone has called. Hers is a position of insider-outsider: she was severely wounded in the conflict, and subsequently used as a propaganda tool by the North Vietnamese, before her eventual defection from the country and repatriation and rehabilitation in the US. *The Girl in the Picture* (1999) is her story, as written by Denise Chong, of this experience and her subsequent life in the US. This text is important for our purposes because of Kim Phuc's desire to tell the Vietnamese story in order to promote the healing of the wounds of Vietnam in a postconflict era. In her Foreword to Phuc's life story, Denise Chong notes,

Kim Phuc recovered from her burns, and passed from childhood into adulthood. And so came a chance, by way of this book, and with the added clarity of time, to revisit through the lens of her life what the war was for an ordinary peasant in South Vietnam and what the end of it wrought, and to examine the impact of the picture on her life.²²

Kim Phuc's voice is one of a very few that have emerged in the last decade, not only telling the Vietnamese story of war and its aftermath through the medium of English; it is also one of only a few narratives from a female perspective. The unique implications of this are manifold, and, as I will discuss

²⁰ Denise Chong, *The Girl in the Picture: The Remarkable Story of Vietnam's Most Famous Casualty* (New York: Scribner, 2001), x. ²¹ Quoted in *ibid.*, ix.

²² *Ibid.*, x.

later, inevitably include a degree of mediation, a discernible tendency to oscillate between alliance with different sides in the conflict, an advocacy of reconciliation, and ultimately a refusal to apportion blame to any one side. As we have seen earlier, Jeffords has argued compellingly that representations of the Vietnam War frequently operated as a sanctuary for traditional notions of masculinity under threat from the hostile interrogations of the women's movement. In addition, Heather Marie Stur has recently argued that while popular memory of the Vietnam War centres on the mire of combat and its psychological effects, shifting critical attention onto women and gender leads to a more complex picture of the war's far-reaching impact beyond the battlefields.²³ From these perspectives, Phuc's narrative provides an emphatic counternarrative to those US-/male-centric representations of the Vietnam War, through a symbolic reorganization of the associations forged in and around the war and gender, but this time importantly from the perspective of the Vietnamese woman.

Indeed, the gender implications of Kim Phuc's different positioning are, if anything, even more complex. Angela K. Smith says of women who have engaged in conflict, "For women it is different. To participate in war, on many levels, they need to break traditional codes of femininity. Even as victims and casualties they trespass into a male arena."²⁴ If male-authored, US-centric representations of the Vietnam conflict and its consequences have been hampered by stereotypes of suffering veterans and of "graphically violent representation" (Smith's term), in the telling of Kim Phuc's life story there is an attempt to move beyond this, to explore the effects of the conflict upon family and community dynamics and damage wreaked on an individual, psychological level; and an attempt to unpick an aggressor/victim binary by figuring *all* those involved in the conflict as victims. In *The Writing of War*, William Cloonan observes that women writers have tended to avoid extended narratives of conflict, and choose instead to write of war's consequences; Kim Phuc's is quintessentially a portrait of the embodied consequences of conflict.²⁵ In this article, I want to suggest not only that, together, texts including *The Girl in the Picture*, the life writings of Le Ly Hayslip, and, to a lesser extent, those of Andrew X. Pham,²⁶ constitute the beginnings of a

²³ Heather Marie Stur, *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

²⁴ Angela K. Smith, ed., *Gender and Warfare in the Twentieth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 4.

²⁵ William Cloonan, *The Writing of War: French and German Fiction and World War II* (Jacksonville: University Press of Florida, 1999), 71–72.

²⁶ Pham, *Catfish and Mandala*; *idem*, *The Eaves of Heaven: A Life in Three Wars* (New York: Three Rivers, 2008); Le Ly Hayslip, with Jay Wurts, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: A Vietnamese Woman's Journey from War to Peace* (New York: Plume, 1990); *idem*,

corpus of a new kind of American literature, the “reverse angle” on the Vietnam conflict, but also that they are indelibly intertwined with a politically motivated project to tangibly and practically help and repair war’s damage.²⁷ Furthermore, “The Voice in the Picture” will argue that these texts are attempts to recorrect that bias towards an ideology of masculinist gender power that we earlier saw so accurately articulated by Jeffords and Williams. Instead, these texts offer an alternative view of the Vietnam War and its legacy that is more complex than the male-centred American memory of the war, which has principally emphasized the combat experience and its psychological effects.

ENGLISH-LANGUAGE VIETNAMESE AMERICAN WAR STORIES

The evolution of Vietnamese American literature is typical of the emergence of any new ethnic literary production. The majority of Vietnamese literature to date written originally in English, as opposed to in translation,²⁸ comprises refugee memoirs, often transcribed by a third party, and oral histories.²⁹ Collections include Sucheng Chan’s *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation: Stories of War, Revolution, Flight, and New Beginnings*,³⁰ and the collection of Vietnamese diaspora perspectives edited by Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen, *Memory Is Another Country* (2009). Individual narratives are often published by small presses and many lack the polish of professionally crafted writing. These include Vui Le’s *The Forgotten Generation: From South Vietnamese to Vietnamese-American* (2009),³¹ and Trung-Nhu Dinh and Tran Thi Truong

with James Hayslip, *Child of War, Woman of Peace* (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1993); Chong, *The Girl in the Picture*. Although I include Andrew Pham here, and discuss his life-writing diptych briefly, I have chosen to focus more thoroughly upon works by Hayslip and Phuc (as written by Chong), since this additionally enables a thorough exploration of the gendered dimensions of writing about the Vietnam War.

²⁷ Kim Phuc’s foundation provides medical care for Vietnam’s child victims, and Kim Phuc herself serves as a goodwill ambassador.

²⁸ Many Vietnamese-language novels deal with this issue, but few are translated. An exception is Duong Thu Huong’s 1988 novel *The Paradise of the Blind*, translated in 1991 by Phan Huy Duong and Nina McPherson. In their Afterword, at 270, the translators write that she “is in the position of having been both a participant and a witness to Vietnam’s tragedy . . . [she] questions the human cost of Vietnam’s long war with the United States.”

²⁹ Isabelle Thuy Pelaud notes that most of the first generation of published works by Vietnamese refugees were written in Vietnamese and published in Vietnamese-language literary journals. See Pelaud, *This is all i choose to tell*, 22–23.

³⁰ Sucheng Chan, ed., *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation: Stories of War, Revolution, Flight, and New Beginnings* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).

³¹ Vui Le, *The Forgotten Generation: From South Vietnamese to Vietnamese-American* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2009).

Nga's *The Last Boat Out: Memoirs of a Triumphant Vietnamese-American Family*.³² These narratives also often seem to be hampered by their authors' attempts at a kind of cross-cultural brokering, an anxiety to appeal to multiple readerships. There are several exceptions, however, notably Andrew X. Pham's acclaimed and accomplished life writing diptych, *From the Eaves of Heaven: A Life in Three Wars* (2008) and *Catfish and Mandala: A Vietnamese Odyssey* (2001); Le Ly Hayslip's pair of memoirs, popularized when Oliver Stone turned them into a film, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (1989) and *Child of War, Woman of Peace* (1993); Monique Truong's well-received 2003 novel *The Book of Salt*; and Duong Van Mai Elliot's 1999 memoir, *The Sacred Willow: Four Generations in the Life of a Vietnamese Family*.³³ Collaborative works are common; in addition to Le Ly Hayslip, who collaborated with Jay Wurts and James Hayslip, and Kim Phuc (whose story is written by Denise Chong), collaborative narratives include Thi Thu-Lam Nguyen's *Fallen Leaves: Memoirs of a Vietnamese Woman from 1940–1975*,³⁴ and Thi Tuyet Mai Nguyen's *The Rubber Tree: Memoir of a Vietnamese Woman Who Was an Anti-French Guerilla, a Publisher, and a Peace Activist*.³⁵

Several of these narratives also describe life after the conflict in Vietnam: from the plight of the boat people to the fate of those left behind and incarcerated in the Vietnamese jungle "bamboo gulags." One powerful corrective to the skewed representation of Vietnam in American culture is the time frame that most of these life narratives adopt. Most – especially *The Sacred Willow* and *The Eaves of Heaven* – begin with French colonial rule and Vietnamese resistance in the early twentieth century and proceed through the first Indochina War and the struggle between communism and nationalism, before exploring the Americans' arrival and involvement, as well as life after the fall of Saigon in 1975. The "tragedy" of Vietnam is thus shown through a long lens, and American perspectives form only a small part of a much larger picture. These accounts thereby reveal a significantly more complex historical and cultural situation than that to be typically found in American "grunt's-eye" veteran films, memoirs and fictions.³⁶

³² Truong-Nhu Dinh and Tran Thi Truong Nga, *The Last Boat Out: Memoirs of a Triumphant Vietnamese-American Family* (Leander, TX: Gaslight Publishing, 2006).

³³ Duong Van Mai Elliot, *The Sacred Willow: Four Generations in the Life of a Vietnamese Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

³⁴ Thi Thu-Lam Nguyen, with Edith Kreisler and Sandra Christenson, *Fallen Leaves: Memoirs of a Vietnamese Woman from 1940–1975* (New Haven: Council on Southeast Asia Studies, Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1989).

³⁵ Thi Tuyet Mai Nguyen, *The Rubber Tree: Memoir of a Vietnamese Woman Who Was an Anti-French Guerilla, a Publisher, and a Peace Activist*, ed. Monique Senderowicz (Jefferson, NC.: McFarland, 1994).

³⁶ This is an observation which has also been made by Oliver Stone.

Another noticeable characteristic of Vietnamese American war memoirs is the “going-back” narrative. Le Ly Hayslip, Duong Van Mai Elliot and Andrew X. Pham all describe their journeys back to Vietnam to seek out the locales of their youth. Yet they choose first to tell of their individual experiences of the conflict, and their eventual defection to and life in the US, a narrative trajectory that reveals a common cycle of trauma–loss–escape–recovery–memorialization. The history of publication and reception of Vietnamese American memoirs also reveals the contested and contradictory attitude towards the conflict in US culture. It is not insignificant that many narratives only found homes with small, often politically motivated, presses. Several are also self-published. Isabelle Thuy Pelaud observes that in the 1975–79 period many writers founded their own printing presses and independently distributed their work, in order to counter the mainstream prejudice against “their lack of language proficiency, the perceived foreignness of their writing, and their perspective on the war.” She notes too that “Americans . . . did not want to read books written by Vietnamese American authors that would reinforce the ‘Vietnam syndrome,’ since these works might provide vivid reminders of military loss and guilt (ibid).”³⁷ Another Vietnamese American writer, Yung Krall, has also publicly bitterly described this struggle to find a publisher and her own experience of being shunned by mainstream presses, who told her that her book would not sell because America wanted to forget Vietnam.³⁸

LE LY HAYSLIP, AMERICAN REVISIONISM AND THE BURDEN OF REPRESENTATION

For the best part of the last three decades, the well-known woman author Le Ly Hayslip has almost single-handedly constituted what was widely known of Vietnamese American literature. Specifically written from a pacifist perspective are the two life narratives *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* and *Child of War, Woman of Peace*. Hayslip’s two-book life-writing project was pioneering in many ways, not least in her negotiation of her own vexed relationship with the conflict in Vietnam as a Vietnamese American woman. Hayslip spent many years outside the US (in Vietnam before she left in 1973), which provided her with a differently nuanced perspective: she was actively

³⁷ Pelaud, 23.

³⁸ According to Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen, who interviewed Krall in 2000. See Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen, *Memory is Another Country: Women of the Vietnamese Diaspora* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2009), 163, 189. Also see Yung Krall, *A Thousand Tears Falling: A True Story of a Vietnamese Family Torn Apart by War, Communism, and the CIA* (Atlanta, GA: Longstreet Press, 1995).

involved in the conflict, as a peasant imprisoned and then tortured and raped by the ARVN (the army of South Vietnam), before her eventual escape from the country via Da Nang and Saigon in 1973. *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* is her account (mediated by the writer Jay Wurts) of this experience. Her subsequent life in the US, married to an American civilian, coupled with frequent visits to Vietnam, forms the subject of the companion text, *Child of War, Woman of Peace* (cowritten with her son James). Both texts document Hayslip's increasing involvement with healing the wounds of Vietnam, which was especially concentrated upon the survivors of the war, both American and Vietnamese, and also what has been termed Hayslip's "gendered pacifism."³⁹ Leslie Bow uses this phrase to describe how Hayslip's ideological position urging peace and nonaggression is a result of the specific sexual violence perpetrated upon Vietnamese women during the war. In a narrative conclusion that echoes the end of Kim Phuc's story, *Child of War, Woman of Peace* culminates in Hayslip's return to Vietnam to build a health clinic and reconcile herself with her family, actions that reinforce her "gendered pacifism." Like Kim's narrative, too, Hayslip's text pays much attention to the process and pain of recalling her war story. It is this dimension that initially attracted the filmmaker Oliver Stone, who was searching for a "reverse-angle" story to complete his Vietnam trilogy, which at the time included *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July*.

That the vexed question of who "owns" the history of the Vietnam conflict continues to overshadow Vietnamese American war memoirs is evident in the critical reaction to Oliver Stone's adaptation of Hayslip's tale.⁴⁰ Asian American critics, most notably Leslie Bow and Monique Truong, have been scathing about Stone's motives in filming Hayslip's story. Truong writes that it reveals

Hollywood attempts to provide the film equivalent of group therapy. It looks to texts by Vietnamese Americans, especially autobiographical accounts, which promise to deliver the narratives, perspectives, and voices necessary for the framing of the conflict from the Vietnamese point of view. [Stone's] acquisition . . . has transformed Hayslip's narratives into fragments of American popular culture and in the process . . . codified them into a definitive Vietnamese American perspective on the Vietnamese conflict. The burden of representation hangs and weighs upon these texts . . . the text's raison

³⁹ This is Leslie Bow's phrase. See her article "Le Ly Hayslip's Bad (Girl) Karma: Sexuality, National Allegory, and the Politics of Neutrality," *Prose Studies*, 17, 1 (1994), 141–60, 143. Also see *idem*, *Betrayal and Other Acts of Subversion: Feminism, Sexual Politics, Asian American Women's Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁴⁰ It should also be noted that Le Ly Hayslip was subject to intense condemnation of her work within the Vietnamese American community, as many people felt she had misrepresented the Vietnamese experience of the conflict too.

d'être is clear and one-sided: to serve as a medium for America's resolution of the Vietnamese conflict.⁴¹

Similarly, whilst Leslie Bow acknowledges that Hayslip's story "does succeed in countering dominant American representations of the Vietnamese people as mere backdrops to a hellish landscape" by "articulating the horrors of war from a peasant girl's point of view," she also warns that "Hayslip's work ... problematizes ... [Stone's] assumption that the presence of the Vietnamese subject is enough to ensure that a critique of American imperialism not be displaced."⁴² Vietnamese American critic Isabelle Thuy Pelaud has suggested that the appropriation of the voice of the "other" which is so evident here is an inevitable consequence of attempting to narrate a story "so freighted with memories of the Viet Nam War and national guilt."⁴³

THE GIRL IN THE PICTURE: MEDIATED IMAGES?

This representational manipulation of Le Ly Hayslip's story mirrors to a degree Kim Phuc's experiences. In their discussion of survivor discourse, Linda Martín Alcoff and Laura Gray-Rosendale warn of one of the major pitfalls of telling:

Survivor discourse ... is fraught with dangers ... [O]ne of the dangers of the confessional discourse is that the survivor speech becomes a media commodity that has a use value based upon its sensationalism and drama and that circulates within the relations of media competition.⁴⁴

The commodification of tragedy is also linked to an appropriation of the traumatic past and the degree of its staged retelling. Kim Phuc's life story is written by Denise Chong and thus must properly be considered a form of biography rather than autobiography. Chong impressively accomplishes a blending of her third-person narrative voice and Kim Phuc's first-person recall, often rendered in the text in sections of italics, and it is clear that she has been careful to ensure that her voice does not drown out Kim's. Nevertheless, the questions of the role of the cultural and linguistic amanuensis, and the terms

⁴¹ Truong, *The Book of Salt*, 237. Also see Leslie Bow, "Third World Testimony in the Era of Globalization: Vietnam, Sexual Trauma and Le Ly Hayslip's Art of Neutrality," in W. S. Hesford and W. Kozol, eds., *Haunting Violations: Feminist Criticism and the Crisis of the Real* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 178–79.

⁴² Bow, "Le Ly Hayslip's Bad (Girl) Karma," 141, 156, 153. Bow is actually referring to the work of John Carlos Rowe here; however she expresses misgivings about Stone's film elsewhere in her article, especially at 156–57.

⁴³ Pelaud further warns that "Vietnamese refugees' tears, losses, and blood" have been used by the United States to appropriate "human rights violations to allow America to shed itself of national responsibility and guilt," and she calls for an end to "representationalism." Pelaud, *This is all i choose to tell*, 2, 7, 35.

⁴⁴ Alcoff and Gray-Rosendale, "Survivor Discourse," 213.

of Chong's collaboration with Kim, must be addressed here as well. Chong takes care to draw attention to the issue of Kim's voice throughout the narrative, often, for instance, highlighting the limits of Kim's recall, or her reticence over a particular recollection. For it is true that the history of representation of Kim Phuc is one in which she has had little agency – she is the girl *in* the picture, caught forever in a silent scream. Does *The Girl in the Picture*, written as it is by another, do any more to return agency to Kim Phuc? I wish to suggest that it does, and that this life narrative as transcribed by Chong does effectively ventriloquize the "voice" in the picture. It is an active insertion into the life cycle of Nick Ut's image. It is the story beyond the picture. Kim Phuc's life story draws a continuous connection between the horrors of the past (the picture) and the possibilities of healing and forgiveness in the present (beyond the picture). If Nick Ut's photograph of the moment of Kim Phuc's injury emerges as an artefact of memory – a fragment of the past – then the narrative of her subsequent years also aptly reveals both the literal and the metaphorical fragments of her memory of the traumatic aftermath. It also melds Kim Phuc's story as an externally verified testimony with the "truth" of Nick Ut's image – this photograph does not lie.

An additional dimension of the photograph of Kim Phuc's moment of injury and the questions of its mediation is enmeshed both with the nature of photography as a medium of (auto)biographical telling and with gendered aspects of representation.⁴⁵ The story that Nick Ut's photograph *seems* to tell – of the botched napalm attack and its consequences – obscures another story of how such a sexually graphic, as well as visually shocking, picture of a nine-year-old girl came to be syndicated across global media. Whilst the photograph performs the story of Vietnam, it also trespasses into an ethically problematic act of displaying the naked image of a young girl; and this is a dilemma of which those involved in the production and circulation of Kim Phuc's photograph were apparently aware. Denise Chong's narrative describes the sequence of events when Nick Ut returned to the AP field bureau in Saigon, where AP staff examined the prints.⁴⁶ Chong writes,

Either Robinson or Jackson pointed out to the other the notable frame of the girl, running naked into the camera's eye. Jackson remarked that certainly no newspaper in Japan would run it. The two didn't discuss whether or not it was a usable picture; the AP's policy was clear: no frontal nudity . . . Someone in the office remarked that the

⁴⁵ For an expanded discussion of the interface of life writing and photography see Timothy Dow Adams, *Light Writing and Life Writing: Photography in Autobiography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

⁴⁶ The editors at the AP office also decided to use the photograph of Kim Phuc in preference to the photograph of her grandmother Tao carrying an injured baby Danh, which was taken first.

shadows on the girl's body gave the appearance of pubic hair where there was none. Faas called over a technician . . . [who] set to work.⁴⁷

This description of the decision to edit, then syndicate, Phuc's photograph, regardless of her nudity, underscores once more the dominance of masculine perspectives in the representation of the conflict, from the very outset. On 9 June 1972 the edited shot of a naked Phuc was printed globally. Whilst there has been much debate over the spectatorship attached to viewing Phuc's injury, it is remarkable that there has been virtually no discussion of the sexually voyeuristic nature of the same image. What, then, is Kim Phuc's place in her own picture? Is she a spectacle? She certainly had no control over the distribution of her own image, or the circumstances of its consumption. Thus, until the publication of Kim Phuc's own memoir, in an act of gendered obfuscation, Ur's picture functioned *as* her life narrative. It is also clear that whilst Kim Phuc was collaboratively involved in the production of her life narrative, there were also limits to her involvement. Whilst Chong writes that the book "depended on the trust, generosity and courage of Kim Phuc . . . to reveal to and relive with me a past which, for the most part, [she] had not given voice to before,"⁴⁸ she also recalls,

In being interviewed for this book, Kim was a willing, if not always comfortable subject. She grew up in a climate of war. Except for the Americans, friend and foe looked alike, so the less one talked and knew, the safer one would be. The war was confusing – all the more so for a child. Kim was born into war, was nine when injured in the napalm strike and only twelve when the war ended . . . Kim's defection allowed her to talk openly, but it also presented a difficulty.⁴⁹

The perils of telling also seemed to pray upon Kim's mind, since she still had family and friends in Vietnam, and since, as Chong notes, "she was persona non grata in Vietnam," so she ensured that when Chong sought out her family in Vietnam she only "quietly" interviewed them, in order to avoid attracting the attention of the government. Inevitably, too, these strictures result in a degree of imaginative construction, since, as Chong informs us, "the Communist officials in the pages of this book are voices reconstructed from memories of others; until Vietnam is a more open society, that is the best that can be done."⁵⁰

The wrangle over claiming Kim as a victim and a propaganda tool is dealt with at length in the narrative. Chong writes,

The picture exerted its power on nobody more than her, its subject. She would be plunged into despair by those who manipulated her life as though the picture were the scaffolding of their own. She suffered, victimized once by the napalm bomb, and yet again by those who would control her.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Chong, *The Girl in the Picture*, 73–74.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, xi.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, xi.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 370.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 364–65.

This manipulation of Kim's victimhood takes place in all political arenas. Just as terrified peasant girls are appropriated as "the feminized victims of the masculinized war,"⁵² so the appropriation of Phuc occurs in a very embodied manner. The Communists tell her, "you are an important victim of the war" and restrict and direct her activities. Even when Western journalists locate her this occurs, and she finds herself repeatedly affirming to strangers that "yes . . . I am the girl in the picture." She is also at times forced to display her injuries as verification of her identity, as the following exchange shows: "*You are the girl in the picture?*" . . . 'Yes,' Phuc replied to the men. 'I am the girl in the picture' . . . 'But, you look very – *normal!*' Phuc understood. She drew up the sleeve on her left arm."⁵³

The tenth anniversary of the fall of Saigon, in 1985, intensifies this interest to an intolerable level and Kim finds herself paraded by the Vietnamese government to endless groups of foreign media:

Beginning in the spring of 1985, the pace of Phuc's interviews with foreign journalists intensified as never before. Media the world over were taking a renewed interest in the subject of Vietnam with the approach of another tenth anniversary of the war – that of the fall of Saigon . . . Phuc's professors and classmates got used to reporters, photographers and film and television crews coming into their classroom to photograph her . . . some one hundred and fifty foreign journalists, mostly American, came to Ho Chi Minh City.⁵⁴

It is at this point in Kim Phuc's story that she has an epiphany in which she finds a purpose to her suffering. A foreign journalist shows her the archival film footage of her attack, something that she had never seen before. Not only the impact, and the extent, of her injuries and suffering dawn upon her as she watches herself, but also her place in the wider picture of suffering:

she saw herself in her nakedness, running out, with two of her brothers and other cousins . . . The screen went black. Phuc sat in silence, her cheeks wet with tears . . . Viewing the film was for Phuc the death and resurrection of her memories of the napalm attack. The hundreds of interviews she had given had focused solely on her plight. With no awareness of the events as captured on film, she had recounted only what she saw in her mind: turning her head as she ran from the temple to see the bombs falling from the airplane, fire becoming her world . . . Never before had Phuc considered what had happened to others caught in the napalm attack.⁵⁵

This moment of watching her own past signals a shift of perspective, as it triggers in Kim a new sense of purpose, rendered in the text in italics as Kim's own voice:

Now I know what I myself suffered through. She understood why she had emerged alive from the fire of the napalm – to be a living symbol of the horror of war. *The film, the*

⁵² Katherine Kinney, *Friendly Fire: American Images of the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 160.

⁵³ Chong, 205, 3, 190.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 254.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 255.

*picture made me into a moment of history. It is only me in that moment of history. I know I am not the only victim of the war, but others don't have the evidence. I have the film, I have the picture, and I have the body.*⁵⁶

Thus the interpretive schema that Kim brings to bear upon her own experience at this juncture is one in which she links the history of her suffering with a resolve to share this with others in the future in order to promote peace. Therefore her own confrontation with both the physical image and the bodily reality becomes a pivotal moment in her recovery.

THE VOICE IN THE PICTURE

Kim Phuc's story uniquely illustrates the convergence of an authority of voice and an authenticity of perspective. The published narrative of her life post-Vietnam (postconflict) (re)asserts her right to *speak* as a victim as well as to *be represented* as one. It also establishes a sense of coalition: she speaks through her life story simultaneously as a single sufferer and as a representative voice of the "reverse angle" – the Vietnamese experience – of the conflict. In this manner, Kim Phuc's narrative participates in something of a collective political endeavour as well. Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen sees this as typical, observing that "the narratives of Vietnamese women . . . redress the perceived "silence" of women in the wider Vietnamese diaspora." Nguyen also usefully adopts the term "individual traumascapes" to describe Vietnamese female refugees' traumatic life stories as recalled and inscribed in life narratives: "War, in effect, produces not only external traumascapes in the form of destroyed homes, villages, towns, and landscapes, but also results in internal traumascapes in the form of emotional and psychological scars."⁵⁷ If the infamous image of Kim Phuc's injury functions as a kind of traumascapes insofar as it is a publically circulated and circulating memory – a kind of enduring artefact of memory – then Phuc's life narrative expresses the accompanying internal traumascapes. Phuc's story also underscores the prominent role of image in the historiography of the Vietnam conflict. Holocaust historian Inga Clendinnen writes,

all photographs are melancholy; the vanished moment caught at the moment of its vanishing . . . All photographs are poignant: we feel the chill of an irretrievable past, the threat of an invisible future, the mortal vulnerability of the innocent, ignorant creatures caught on the silvered paper.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 255–56.

⁵⁷ Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen, *Memory is Another Country*, 9, 101. This use of the concept of a "traumascapes" is a reformulation of a term originally coined by Maria Tumarkin to describe a kind of memory of place as marked by tragedy. See Maria Tumarkin, *Traumascapes: The Power and Fate of Places Transformed by Tragedy* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2005).

⁵⁸ Inga Clendinnen, *Reading the Holocaust* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 172.

However, here the melancholy is especially acute since the photograph of Kim Phuc also captures the moment of the loss of her innocence, independence, childhood – and health.⁵⁹ That is to say, the photograph and its life cycle capture both individual loss and trauma and the inscription of a wider cultural trauma and mourning, one that also crosses the national and regional boundaries of the conflict and its aftermath. The addition of Kim Phuc's personal testimony as inscribed in the life narrative *The Girl in the Picture* reveals not only the afterlife of the photograph but the individual aftermath of that iconic moment: the long years of excruciating physical pain, psychological torment and torturously slow rehabilitation that Kim Phuc endured, as well as the political wrangle over claiming her experience as representative of the atrocities committed by both sides in the conflict. In *Trespassing through Shadows: Memory, Photography and the Holocaust*, Andrea Liss noted that photographs in public circulation bear what she calls a "double burden": the imperative to educate the viewer against future atrocity and the urge both to mourn and to memorialize the past.⁶⁰ This is the double burden of Nick Ut's photograph and its legacy as well.

Kim Phuc's life narrative furthermore individualizes and makes manifest the very embodied consequences of the biological and toxic weaponry employed by the US military against the enemy in Vietnam (including napalm and Agent Orange). This is traumatic memory literally written on the body: Kim Phuc carries the scars of the conflict upon her skin. The authority and authenticity of her experience is manifest from the outset in the injuries upon her body on display in Nick Ut's photograph. If her bodily agony is visible from the outset, though, it is the task of Chong's narrative to render visible her inner subjectivity. Yet Chong also highlights both Kim Phuc's resilience and her ability to recover and to forgive, and it is this dimension that intersects with a movement for peace and forgiveness. In *Vietnam: Anatomy of a Peace*, Gabriel Kolko writes,

All wars profoundly transmute social and human realities, and it is only with this pervasive truth in mind that we can begin to comprehend the whole course of

⁵⁹ In *Reading the Holocaust*, 14, Clendinnen compares the picture of Kim Phuc with Holocaust victim photographs: "When we think of innocence afflicted, we see those unforgettable children of the Holocaust staring wide-eyed into the cameras of their killers, but we also see the image of the little Vietnamese girl, naked, screaming, running down a dusty road, her back aflame with American napalm." Also see *idem*, "The History Question: Who Owns the Past?", *Quarterly Essay*, 23 (2003), 1–72.

⁶⁰ See Andrea Liss, *Trespassing through Shadows: Memory, Photography and the Holocaust* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), chapter 1. A similar formulation, called "postmemory," can be found in Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), a means whereby private recall is connected to collective, public history. Both Liss and Hirsch concentrate upon the afterlife of the photograph in cultural memory, in a manner akin to the afterlife of Ut's image.

Vietnam's history, not only over the thirty years of the war but, above all, after it ended in 1975. There is a direct continuity between the war's overwhelming heritage and the two decades that followed it. We cannot understand the anatomy of the peace unless we fully appreciate the war's incalculable physical, human, and psychological damage.⁶¹

In conclusion, *The Girl in the Picture* and other Vietnamese American war memoirs serve as a timely reminder to us of the fundamental immorality and brutality of a war that made such extensive use of toxic defoliants and napalm, and that involved the bombing and burning of villages, the torture of innocent civilians and the widespread destruction of an entire environment. As Isabelle Thuy Pelaud summarizes,

In the process of telling . . . Vietnamese American writers are not only articulating new ideas about what it means to be American but also generating new ideas of Viet Nam . . . Vietnamese American stories, whether they abide by, resist, or sidestep the pressures to conform to predetermined images . . . have the power to affect . . . how we view and function in the world.⁶²

I have also argued that memoirs like *The Girl in the Picture* provide a symbolic reorganization of subjectivity, ultimately serving to construct Vietnamese Americans as more than refugees, "boat people," or passive victims, but as active subjects in their own right. Such newly endowed agency ensures that representations of the Vietnam War can no longer repress the perspective of the Vietnamese "other." Sucheng Chan summarizes their importance:

These life stories are valuable . . . as . . . eyewitness accounts of a war, a Communist revolution, and a refugee outflow seared into the memories of both Vietnamese and Americans. They document at an intimate personal level momentous events of great historical interest.⁶³

Consequently, the real significance of these memoirs lies in their status less as texts and more as interventions in a historiographical framework. However, it is not just a newly endowed subject-with-agency that emerges from these memoirs. These narratives also importantly reorganize the *gendered* nature of that subjectivity, reorientating our understanding of the dominant masculinist mechanics of the American machinery of representing the Vietnam War and inserting the *female* "voice in the picture."

⁶¹ Gabriel Kolko, *Vietnam: Anatomy of a Peace* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 1. Also see *idem*, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York: Pantheon, 1985).

⁶² Pelaud, *This is all i choose to tell*, 137.

⁶³ Chan, *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation*, xi.