

AMNESIAC MEMORY, MELANCHOLIC REMEMBRANCE

AMNESIAC MEMORY, MELANCHOLIC REMEMBRANCE:

THE WORK OF

LE LY HAYSLIP

By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how America's cultural and historical memory forgets or problematically remembers Vietnam and the Vietnamese people(s) through the most prominent Vietnamese American texts, Le Ly Hayslip's *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* and *Child of War, Woman of Peace*, and Oliver Stone's filmic adaptation of Hayslip's memoirs, *Heaven and Earth*. In the U.S., thirty years after the end of the Vietnam War, there is a vast archive of history books, memoirs, films and other cultural products about the War, yet the Vietnamese peoples(s) are conspicuously absent in these discourses. In the American context of historical amnesia, Vietnam (the country) is forgotten and the Vietnamese people(s) are denied subjectivity, their numerous losses remaining disavowed and un-mourned.

I argue that Hayslip's books represent acts of mourning. She achieves this mourning by engaging with her losses and those of the Vietnamese people(s) in a productive way, using them as means to attain voice / subjectivity and to counter the American forgetting of Vietnamese casualties and losses. I explore a form of melancholic remembrance tied to the traditional Vietnamese practice of ancestor worship at work in Hayslip's memoirs, one that allows Hayslip to offer alternative, minority stories of the War. However, the mainstream reception of Hayslip's books, especially the embrace of her message of healing and reconciliation, appropriates and co-opts her voice / story to support U.S. national objectives. I analyze Stone's film as an ultimate example of Hayslip's appropriation by the American dominant. The thesis considers the complexities in and around Hayslip's texts in order to better understand America's amnesiac memory in relation to Vietnam and the Vietnamese people(s).

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Introduction:

“‘Let the Memorial Begin the Healing Process’¹: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Exclusion of Vietnamese Subjects”

On November 14, 1982, seven years after the last withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam and the fall of Saigon, 150,000 people gathered in America’s capital to witness the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. In a three-hour parade complete with floats, flyovers by fighter planes and helicopters, and the participation of 15, 000 veterans, the veterans of America’s lost war finally received the public recognition, the hero’s welcome, they never got upon their return home.

More importantly, in a candlelight vigil held earlier in the day at the National Cathedral and attended by the President of the United States, all 57, 939 names of those who lost their lives in Vietnam were read aloud and mourned. Their lives and sacrifice were enunciated and made real through public acknowledgement; these were actual men and women with names and families who fought and died to protect the American nation. The names on the list read at the ceremony are the very same that are etched permanently on the black granite of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington D.C. (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 378-379).

The tale that surrounds the moment of inspiration for the building of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial has by now become mythologized for those who study its history. In the differing versions of the story, Jan Scruggs, a former army corporal, after

¹ Dedication day invocation, quoted in Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz (378).

having watched Michael Cimino's film *Deer Hunter*, or read a book on post-traumatic stress disorder, or drunk a whole bottle of bourbon, came to the realization that a public memorial was needed to remember and honor the men and women who served and died in Vietnam. Regardless of which version is closest to the truth, Scruggs' story, at the time, pointed to the conspicuous void in America's cultural memory where the participants of the Vietnam War should have been, thus emphasizing that the War had left an unhealed wound which the American nation must eventually come to terms with.² There was an urgent need to somehow integrate the anomaly that was Vietnam and its veterans into the American narrative of imperial, military, and political success in the twentieth century.³ The veterans of the unpopular war that ended in devastating defeat for the U.S. were not accorded the customary hero's welcome that greeted returning veterans of past wars, but more troublingly, the casualties of the War were not properly recognized and mourned by the very nation that sent them to the battlefield. Thus, in 1979, Jan Scruggs embarked on a mission to secure private funding and endorsements for the creation of a memorial that would contain all the names of those who died in country.

Scruggs' project gained momentum and support first from high-profile public figures and then from the federal government, which resulted in plans to build a wall-shaped memorial. Controversy over the Wall's supposed somber, non-patriotic, and non-

² I use Marita Sturken's definition of cultural memory as a "field of cultural negotiation through which different stories vie for a place in history" (1). It is a memory that is "shared outside the avenues of formal historical discourse yet is entangled with cultural products and imbued with cultural meaning" (3); it is, also, not oppositional to or mutually exclusive from history.

³ The only other possible exception was the Korean War (1950-53), which ended in neither victory nor defeat for the U.S.

heroic design led to the erection of a more traditional monument of three -- racially marked white, black and Hispanic -- soldiers beside an American flag near the wall.⁴ A decade later another statue-monument was constructed to honor the women (mainly nurses) who served in Vietnam. Recently, yet another structure was added to the Memorial to commemorate those who died as a direct result of trauma and injuries sustained in Vietnam. These monuments together comprise the space of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial that sits in between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument. The historical trajectory of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial reveals an impulse towards inclusion, a move to remember and mourn *all* of those who sacrificed themselves or died because of the War. But “all,” in this case, includes only Americans. The mourned may be whites, blacks, Hispanics, men, women, army Generals, combat soldiers, those who died on the battlefield, those who suffered from PTSD, but they must share the common element of American citizenship. Whether as a direct intention or not, the Memorial refuses to remember that the Vietnamese also participated in the War, that three million Vietnamese lives were lost. The innumerable losses -- physical, psychical, symbolic -- experienced by the Vietnamese (North, South, civilians, diasporics) remain forgotten by the U.S.; relegated to the margins of history, outside of the American imagination.

While it is not expected or customary for the U.S. to commemorate its enemy dead (although it must be remembered that the South Vietnamese and its army were

⁴ There was also enormous controversy over Maya Lin's (the architect of the wall) age, gender, lack of credentials, Asian “otherness,” and modernist design. In fact, the wall only got the go ahead for construction on the condition that a more traditional statue-monument be erected next to it.

America's ally) in a public structure that speaks to a sense of national unity and identity, the Veterans Memorial demonstrates how the Vietnamese have been omitted from America's historical and cultural memory. This effacement denies that the Vietnamese were a part of the War and enables Americans to write history books, narrate autobiographical tales, and make movies that center almost exclusively on the American experience. Vietnam becomes mere background; the Vietnamese, periphery. Marita Sturken argues that "in its listings of U.S. war dead, and in the context of the [Washington] Mall, the memorial establishes Americans, rather than Vietnamese, as the primary victims of the war" (82) and consequently deems the Vietnamese unmentionable. The disavowal of Vietnamese subjectivity has greatly conditioned the way that American discourses on the War have understood and represented the country and its peoples.

To date there is no analogous memorial structure in terms of function, size and significance, in the U.S. or Vietnam, which remembers and mourns the deaths of the Vietnamese.⁵ Perhaps the only other monument that makes a gesture towards doing so is the Vietnam War Memorial in Westminster, California. Designed by a Vietnamese

⁵ In 1991 Chris Burden attempted an art piece (*The Other Vietnam Memorial*) to record the names of the estimated three million Vietnamese casualties. The work was not successful according to critics and the artist himself. Unable to get a complete listing of the Vietnamese war dead, Burden repeated four thousand names to reach the full total, thus making his work an *exercise* in countering the exclusions of the Veterans Memorial. Given that the piece is little known, I do not consider it an adequate memorial. Furthermore, in their essay "The Past Without the Pain: the Manufacture of Nostalgia in Vietnam's Tourism Industry," Laurel B. Kennedy and Mary Rose Williams argue that the marketing of Vietnam and the War for tourism purposes dehistoricizes the War. Western tourists do not want to fully and directly confront the atrocities of the war; thus the construction of monuments and war sites for tourists serves to trivialize rather than bear witness to the War. What might have been sites of remembrance and memorialization for the Vietnamese in Vietnam have become capitalistic commodities.

American sculptor, the statue depicts an American soldier standing next to a South Vietnamese soldier under a plaque that reads: "Duty, Honor, Sacrifice. It is sometimes said that heroes are hard to find. People who understand the meaning of duty, honor and country need to look no further than those who fight for freedom and democracy." The purpose of the memorial is not only to remember the dead but also to commemorate "the alliance between Vietnamese and American people during the war" (*dedication*). As Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong pointed out, while the memorial includes the lives of South Vietnamese soldiers as those worthy of mourning, it excludes the women, children, men without ranks, and North Vietnamese in this act of inclusion (170-171). Furthermore, as the heroic stance of the two soldiers and the worded inscription suggests, the memorial re-inscribes the glory of war and its cause. By reiterating the alliance between America and the South Vietnamese, the memorial stands to reinforce America's role as provider of paternalistic aid to South Vietnam in a civil war against the Communists, as protector of freedom, and erases the imperialistic, morally questionable dimensions of America's involvement in Vietnam. Ultimately, like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall, it serves to evoke feelings of American nationalism and patriotism.

As argued by Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, the profusion of American flags and medals and insignia left at the foot of the Memorial Wall by mourners has turned it into a site where patriotic feelings are expressed, which runs counter to the original intention. They state: "Designed to draw attention to the individual and away from the nation and its cause, the Memorial's wall turns out to be a most dramatic locus of patriotic feeling" (405). Though there are also conflicting and negative sentiments about the War expressed

in the form of poems and letters left behind which make the Wall “a repository of diverse opinions about the war” (405), the overwhelming patriotism (flags are the single most frequent item left behind) displayed at the wall and its placement in the nationalistic context of the Washington Mall risk obscuring the complex history of the War and America’s place in it. If the Memorial Wall is a place where history of the War can be written, then that history may very well come to be in line with nationalistic history when all is said and done.

But its potential to add to the writing of Vietnam War history is not the Wall’s most powerful function. Kim Servart Theriault says that the Wall acts as an agent of healing for the American people. She adds that “the Vietnam Veterans Memorial has become a prototype for mourning and healing that has spawned many more created in the same spirit of healing. There is a virtual wall on the Internet, five half-scale moving walls that travel around the country, and numerous websites, including a ‘suicide wall’ for those who allegedly committed suicide as a direct result of their service in Vietnam” (422). Not only are American deaths remembered and mourned, but living Americans and the American nation can come to a place of healing and peace by interacting with the Wall. The Wall helps to “re-member, put back together, or re-engage individuals, families, and much of the government and society through a process of remembering that has addressed physical, psychological, and intellectual trauma” (421). In this way, the Wall plays an important role in assisting the process of personal and collective mourning in the classical Freudian sense, where the grieving individual or nation can successfully come to terms with past losses; in other words, to heal and move forward.

Where then is the place of peace and healing for the Vietnamese in the American narrative(s) of the War? How can Vietnamese, especially Vietnamese Americans, mourn and remember their losses? But to even mention peace and healing for Vietnamese subjects, in the American context, is a leap forward. Before this can be done, Vietnamese subjects, both dead and living, must have their humanity recognized. Judith Butler rightly argues that public grieving determines what is a grievable subject and a grievable death, and who counts as a human being: “Some lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death?” (*Precarious Life* xiv). The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, as a case in point, reflects the general elision and forgetting of the Vietnamese in American history and the American consciousness. The Vietnamese are deemed ungrievable; thus, their lives, dead and living, are not accorded “human” status or value. A compelling scene in an award-winning 1975 documentary juxtaposes a Vietnamese funeral with scenes of General Westmoreland (at one time the principal U.S. official in Vietnam) expressing his view on the value of Vietnamese lives. He proclaims: “The Oriental doesn’t put the same high price on life as the Westerner. Life is plentiful, life is cheap in the Orient [...] as the philosophy of the Orient expresses it, life is not important” (*Hearts and Minds*). While Westmoreland’s comments are explicit and categorical, his views are not far from the reality of how the Vietnamese have been constructed in American historical and popular memory during and after the War. As the most documented war in American history

(Rowe, Weiss), the enormous archive of historical accounts, journalism, memoirs, films, novels, and poetry, tends to be organized around an American perspective, rarely taking into account that of the Vietnamese. Vietnam and the Vietnamese act as backdrop and footnotes in these discourses, resulting in a general silencing of their experiences. The dehumanized subject cannot talk for s/he has no voice.

Yet, despite the amount of scholarly and cultural attention paid to the war, Yen Le Espiritu argues that, “thirty years after the ‘fall of Saigon,’ a ‘determined incomprehension’ remains the dominant U. S. stance on the history of the Vietnam War” (“AfterWARD” xiii). This “determined incomprehension” results from the way America chooses to write and remember history, forgetting the very people “who were the main participants and victims of that history – Vietnamese from North and South, and Vietnamese diasporics including Vietnamese Americans ... [America] mimes acts of remembering by way of an amnesiac memory” (Nguyen-Vo T. H 158). At the present moment, Vietnamese subjects are excluded and rendered silent, thus dehumanized, in the American discourse(s) on the War; they are without subjectivity, without a voice, without a human face to attach to the body count. However, it is revealing to consider the place Vietnam, its interests, and its people have always occupied in the minds of the American administrations that orchestrated the war and of the American people. Robert D. Schulzinger says, “the war in Vietnam was never strictly about Vietnam for the Americans who directed it, fought in it, or opposed it. The United States became involved in Vietnamese politics and eventually fought in Vietnam because of the Cold War” (329). During the twenty years of American involvement in Vietnam, issues of international and

domestic politics were always more consequential and pressing than what was happening in Vietnam. This present form of forgetting has historical roots in that Vietnam has never been a true central concern for America and the American public.

But this question begs to be asked: Can it be expected of the U.S. to remember and mourn the losses of the Vietnamese, even outside the nationalistic context of the Veterans Memorial? How can America actually recognize and mourn them? Judith Butler points out, “there are no obituaries for the war casualties that the United States inflicts, and there cannot be” (*Precarious Life* 34). For if America were to publicly mourn Vietnamese lives, then it would have to recognize the humanity of these lives and confront the complications this recognition poses to the American narrative of the War. Moreover, it would have to confront its own sense of vulnerability and emasculation inflicted by losing the war. Thus, left on its own, the American mainstream will chose to forget or only invoke Vietnam when politically expedient. The onus, then, falls on the Vietnamese themselves to remember, to create obituaries, not just of lives lost, but of the multiplicities of losses incurred by the war. The hope, in doing so, is to assert Vietnamese subjectivity, to remember Vietnamese losses, and to augment American official and unofficial histories and perceptions of the War, the country, and its people(s).

My project focuses on one specific instance of a Vietnamese (Vietnamese American)⁶ subject speaking up and gaining recognition and acceptance from the American mainstream. Le Ly Hayslip’s memoirs *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (1989) and *Child of War, Woman of Peace* (1994), co-authored with Jay Wurts

⁶ Reviewers of Hayslip’s book refer to her as Vietnamese. Hayslip herself slips back and forth between the identifications of Vietnamese and Vietnamese American.

and James Hayslip respectively, are, together, the most successful texts by a Vietnamese American author.⁷ Thus, they have become the representative Vietnamese perspective for Americans, a label that is not unproblematic. However, Hayslip's books are important because they address the elision and omission of the Vietnamese from American discourses by avowing the particular losses of a Vietnamese woman, and through her, the losses of the Vietnamese and the Vietnamese diaspora, in a public forum. They are, in some senses, works of mourning, of identifying and remembering the losses and suffering war has brought upon the Vietnamese people. Hayslip tells (one segment of) the Vietnamese side of the story, which has been and remains a central concern for Vietnamese American literature.

The field of Vietnamese American literature is nascent and understudied. Under the umbrella designation of Asian American Studies, works by authors of Vietnamese origin (naturalized Vietnamese American, Vietnamese living in America, American-born

⁷ I define "success" here by the reception and recognition Hayslip and her texts have received from mainstream America. *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* received many glowing reviews from critics in national media outlets upon its publication. It has gone through four printings in three decades, pointing to popular demand. From the outset, it was also published internationally, in Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Both books, together, have been translated into 17 different languages. They have also been made into a high-budget Hollywood film. Hayslip has toured nationally and internationally to give talks and lectures about war and peace, and her books (especially the first) are widely taught in college courses about the war (Asian Studies, Literature, and Women's Studies). Renny Christopher says that *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* is in the process of becoming canonized in the field of Vietnam War literature. Critics who write on Vietnamese American literature generally accept the prominence of Hayslip and her books. Also, She has been the recipient of numerous honors, most recently, the "Pride of America" award (along with 24 other immigrants) conferred by the Carnegie Corporations of New York in 2008. In addition, in a series of Asian American biographies published in 2007, Hayslip was included alongside three other prominent Asian Americans: I.M Pei, Yo-Yo Ma, and Kristi Yamaguchi.

Vietnamese) have not had the same critical attention and scrutiny paid to them as that paid to other Asian ethnic groups such as Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans. The anti-war movement in the sixties had a huge impact on the formation of Asian America, yet, as Viet Thanh Nguyen muses, “strangely, for all the visceral impact the war had on Asian American consciousness, for all it animated an early generation of Asian Americans, we see little cultural work about the war or its survivors” (“Speak of the Dead” 14). Asian Americans and Asian American Studies have been almost as neglectful of Vietnamese experiences as the larger American nation.

There have been only two full-length academic articles devoted to conceptualizing and historicizing the field: a chapter by Monique Truong entitled “Vietnamese American Literature” in the anthology *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature* (1997) and an article in *Amerasia Journal* by Michelle Janette called “Vietnamese American Literature in English, 1963-1994” (2003). In her book *The Vietnam War / The American War* (1995), Renny Christopher spends a portion of her sustained discussion of Vietnam War literature on Vietnamese exile narratives. John Schafer compiled a bibliography, primarily for college teachers, of Vietnamese accounts of the War in his 1997 book, *Vietnamese Perspectives on the War in Vietnam: An Annotated Bibliography of Works in English*. Finally, as of 2009, there has only been one effort, by a pan-Asian collective, the Asian American Writers’ Workshop, to anthologize creative writings by Vietnamese Americans, the result of which was the publication of *Watermarks: Vietnamese American Poetry and Prose* in 1998.

Both Truong and Janette characterize Vietnamese American literature (in English) as not yet fully formed or arrived. Truong points to the lack of English language skills for the first group of Vietnamese immigrants post-1975, which acts as an impediment to them telling their stories directly.⁸ The very first emergence of Vietnamese American stories were found in American-spearheaded sociological and literary projects of “interviewing, collecting, translating, and editing the oral her/histories of Vietnamese Americans” (222). She further adds: “these transcribed life stories most often found themselves showcased and confined within a larger ‘organizing’ text that attempted to incorporate and employ the Vietnamese American voices / texts for the construction and facilitation of narrative goals extending far beyond the respondents’ original speech / narrative act” (222). For example, these voices get used to support the myth of the model minority or revisionist histories of America’s involvement in the War. More importantly, Truong argues, the Americans’ editorial acts either deny Vietnamese agency by taking control away from their voices or construe them as forever longing for a return to the homeland, and thus not as American citizens.

The next phase of development is also problematic for Vietnamese American literature as it relies too heavily upon co-authorship. During the 1980s, important personal narratives by Doan Van Toai, Nguyen Ngoc Ngan, Nguyen Long, Nguyen Thi Thu-Lam, Tran Thi Nga, and Le Ly Hayslip were all written with the aid of an American

⁸ There were a handful of Vietnamese sojourners in America (students and diplomats) who produced literary works prior to 1975, but the year “stands as a popular signifier for the fictional ‘initial’ entrance and incorporation of people of Vietnamese descent as a racial and ethnic group into the social fiber of the United States” (220). There is still much critical work that needs to address these early writers.

more proficient in the English language. While co-writing, in these instances, implies that the speaking subject who tells his or her story has not yet developed the ability to articulate it in English, the issue of cooptation of story and voice also arises, as in the case of Tran Thi Nga and Wendy Larson.⁹ These few but formative Vietnamese American narratives and the production that surrounds them present a “highly problematic representation of the Vietnamese American voice” (226).

Janette observes, “the last seven years have seen a blossoming of Vietnamese American literature in English that I believe will come into full flower in the next decade or so. At this moment [...] we are still in the midst of transition” (268). Although Janette does not explain what this period of “transition” means, her earlier comment that writings by a new “generation of writers who see themselves as wordsmiths first, members of a particular identity group second” (268) points to the issue of authorial voice again. And Janette is right, the new generation of “wordsmiths” like Monique Truong, Andrew Lam, Andrew X. Pham, le thi diem thuy, Linh Dinh, and Aimee Pham have mastered the English language and moved beyond the limited scope of generic memoir or autobiography. Yet as this new group of writers works to redefine Vietnamese American literature, it is important to (re)examine the early writings by Vietnamese Americans. In doing so, we can come to better understand the difficult and complex conditions Vietnamese American voices have encountered in their attempt to gain a place in the American historical and cultural landscape, conditions that are beyond co-authorship but

⁹ Larson arranged Tran’s recorded reminiscences into poems in a collection that juxtaposes them with Larson’s own poetry. Many critics have charged Larson with cultural imperialism. See Truong’s article for more.

still affect and concern the new group of Vietnamese American writers. Most of the books that belong to the co-authored stage of Vietnamese American literature, of which Hayslip is a part, have fallen out of print or have received little or no critical attention in American scholarship. I choose to focus on Hayslip because of the special status her memoirs have achieved in the American mainstream – they have remained constantly in print – using her example to explore the specificities of how America remembers or forgets Vietnam and the Vietnamese.

In *Child of War, Woman of Peace*, Le Ly Hayslip recounts a telling episode in which she and her American in-laws gather in front of the television to watch newsreels of the war taking place in Vietnam. As the images of Vietnamese “fleeing burning villages, tied up as prisoners, or as rag dolls in a roadside trench” (28) flashed across the screen, Hayslip felt the disconnect between her own reaction and those of her white American husband’s family. Whereas Hayslip saw the suffering of her own family, of her own neighbors and fellow countrymen, her in-laws “just yawned, because they [the Vietnamese] were *the enemy*” (28). Hayslip’s in-laws’ dismissive response is indicative of the American attitude towards Vietnamese casualties of war and, as I have demonstrated, the humanity of the Vietnamese people. This ignorance was part of what prompted Hayslip to write her book to humanize the Vietnamese dead. To convince Americans of Vietnamese subjectivity she engages with her own history and the Vietnamese’s history of suffering and loss. Hayslip’s books are, on one level, acts of mourning that allow for differing perspectives and histories to emerge.

In order to explore how Hayslip's memoirs grieve Vietnamese losses I consider theories of productive melancholia and their relation to the practice of ancestor worship in Vietnamese culture in chapter one. Chapter two focuses on Le Ly Hayslip, analyzing the generative engagement with loss at work in her texts. It examines how she is able to avow her loss in the American context, and also discusses the cooptation of her voice to support dominant ideology. The last chapter deals with Oliver Stone's adaptation of Hayslip's books. It examines how this prominent Vietnamese American text is appropriated through the popular medium of film. This project has two main aims: first, it seeks to understand the complexities both within and surrounding Le Ly Hayslip's memoirs; and second, it attempts to comprehend and reveal the particular ways in which the American imagination has and continues to remember and / or forget Vietnam and the Vietnamese.

Chapter One:

“‘Melancholia Behaves Like an Open Wound’¹⁰: Loss, Productive Melancholia, and the Vietnamese Practice of Ancestor Worship”

I.

Recent work in contemporary discourses on loss by theorists such as Judith Butler, Douglas Crimp, David Eng, David Kazanjian, and Ann Cheng argue that the pervasive, seemingly clear-cut distinction between mourning and melancholia that Sigmund Freud had established in his 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia” is tenuous and calls for reconsideration. It is now apparent that there are possibilities for reacting to loss other than that of healthy mourning and pathological melancholia, possibilities operating in complex ways that move beyond Freud’s early conceptualization. Furthermore, it is through this questioning of the Freudian model of responding to loss that we can start to talk about the idea of a productive melancholia. The very notion of productive or generative melancholia, at its core, relies on the complication of this normal-abnormal dialectic. In turn, if the possibility of a melancholia that is not pathological does not collapse the distinction completely, it at least greatly problematizes the strict demarcation of mourning and melancholia. Even if we follow Freud and accept that mourning and melancholia represent opposite ends of a spectrum, it still remains imperative to explore what lies in between.

¹⁰ “Mourning and Melancholia” (319).

In “Mourning and Melancholia” Freud provided a theoretical paradigm by which thinkers of the twentieth century would later come to understand the psychic responses to loss. The Freudian model proposed that when a loss occurs, when a love object is lost, there are two ways, one normal and one pathological, to deal with this bereavement. He begins by outlining the similarities between the processes of mourning and melancholia. Both are defined as “the reaction to the loss of a beloved person or an abstraction taking the place of the person, such as fatherland, freedom, an ideal and so on” (310). The reactions to loss are characterized by “a profoundly painful depression, a loss of interest in the outside world, the loss of the ability to love, the inhibition of any kind of performance” (311). Yet, despite these apparently abnormal behaviors, mourning, the “normal affect” (310), is not considered an illness because “we rely on it being overcome after a certain period of time, and consider interfering with it to be pointless, or even damaging” (311). In other words, mourning is not an indefinite state, but rather a phase to be worked through and experienced as a desired response to loss. It is even a crucial process for the mourning subject to once again function properly, to (re)gain a state of normality. Once the time of mourning is completed, the subject’s libido can sever the attachment bond with the lost object and be available for future object-choices and attachments; the libido / ego is “left free and uninhibited” (312).

Melancholia, on the other hand, is a condition of arrest, where the object-cathexis is unable to be withdrawn and the libido remains in a perpetual state of investment – attachment to the lost object. The amount of energy required to deny the loss and maintain the relationship with the lost object in melancholia is detrimental to the ego, and

it is here that melancholia becomes most distinguished from mourning. Freud states that in melancholia there is “an extraordinary reduction in self-esteem, a great impoverishment of the ego” (313). He goes on to add: “In mourning, the world has become poor and empty, in melancholia it is the ego that has become so” (313). Unable to detach from the lost object, the ego finds itself identifying with and devouring the lost object. Freud tells us that upon the initial loss, “the free libido was not, however, displaced on to another object, but instead drawn back into the ego. But it did not find any application there, but served to produce an identification of the ego with the abandoned object [...] Thus the loss of object had been transformed into loss of ego” (316). The denial of loss, the retention of the lost object, and finally, the ego’s identification with that very object point to a process of failed mourning that characterizes melancholia as pathological.

Yet, as many commentators and critics have pointed out, Freud seems to have changed his position on melancholia in his later essay “The Ego and the Id” (1924) by suggesting that the ego is constituted by its object-choices and object-losses.¹¹ That is, there is no (fully-formed) ego, no subject to speak of, without the psychic process of melancholia. The setting up of the lost object(s) inside the ego, through a process of identification, internalization, and incorporation as a result of failed mourning is “an essential contribution toward building what is called its [the ego’s] ‘character’” (“Ego and Id” 18). Freud goes on to boldly conclude: “the character of the ego is a precipitate of

¹¹ See Judith Butler’s *The Psychic Life of Power*, Tammy Clewell’s “Mourning Beyond Melancholia: Freud’s Psychoanalysis of Loss” (2004), Jonathan Flatley’s *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (2008), and Ilit Ferber’s “Melancholy Philosophy: Freud and Benjamin” (2006).

abandoned object-cathexes and that it contains the history of those object-choices” (“Ego and Id” 19). Hence, ego formation, in part, relies on the retention of, a kind of permanent holding-on-to, one’s losses. The ego becomes the site of the “sedimentation of objects loved and lost, the archeological remainder, as it were, of unresolved grief” (*Psychic Life* 133). From Freud, we inherit a powerful and profound statement: a large part of who we are is determined by who / what we lose.

In her application of melancholia to gender formation, Judith Butler does an illuminating reading of Freud’s theoretical revision. She interprets Freud’s modification as making “room for the notion that melancholic identification may be a *prerequisite* for letting the object go” (*Psychic Life* 134). Detachment from the lost object or letting go, as desired ends of healthy mourning, takes on a new meaning for there is “no final breaking of the attachment” (*Psychic Life* 134). Butler continues: “Indeed, one might conclude that melancholic identification permits the loss of the object in the external world precisely because it provides a way to preserve the object as part of the ego and, hence, to avert the loss as a complete loss. Here we see letting the object go means, paradoxically, not full abandonment of the object but transferring the status of the object from external to internal” (*Psychic Life* 134). It is not only the understanding of melancholia that is reconfigured; so too is the idea of mourning and what it means to mourn. In order for grief to be resolved, for loss to be fully mourned, a melancholic, identificatory process must be employed to preserve the lost object. Butler’s formulation that melancholia may be a prerequisite for mourning and that mourning looks to be an altered version of melancholia, dramatically blurs the traditional distinction between the two responses to

loss while speaking to the psychic and theoretical complexity they both share. Most importantly, though, the unsettling of mourning and melancholia's mutual exclusivity points towards the possibility for the depathologization of the latter.

Butler's move and the general push towards depathologization began with Freud's own reconsideration of melancholia. Even in his 1917 essay, Freud displayed signs that he may not have been entirely convinced of his own conceptualization by wondering, with a hint of incredulity, why, despite so many displays of abnormal behavior, mourning is not presented to practitioners as an illness to be treated. Furthermore, he conjectures that melancholia is seen as pathological partly because its mechanics were so poorly understood. Six years later, in "The Ego and the Id," Freud concedes that the melancholic process of identification and incorporation was more "common" and "typical" than previously thought, thereby suggesting that melancholia falls within the range of normative behavior, hence, not deviant or pathological. With the shift in his thinking on melancholia, Freud made the first gesture and provided the potential for creative reimaginings of the concept to come later in the century. Theories of gender, postcolonial, and racial melancholia, borrowing one way or another from Freud, have emerged recently to shed light on the cultural, social, and political world in which we live. Indeed, melancholia has become an important tool for analyzing what David Eng calls "marginalized subjectivities" and "minoritarian group identities" that are "predicated on states of injury" (1276). This trajectory posits melancholic attachments to loss not only as formative to subjectivity, but also as the condition through which marginalized subjects and communities can begin to gain agency and mobilize. In this

historical moment it is possible to clearly see loss and melancholia's political dimensions and explore what this means. And perhaps, finally, the pathological connotations that melancholia, as a concept, has carried with it for centuries will begin to fade.

II.

Having thus outlined the grounds for exploring the possibility of a productive melancholia, the remainder of this chapter will partly be devoted to examining melancholia's productivity in relation to politics. The theoretical work being produced at the present moment places great emphasis on the political value of melancholic engagements with loss. While I do not disagree with this construction, I believe that it is also relevant to open up the meaning of melancholic productivity. Politics -- agency, activism and the building of collectivities -- is ultimately the core of productive melancholia; it is where the theory has the most ideological force and everyday relevance. Connecting personal losses to larger social structures and translating grief into social and political justice -- what Anne Cheng calls the move from "grief" to "grievance" -- is crucial for marginalized subjects and groups. Productive melancholia allows for an essential politics of hope. Yet we must not forget that sadness and grief can be consuming, that -- as a psychic and affective experience -- melancholia has the real potential to debilitate and destroy subjects and their communities. Thus, the political work of productive melancholia should be seen as something to strive for, as an *ideal* response to loss. However, there are reactions that do not yet arrive at this ideal, that are not necessarily political, but are nonetheless productive.

I suggest an alternative way of thinking through productive melancholia, one that seeks to complement the existing theorizations of the concept and perhaps further the understanding of productivity. I wish to reconsider the “productive” aspect of the term by pointing to melancholia’s ability to be generative in myriad, complicated, and even contradictory kinds of ways that are not necessarily political (in the strict sense). This understanding can contribute to examining injured and marginalized subjects / collectivities’ complex relationship with dominant culture (as well as the meaning of political). I emphasize melancholic productivity in its most basic sense, in which the typical association of sadness, depression, and melancholic attachments with ennui, debilitation, or pathology are questioned and ultimately broken. This move represents a step backwards to look at what happens before politics can enter the equation. Put otherwise, I stress the value of surviving, of not giving up, of attempting and struggling to inhabit a space of disavowal, of simply living with, avowing, and mourning loss. And the productivity of engaging loss can become the foundation for political work.

The literary and lifework of Le Ly Hayslip is engendered from a remembrance of her own personal losses and the collective losses of the Vietnamese people and Vietnamese Americans. Hayslip uses the specificities of her suffering in order to give voice to particular Vietnamese losses -- losses that hitherto have been ignored or silenced. Although Hayslip’s has been a rare case in which the American mainstream has recognized and accepted a Vietnamese perspective, I maintain that with recognition or not, the refusal to forget loss is a form of productivity. Remembering -- when that very privilege has been denied -- the ability and need to remember, can be productive in and of

itself. This position will allow me to connect traditional Vietnamese mourning practices or a practice of remembrance with productive melancholia. Ancestor worship and the view towards the dead in Vietnamese society represent an instance where the past and those who have passed on are never fully gone. Instead, the dead continue to play an active part in shaping the present and the future. I construe this incorporation of ghosts, of those from one's past, into the everyday fabric of life as a melancholic remembrance -- one that is natural and essential to the idea of Vietnamese life and culture: one that is productive. In fact, Hayslip's work would not be possible without her unbroken attachment to her deceased father. According to Hayslip, it is with his wise and guiding spirit, along with millions of lost Vietnamese souls, urging her to tell her (and his / their) story that she finally decides to write her books. Her memoirs themselves are a tribute to the memory of her father. Therefore, I argue that operating, on one level, in Hayslip's text (by which I mean her memoirs and philanthropy) is an historical materialist approach, as defined by Benjamin. That is, Hayslip engages with the past, with loss, in a manner that keeps it alive, leaving history open, most importantly, open for counter forms of remembrance and mourning.

III.

In his seminal essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Walter Benjamin describes two distinct melancholic approaches to history: historicism and historical materialism. Historicism originates in an "indolence of the heart, *acedia*, which despairs of grasping and holding the genuine historical image as it flares up briefly" (258). It

understands the past by blotting out the later course of history, emptying the past of the present and the present of the past. Hence, a temporal continuum of historical progress is created in which the past is static and finished, leaving no room for the contestation of history. This historicist form of looking back, of historical sadness, becomes dangerous because, ultimately, it empathizes with the victors, with those who get to write history. Thereby, the narrative(s) of the victors, the rulers, the dominant -- Benjamin would call these narratives barbaric -- are inscribed as History and Knowledge. Similarly, in *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha refers to this official memory of the victor / nation-state as pedagogical memory (225-226).

The historicist framework, America's pedagogical memory, makes no room for Vietnamese or Vietnamese American histories of loss and injury. Yet an undeniable material consequence of the War was the influx of Vietnamese refugees or displaced boat people into the U.S. Thus, within pedagogical memory, Vietnamese refugees were initially cast as anti-communist "freedom fighter[s]" (Ong 81) and then as compliant, grateful, and socially and economically successful good refugees.¹² Yen Le Espiritu argues that the persistence of U.S. scholarship around Vietnamese Americans as refugee figures suppresses the complexity and multiplicity of Vietnamese American subjects and their experiences; it also results in the remaking of the War as successful and just.¹³

¹² For an overview of Vietnamese migration to the U.S. see Linda Trinh Vo's "The Vietnamese American Experience: From Dispersion to the Development of Post-Refugee Communities" and Hien Duc Do's "The New Migrants from Asia: Vietnamese in the United States."

¹³ See Espiritu's "Towards a Critical Refugee Study: The Vietnamese Refugee Subject in U.S. Scholarship" and "The 'We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose' Syndrome: U.S. Press Coverage of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the 'Fall of Saigon'"

Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong adds, “these refugees, who embody success stories of freedom gained and hard work rewarded, must at the same time deny the complex history as well as the collective agency of the group they represent. The highly complex and contingent history of their people must be forgotten in a historical amnesia, in order so that *the* success story could be retold” (166-167). Thus, it is easy to see how the figure of the (good) Vietnamese refugee fits conveniently into the American narrative of the War and American national identity. A major reason why Hayslip is accepted and celebrated by the American mainstream is that her story is easily co-opted and she can then be construed to stand as a “good refugee” figure. The reception and appropriation of her texts turn them into a token Vietnamese perspective that perpetuates the unity and singularity of American pedagogical memory. Hence, with both sides of the story told, the history of the Vietnam War is complete. The past is understood, finished.

However, Benjamin asserts that the “true picture of the past flits by,” that the past “can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again” (257). If the past is elusive and “threatens to disappear irretrievably” when it is not “recognized by the present as one of its own concerns” (257), then minority histories and narratives of loss and injury risk being forgotten and lost or subsumed in perverse ways in the historicist framework.

The onus thus falls upon the historical materialist to “brush history against the grain” (259). That is, to engage with the past in a manner that breaks away from that of the historicist. For the historical materialist, past, present and future are not homogenous and empty; rather, the past is pregnant with the present and vice versa. And by seizing

hold of the historical image “as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (257) and making the past an undeniable part of the present, the historical materialist gives “mankind” (256) and its future a chance at redemption, that is, the possibility for mankind to inherit a less singular, more genuine history. Historical materialism rests on the idea of an animate past that is never closed off from the present and the historical materialist engages with it actively and constructively. This kind of engagement facilitates an empathy with the past that allows for silenced or repressed histories to (re)emerge. Historical materialism allows the past, in its entirety, to have a say; it is a melancholic form of attending to the past and remembrance that serves minorities, the repressed and oppressed. Functioning in Le Ly Hayslip’s work is a historical materialist approach, one of bringing to the present stories of Vietnamese loss and suffering that challenge dominant hegemony. Her memoirs are attempts at unsettling America’s pedagogical memory, despite the fact that they (and she) have been transformed by the mainstream into representatives that support national objectives. The original intention of Hayslip’s books and how they have been used by the American dominant point to the difficult negotiations a minority voice goes through when it gains recognition from the mainstream.

David Eng and David Kazanjian argue that Benjamin’s essay represents “a treatise on the political and ethical stakes of mourning remains – mourning what remains of lost histories as well as histories of loss” (1). They view historical materialism as a “creative process, animating history for future significations as well as alternate empathies” through establishing an “active and open relationship with history” (1). The melancholia of historical materialism becomes a hopeful process for generating “sites for

memory and history, for the rewriting of the past as well as the reimagining of the future” (4). Thus, refusing to let the past be past and dealing with unacknowledged losses can have productive consequences for both history and politics. In the hands of Eng and Kazanjian, melancholia’s relationship to history, first articulated by Benjamin, assumes a generative dimension with multivalent bearings; they emphatically assert: “avowals of and attachments to loss can produce a world of remains as a world of new representations and alternate meanings” (5).

The end products of a materialist engagement with loss, however, are inextricably tied to politics. The newly created worlds from loss’s remains are socially and politically inflected. Along the lines of Eng and Kazanjian, Jonathan Flatley reminds us that for Benjamin “a melancholy dwelling on loss must always be connected to present political concerns” (65). As we have seen, Benjamin disparages a melancholia that leads to historicism or inactive complacency; rather, he advocates a “politicizing, splenetic melancholy, where clinging to things from the past enables interest and action in the present world and is indeed the very mechanism for that interest” (Flatley 65).

Melancholia can function as the condition and apparatus for which marginalized subjects and groups -- those who have been injured, those marked by loss -- in dominant culture to transform their experiences into political productivity: defined variously as agency, the formation of collective consciousness, the building of coalitions, and activism.

Echoing Benjamin’s positing of melancholia’s value in political work, many recent theorists have also positioned politics at the center of productive melancholia. Douglas Crimp, in his essay “Mourning and Militancy,” talks about the necessity of a

form of grief work that is complemented with action and activism. Writing in the context of gay men and the AIDS crisis, Crimp delineates the tension between the gay community's mourning of men who have been lost to the disease and the activist movement. For activists, public displays of mourning seem "indulgent, sentimental, [and] defeatist" (5) precisely because the act of mourning itself drains much needed resources for involvement in other activities. The energy -- psychic and physiological -- and time expended in the state of mourning does not leave room for important forms of activism. Thus, from this perspective, grieving is undesirable as it leads to a kind of debilitating melancholia. Against this stream of thought, Crimp argues that mourning and activism are not incompatible because for "many gay men dealing with AIDS death, militancy might arise from conscious conflicts *within* mourning itself" (10). The internal, conscious conflicts are a consequence of dominant, heteronormative society's "ruthless interference with our [the gay community's] bereavement" (8). In addition, due to the number of mourners still living with AIDS and HIV, there exists the "impossibility of deciding whether the mourner will share the fate of the mourned" (10), thus making the final detachment a site of complication and suspension. Mourning, then, has the potential to become the catalyst for the formation of collective, political consciousness, one that could aid in the activist fight. For Crimp, an activism that eschews mourning denies the recognition of psychic, self-inflicted violence that, along with external violence, helps to shape the injured subject's and group's place in dominant culture, while mourning without activism leads to little social change. Thus, Crimp urges: "Militancy, of course, then, but mourning too: mourning *and* militancy" (18). What must be gleaned from

Crimps analysis is that the psychic work of mourning, of engaging loss, for injured (wronged or oppressed) members outside society's norm, can and should be converted to make political statements and rally action.

This conversion, this movement from subject of loss to subject of action occurs, first and foremost, psychologically. At the same time, the legitimization of psychic experiences of injury can be used as persuasive argument for the rectification of social and political injustice. In *The Melancholy of Race* Anne Anlin Cheng reminds us that "the politics of race has always spoken in the language of psychology" (28) by opening with the American legal-historical case of *Brown v. Board of Education* to illustrate one successful instance of the translation of "racial grief into social claims" (3). In this monumental case, the use of psychological studies on the "detrimental effects of racism on children of color" (3) as evidence in the courtroom proved to be compelling and decisive in the Supreme Court's decision to overturn segregation in public schools. Here, the loss and grief experienced affectively as a result of unattainable white ideals, of institutional and systemic racism, becomes the ground for redress and restitution. Cheng goes on to say, "the original *Brown* ruling then may be said to be an unprecedented judgment about the necessity of examining the invisible but tenacious aspect of racism – of allowing racial grief to have its say even if it cannot definitively speak in the language of material grievance" (4). Put otherwise, a damaging experience, unquantifiable and intangible, such as grief has potentially practical and valuable functions, especially in the legal arena, when used as a tool or basis for grievance. Understood in conjunction with Crimp's assertion that action may come from grief work, Cheng's analysis of the *Brown*

case furthers the argument by saying that grief itself can be used productively. It is thus taking hold of the grief itself and using it in a political manner that enables the transformation “from grief to grievance, from suffering injury to speaking out against that injury” (3).

Translating grief into grievance, mourning into militancy, depends upon a sense of collectivity. In many respects, activism is most effective in large numbers and communities. The affective experience of loss -- historical and / or proleptic -- and the refusal to let that loss be past becomes a category, like gender or ethnicity, for identification and solidarity; it provides a home for what Eng and Han call “psychic citizenship” (366). This “home” is a place that exists because loss has made its existence possible. Judith Butler describes this as: “a place where belonging now takes place in and through a common sense of loss (which does not mean that all these losses are the same). Loss becomes condition and necessity for a certain sense of community, where community does not overcome the loss, where community *cannot* overcome the loss without losing the very sense of itself as a community” (“After Loss, What Then?” 468). Therefore, it becomes possible and crucial for injured subjects to connect to a larger network, a nexus of marginalized individuals. In doing so, one may begin to find answers to the following important questions: “Whence these losses to which I have become attached? What social structures, discourses, institutions, processes have been at work in taking something valuable away from me? With whom do I share these losses or losses like them? What are the historical processes in which this moment of loss participates – in other words: how long has my misery been in preparation?” (Flatley 3). In short,

sharing loss and grief with others who have experienced the same -- making loss communal -- can have empowering effects while linking the individual to a larger sense of sociality and historicity. Melancholia becomes a site of connection rather than a remove from the world, allowing the transition from insularity to collectivity. The formation of communities centered on loss and melancholia is perhaps the most potent political statement, because coming together as a whole, the individual and the community gain “social recognition in the face of this communal loss” (Eng and Han 365).

IV.

As we have seen, theories of productive melancholia advocate the conversion of personal and often isolating experiences of loss into a communal experience which gives rise to a sense of political agency. My main apprehension regarding the equation of productivity with political activity, activism and so forth is that such a framework risks becoming burdensome to melancholic subjects and/or communities who must face the very real, embodied, lived experience of negotiating loss, grief and depression on a day to day basis, who already live with an enormous weight on their shoulders. It blots out the minor triumph of surviving (remember Freud’s warning as to melancholia’s potential to destroy) and elides the various values of grief work. Moreover, it categorically identifies political production and activity as good, as beneficial to both the subject and the subject’s community, yet, as we shall see in Hayslip’s case, “visibility” and the avowal of

loss can also be co-opted by the dominant and used in detrimental ways to those marginalized.

For minority subjects and collectives, the avowal of loss in order for the dead, for the things lost, to be recognized, mourned and remembered in a society that does not make room for such loss to be avowed, is a form of productivity. While doing so has the seedling embedded in it to become a political statement, it is not necessarily always the case. Remembering and mourning are sometimes important just for the subject's wellbeing, for the melancholic subject to make conscious and legitimize their loss and continue on existing.¹⁴ And it seems intuitively demanding to expect melancholic subjects or communities to engage in politics, especially when survival is more immediate. Certainly, though, as Crimp points out, the potential is there for remembrance to be political: "The violence we encounter is relentless, the violence of silence and omission almost as impossible to endure as the violence of unleashed hatred and outright murder. Because this violence also desecrates the memories of our dead, we rise in anger to vindicate them. For many of us, mourning *becomes* militancy" (8-9). Accepting this critical position, however, does not and should not mean that when mourning *does not become* militancy it is not productive in any sense.

Giving the dead a permanent place in memory, establishing an active relationship with the past and loss so that the present may learn and benefit from them, is worthwhile. Through a longstanding tradition of reverence for those who have preceded one's self, the dead are an inextricable part of the present day to day for Vietnamese culture and society.

¹⁴ The same thing could be said for the reverse, for forgetting. Forgetting is sometimes a useful and powerful tactic for the survival of injured subjects and/or communities.

I wish to argue that the Vietnamese worldview on death and their mourning rituals represent a form of productive melancholia. It is a melancholia where the present is open and receptive to the past; where the past's "ghosts and specters, its flaring and fleeting images" are brought "into the present" (Eng and Kazanjian 4).

In Vietnam, elaborate funerary and mourning rites are central to Vietnamese traditional customs. The importance of mourning the dead in Vietnamese culture is tied to the Confucian ideology that stresses filial piety and ancestor worship imported to Vietnam during the century of Chinese domination in Vietnamese history.¹⁵ The dead, especially one's ancestors, must be mourned properly if they are to attain any sense of peace in the afterlife. Thus, the funeral is often the most ostentatious and important event in a person's life as it functions to provide a transition to a new life in the spirit world. The rites of the funeral are complex and usually last for a lengthy period of time, culminating in the deceased being added to the family altar that houses members of past generations. Incense is lighted -- as a way to invoke the spirits -- and offerings (of food and gifts) are made on a regular basis at the altar, along with annual memorial feasts and visits to the cemetery, as forms of remembrance.¹⁶ Dead ancestors are invited to visit the

¹⁵ Ancestor worship has become entrenched in Vietnamese culture, transcending religious affiliations and modern changes in society. Terry Rambo states that, in postcolonial Vietnam, "veneration of deceased family members remained almost universal among Vietnamese, even those who had become members of organized churches including the Catholics" (86).

¹⁶ It is of utmost importance for living family members to observe their duties to their ancestors. The spirits need necessities such as food, money, and shelter in the afterlife and without them they suffer. Paper clothing, paper money (American dollars are the most coveted currency nowadays), and paper homes, among other objects, are burned as

homes of their descendents to partake in celebrations (especially during Tet -- the Vietnamese New Year) and important events such as weddings. What is relevant in these rituals to a theory of productive melancholia is the belief that the spirits of dead ancestors still retain a connection with the living; the dead can intervene and affect the present and the future: by blessing living family members with good luck, protecting them from harm and granting requests if the living have been filial and punishing them if they have neglected their duties. Thus, humans and their ancestors are intertwined in a reciprocal relationship, one where the prosperity and continuance of both parties is dependant upon one another.¹⁷

In this system of thought, ghosts and spirits “live” among the living; they have a crucial hand in shaping the outcomes of their descendants’ lives. Shaun Malarney sums up the role the dead plays in Vietnamese society: “the dead are intimately woven into the world of the living. Not only do most family homes have ancestral altars where the spirits of family ancestors reside, but the souls of the dead are also present in shrines, temples, and communal houses, and their names adorn cities, streets, and buildings. The dead, in a way, live on everywhere in Vietnam” (“Weddings and Funerals” 185). The traditional Vietnamese style of mourning, the cohabitation with loss and ghosts, can thus be seen as an instance of the perpetual mourning that marks melancholia. However, it is a

offerings. There is an entire street in Hanoi’s famous Old Quarter devoted to selling sundry funerary and “worship” items.

¹⁷ For a discussion of the reciprocal relationship between dead ancestors and living human beings in Vietnamese families / societies see Shaun Malarney’s “Weddings and Funerals in Contemporary Vietnam” (2003) and *Culture, Ritual, and Revolution in Vietnam* (2002). Also see Nguyen Van Huy’s “Tet Holidays: Ancestral Visits and Spring Journeys” (2003).

melancholia that is not associated with grief and sadness, but rather with respect and remembrance of one's history. In this form of melancholia, the dead, the past, and history, are alive and generative in the present. Melancholic remembrances in ancestor worship have the potential to be tangible illustrations of what Benjamin calls a dialectical image, a constellation of meaning and understanding formed by the coming together of the past and the present.

Hayslip's case is a unique example of how a melancholic remembrance, one that has its roots in Vietnamese ancestor worship, precipitates activism. The next chapter will look closely at the particulars of Hayslip's melancholic remembrance of her losses and how such attachments lead her to write about her experiences to challenge the American picture of the War and of the Vietnamese people.

Chapter Two:

“‘War Can Teach Us Peace’¹⁸: Le Ly Hayslip and the American Mainstream”

I.

In 1989, Le Ly Hayslip published her first memoir, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: A Vietnamese Woman's Journey from War to Peace* (hereafter *WHAECP*), co-written with Jay Wurts, to great acclaim. The book weaves two journey narratives together, one detailing her early life in war-era Vietnam and her eventual escape to the U.S. while the other chronicles her return in 1986 to reunite with members of her family after sixteen years of separation. Hayslip grew up in the idyllic and peaceful village of Ky La in central Vietnam -- a place she calls the most beautiful place on earth until the ravages of war touched it. The influx of soldiers and fighters from all sides (American, Vietnamese Republican, and Viet Cong¹⁹) into the village to impose authority and rule forced the simple peasants to accommodate and navigate the military-political games played with them as pawns. A young Hayslip becomes involved with the Viet Cong struggle and after numerous tortures by Republicans, rapes by Viet Congs, and deaths of neighbors and loved ones, Hayslip is exiled to Da Nang. In the city, she describes the rampant corruption and decay of traditional Vietnamese life. Later on, Hayslip is impregnated by an employer (she refers to him as her first husband) and is thrown out of the house by his wife. To raise her son, she begins working in the black

¹⁸ *WHAECP* (xv).

¹⁹ I adopt the term Viet Cong, although The National Liberation Front is the more technically correct and less pejorative term, because Hayslip uses the term in her texts to refer to Vietnamese Communist fighters in South Vietnam.

market as a racketeer and eventually prostitutes herself in order to survive. After numerous failed and abusive relationships with American GIs, she marries an older American civilian, Ed Munro, and moves to the U.S. with him.

As the blurb synopsis of the book advertises, “before the age of sixteen, Le Ly had suffered near starvation, imprisonment, torture, rape, and the deaths of beloved family members” (*WHAACP*). The most striking aspect of Hayslip’s tale is the index of figural and literal losses she has experienced: the loss of innocence, virginity, family structure, traditional farm life, friends and family members, and ancestral homeland. Hayslip’s harrowing tale describes the specific horrors of war, the struggle for survival, and the personal losses of one particular Vietnamese woman. The hitherto nameless and faceless, thus nonhuman, Vietnamese who have died or who live with numerous losses and tragedy gain a face and public persona in Hayslip because of the experiential and embodied quality of her losses. Hayslip understands that it is difficult for readers not to feel the emotional force of her experiences and she has admitted that her aim is to target the human heart rather than reason or politics.

Child of War, Woman of Peace (hereafter *CWWP*), published in 1994 and co-written with her son James Hayslip, is a continuation of the escape narrative by focusing on Hayslip’s life in America. It is regarded as a sequel to *WHAACP* and the two books are usually taken as one text when considered in academic and popular discussions -- an approach that I adopt here. In the second book, Hayslip speaks of her struggle to build a good life for her family in America, her disastrous relationships with American men, her spiritual growth, and the development of her charity (the East Meets West Foundation) to

help alleviate the pain and suffering of the less-fortunate Vietnamese who still remain in impoverished post-war Vietnam.

Her narrative traces the movement from war to peace, from suffering to healing, and thus depends on a message of forgiveness and reconciliation. She writes in *WHAACP*: “Some people suffer in peace the way others suffer in war. The special gift of suffering, I have learned, is how to be strong while we are weak, how to be brave when we are afraid, how to be wise in the midst of confusion, and how to let go of that which we can no longer hold. In this way, anger can teach forgiveness, hate can teach us love, and war can teach us peace” (xv).

Hayslip continues to write, deliver peace lectures, and make documentaries on war. She now spearheads a new humanitarian organization, the Global Village Foundation, which aims to create sustainable community development projects in Vietnam. The foundation is currently involved in literacy, health and work education-programs to empower disadvantaged rural community members in Quang Nam province (central Vietnam).²⁰ Hayslip’s philanthropic work is linked to her spiritual transformation in later life. Her experiences of suffering have lead Hayslip to embrace Buddhist philosophy and become more invested in spiritual matters. Through her immersion in religious teachings and what she sees as her subsequent enlightenment, Hayslip presents herself as a figure of healing to readers and the public. She believes that her true mission in life is to heal the wounds of war and act as a peacemaker, building bridges between

²⁰ For more on the foundation visit: www.globalvillagefoundation.org. Also visit: www.eastmeetswest.org

former enemies.²¹ Her conversion from victim of suffering to healer of suffering occurs in conjunction with the beginning of her literary and humanitarian work.

II

One of the most rhetorically sophisticated strategies Hayslip employs in her memoirs is the framing of her work outside of her own agency, situating it in a larger sphere that inflects it with both historical and spiritual resonance. Paradoxically, at the same time, it is this positioning that makes her work materially possible and gives her the agency she does not call her own. Hayslip repeatedly refers to her lifework -- by which she means her writing and humanitarianism -- as “my father’s business,” thus ostensibly taking little credit for her own remarkable endeavors.²² In *WHAACP*, Hayslip recounts one early lesson she receives from her father that becomes formative to her adult life: to placate her youthful fervor for war and fighting, her father teaches Hayslip that her life’s purpose is to affirm life, spread the lessons she has learned from war, remember her ancestors, and remain a dutiful Vietnamese daughter. He tells her,

‘Your job is to stay alive – to keep an eye on things and keep the village safe. To find a husband and have babies and *tell the story of what you’ve seen to your children and anyone else who’ll listen. Most of all, it is to live in peace and tend*

²¹ Hayslip cites a meeting with a guru at a spiritual retreat who tells her of her “higher calling” in life as an important event that sparked her self-discovery. She also believes that she is the modern reincarnation of an ancient ancestor who was a medicine man / herbalist in his lifetime.

²² *CWWP* pages 195, 229, 250, and 330.

to the shrine of your ancestors. Do these things well, Bay Ly, and you will be worth more than any soldier who ever took up a sword.' (Emphasis added 32-33)

After his death, Hayslip's father continues to guide and advise her in his afterlife through dreams and visions. While it is possible to read the primacy Hayslip's father occupies in her life and mode of thought as her adherence to a Confucian patriarchal system, I suggest that it establishes a non-linear temporal link between the past and the present. It is Hayslip's deep attachment to her deceased father that engenders both her worldview and her actions. Her bond with her father is a melancholic attachment, creating room for the dead to inhabit her being, giving the past and all the losses it encompasses a home in her present and future. She pronounces: "If you lost someone you love, his light burns on in you – so long as you remember" (*WHAEC* xv). And Hayslip remembers through a melancholic memory, a memory that is open and receptive to the past and its "ghosts," where the past is not temporally finished but continues to play a significant part in shaping the outcomes of what is and what will be. Hayslip's form of remembrance enacts the potential of a productive melancholia that Judith Butler, David Eng and others describe so convincingly in more abstract and theoretical terms. Like Butler, she recognizes that "the past is irrecoverable and the past is not past; the past is the resources for the future and the future is the redemption of the past" ("After Loss, What Then?" 467).

In her approach, the dead are not dead and gone; they persist, in some ways, to actively travel the path of life with the living. This kind of remembrance and engagement with the past has the potential to be inclusive -- which is in line with her politics -- not

only in the sense that it remembers and recovers repressed, subaltern memories and histories, but also because it does not recognize the past as static and singular; *all* the dead participate in propelling Hayslip to attend to their stories and concerns. Gradually, Hayslip's ability to connect with spirits expands to embrace voices other than her father's, to include the voices of her ancestors, her husbands, and other lost souls. She says, "I consulted with my father and Ed [her first husband] and other ghosts who visited me, from time to time, during dreams and meditations" (CWWP 129). Her many "consultations" with ghosts arise from Hayslip's firm grounding in the Vietnamese folk belief that spirits can and do communicate with the living, and in this way they can be seen as operating in a similar vein to the custom of lighting incense at ancestral altars to ask for favors and guidance on important matters. Hayslip herself proves to be a strong believer in spiritual and otherworldly occurrences as she continually emphasizes the importance of proper burial and respect for the spirits of ancestors -- what she considers hallmarks of the Vietnamese culture.

Viet Nguyen has pointed out that Hayslip utilizes another Vietnamese trope by conjuring the classical, national Vietnamese female figure -- that of Kieu -- who symbolizes the epitome of Confucian virtue, chastity, and filial piety as the precedent and parallel to her life.²³ Nguyen argues that she tries to appeal to Vietnamese American

²³ *Truyen Kieu* (The Tale of Kieu) written by Nguyen Du in the nineteenth century is considered the national narrative of Vietnam. It has been known and loved by the people of Vietnam from all segments of society since it was first written. The epic long poem chronicles the life of a heroine forcefully separated from her betrothed and family and sold into prostitution and unwanted marriages before she returns home a physically soiled but morally pure woman. Her name has even been used to designate all Vietnamese

audiences by fashioning herself as the (familiar) prototypical Vietnamese heroine who is thrust into difficult circumstances beyond her control and yet triumphs to shore up conventional values (*Race and Resistance* 119-120). Portraying herself as a modern-day Kieu also supports Hayslip's self-representation as a woman deeply rooted in Vietnamese traditions, a mystical peasant who is the receiver and messenger of ancient wisdom. Hence, her karmic philosophy -- that every action will be rewarded or punished accordingly -- and her benevolent message of forgiveness and healing gains credence through the authority of tradition. Hayslip tells us: "My father taught me to love god, my family, our traditions, and the people we could not see: our ancestors" (*WHAACP* ix). Establishing herself as an essential Vietnamese allows Hayslip fluid access to first her ancestors, then her deceased husbands, and finally other spirits such as GIs killed in country. In other words, her Vietnamese-ness enables Hayslip to communicate with an otherworldly realm and act as a medium between the present and the past, to allow the dead a channel through which to speak and thus finally to engage with loss and histories of loss. She juxtaposes her Vietnamese spiritualism to her belief that "most Americans, even the very religious ones, pooh-poohed spiritualism and Eastern philosophy because they worshiped at the shrine of science. They couldn't acknowledge the possible existence of a more-than-rational world -- a flip-side to the universe, as hidden to the five senses as the inside of the atom" (*CWWP* 265).

Her spiritualism has productive potential for Hayslip as it often functions to provide rationale and catalyst for her decisions and actions. For instance, when scared

exiles / diasporics: Viet Kieu. See Huynh Sanh Thong's translation of Nguyen's work *The Tale of Kieu: A Bilingual Edition* (1983).

and uncertain about her decision to return to Vietnam in the late 1980s to visit her mother -- and becoming one of the first ever *Viet Kieus* (Vietnamese diasporics) to step foot on homeland soil after the Communist victory -- Hayslip gains assurance about her decision from her father's spirit appearing in a dream. The night before the departure, after receiving mixed advice from family, friends, and government officials regarding her plans, Hayslip is comforted by her father's words and resolves to proceed. She tells us:

That night, I stumbled through foggy dreams until I came to the front door of our old house in Ky La. My father was sitting on his haunches, finishing a smoke. For some reason I couldn't approach him closely; something held me back. But I could hear him and feel his presence.

'You're doing the right thing, little peach blossom,' he said, exhaling smoke and mist. 'You've done well for yourself and your children. Now it's time to do something more.' (CWWP 240)

As her father's apparition tells her that she is about to embark on a life-changing homecoming journey, he justifies the choices she makes, putting the weight of his wisdom and authority behind them. It is his approval from beyond the grave (but never removed from her life) that gives her decisions and work meaning and force. Evidently, this trip to Vietnam -- at the time, a dangerous move -- will become the first of many, as it was the initial spark that fueled her humanitarian work. The return trip can be seen as the beginning of Hayslip's efforts to build a bridge between Vietnam and the U.S.; on it she sees the pressing need to rebuild a poverty-stricken Vietnam and the willingness of the Vietnamese government to accept aid from abroad -- to normalize relations with the

U.S. (something that would be achieved shortly after, in 1995) -- and its desire to welcome back the millions of overseas Vietnamese who fled the country in and after 1975. The trip was a crucial juncture in Hayslip's life and work, propelling her to undertake her role as cultural ambassador and humanitarian. For Hayslip, the trip wouldn't have been possible were it not for her capability to remember, respect and be guided by the spirits of the dead.

It is Hayslip's close observance of the traditional Vietnamese custom of ancestor respect, which I have suggested as a form of productive melancholia, that enables her writing and humanitarian work. Hayslip mobilizes the past and histories of loss -- both personal and collective -- so that she may speak within the American dominant. Loss and its attendant affect of grief become the condition for her articulation of Vietnamese subjectivity. Hayslip explains about her writing process: "I had a million lost souls behind me: pushing, wailing, singing a joyful chorus at every completed page" (*CWWP* 209). Later on in the narrative, she reiterates her relationship with ghosts and its connection to her writing: "I felt not only my father's spirit, but the buoyant spiritual energy of a million souls who were counting on me to tell their story" (*CWWP* 305). Hayslip's father and the millions of lost souls become collaborators in her literary project, providing for her the stories, strength and courage to write and publish widely in America. Her collaboration with "ghosts" echoes Yen Le Espiritu's assertion that to engage with issues of war and of refugee life we must "become tellers of ghost stories -- that is, to pay attention to what modern history has rendered ghostly, and to write into being the seething presence of the things that appear to be not there" ("AfterWARD" xix).

At work in Hayslip's text is this embrace of ghosts and ghostly histories. She proclaims:

"I deliver speeches by ghosts. They use my body to tell their dead stories" (Ho 113).²⁴

This intimate relation to the dead, this attentive communication with ghosts, constitutes a melancholic practice of remembrance, one that has strong Vietnamese dimensions and allows Hayslip to tell ghost stories. Furthermore, through continual contact with and reverence for her ancestors, Hayslip is able to maintain her role as a dutiful Vietnamese woman / daughter -- her Kieu status -- despite having left her homeland and married an American "enemy."

III.

Although Hayslip presents herself as a traditional Vietnamese woman steeped in the spiritual customs of Vietnam, Vietnamese American communities have harshly criticized her work. They, along with a few mainstream Americans, have disputed or completely disregarded her work, accusing her of being an opportunist, a communist sympathizer, and a spy. She has even received death threats from deranged veterans. Her humanitarian work has been discredited as feeding a totalitarian, communist regime and her books have been attacked as lacking in veracity. Hayslip's public appearances have even been met with protest gatherings by small groups of anti-communist Vietnamese

²⁴ We must not forget that both of Hayslip's books were also coauthored with human collaborators. As Hayslip offers her voice to ghosts so they may tell their story, she is, at the same time, dependent on others to aid her in telling her story. She presents a conception of storytelling and authorship that is inclusive and dependent on multiple collaborations.

Americans.²⁵ Moreover, it does not help her cause that she can at times be inconsistent with her thoughts and statements in her books and interviews, making her an easy target for critique. However, it is important to put perspective on Hayslip's work by positioning it in the larger context of American discourses on Vietnam and the War. Within the American culture of historical amnesia, Hayslip's speech act, in some ways, operates in opposition to the organized forgetting of Vietnam. But while her claim to authority is based on the millions of Vietnamese ghosts who speak through her, it is important to recognize that her voice is not the single voice of Vietnamese "truth." Hayslip represents only one Vietnamese perspective, and the thrust of her narrative has very specific motivations and aims that are incongruous with other Vietnamese and Vietnamese American viewpoints.

However, the main point that I want to stress about Hayslip's books is that, despite their controversial and complicated status as cultural objects within Vietnamese American literature, the Vietnamese American diaspora, and the American mainstream, they succeed on one level in voicing the tolls of the War on Vietnamese lives. In this sense, Hayslip's narrative is relevant and important for its refusal to allow the atrocities and pain inflicted on Vietnam and the Vietnamese people, the innumerable and anonymous dead, and the continual grief of this and subsequent generations to remain silent / silenced and unmourned. In telling her autobiography -- making it public to Americans -- and claiming authority and authenticity based on first-hand experience and

²⁵ See Khanh Ho's interview with Hayslip, Meagan McGovern's "Vietnamese author's visit spurs protests; Groups say woman's humanitarian help indirectly benefits communism" in *The Houston Chronicle*, and K.L Billingsley's "On film or on paper, this portrait of Vietnam is a myth" in *The San Diego Union-Tribune*.

her communication with ghosts, Hayslip enters into U.S.-Vietnam historical discourse, offering an alternate version / vision of the American-centric narrative(s) of Vietnam and the War. In fact, both national newspapers that reviewed *WHAACP* upon publication, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, begin in virtually identical fashion by pointing out the marginalized representations of the Vietnamese in America and the lack of recognition for Vietnamese perspectives in Vietnam War discourses. Arnold R. Issacs writes, “they [the Vietnamese] were always at the edges, when we saw them at all [...] to Americans, almost always, the peasants of Vietnam were part of the scenery of the war, no more” (*The Washington Post*). Similarly, David K. Shieler says, “we have not cared to hear Vietnamese voices or look at ourselves through Vietnamese eyes;” adding that Hayslip’s perspective is “a rare view from the bottom up” (*The New York Times*). Renny Christopher’s introduction to her study of Vietnamese American / American war literature strikes the same cord as Issacs and Shieler. She summarizes how Americans have understood Vietnam:

Most U.S discourse about ‘Vietnam’ the war is enmeshed in the history of stereotypical representations of Asians that make it almost impossible for that discourse to break from the idea of ‘Vietnam’ the war in order to consider the participation of Viet Nam the country.

It has been said that normally the winners of a war write the history and the losers live with it. In the case of the Second Indochina War, the United States and the Republic of Viet Nam (RVN) are the losers, yet, on a worldwide scale, it is Americans who are writing the history of the war. The United States has

steadfastly ignored any document published in English by the victors, but it also steadfastly ignores any writings by Vietnamese refugee writers who are, also, among the losers of the war. (2)

Thus, keeping this American context of willful repression and ignorance of Vietnam and the Vietnamese in mind, we can begin to understand the significance of Hayslip's text and the gesture it attempts to make. Hayslip represents a step towards making it possible for the Vietnamese to emerge from the margins, the background, to occupy a subjective position and play a leading role in a history they are inextricably a part of.

What distinguishes Hayslip and her story from other Vietnamese American narratives before and after her is the reception she has received from mainstream America.²⁶ *WHAECF* was unanimously lauded by reviewers if not by all audiences, made into a Hollywood film, and is being taught in many college courses on the Vietnam War in the United States. This acceptance by America places Hayslip and her books in a unique position as the representative Vietnamese / Vietnamese American individual and text, an issue I will return to later in this chapter. Embedded in America's acceptance of Hayslip's voice, however, is a recognition (conscious or not), or at the very least, a confrontation with the reality that Vietnam is not a war but a country, and that the Vietnamese are not just anonymous dead bodies in a ditch or Viet Congs in black

²⁶ Hayslip has not been and is not the sole Vietnamese voice speaking out. For example, *The Sorrow of War* (1998) by Bao Ninh gives the perspective of a North Vietnamese fighter and Nguyen Ngoc Ngan's *The Will of Heaven* (1982) discusses his role in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam and his "re-education" internment experience after the War. Recent works by Vietnamese American writers such as Amiee Phan's *We Should Never Meet* (2004), Andrew X. Pham's *Catfish and Mandala* (1999), and le thi diem thuy's *The Gangster We are all Looking For* (2003) explore what it means to be Vietnamese American in America.

pajamas and conical hats hiding in the bush, but subjects enmeshed in a history of colonialization, resistance, and war. While discussions of Hayslip acknowledge this achievement, they do not take up or fully explore the ramifications of what she represents in the exchange between America and Vietnamese America. As a foundational and seminal text in what is an emergent Vietnamese American literary–historical canon, Hayslip’s work points to the potential for dialogue, for speaking to the larger American public. It marks a turning point of contact, a beginning for a (possible) better understanding -- a fuller, less one-dimensional picture -- of what Robert McNamara calls the “fog of war,” and I will add, its aftermath.²⁷ Having said this, I would also stress that Hayslip’s foray into the mainstream needs to be qualified by looking into the terms of her inclusion.

IV.

The most problematic aspect, though, of Hayslip’s memoir is her politics of reconciliation and her categorical message of forgiveness she endorses at the end of both her books. After avowing the losses and suffering of one particular Vietnamese woman, and in the process attesting to the multiplicity of losses experienced collectively by the Vietnamese diaspora, forcing her (American) readers to follow a story seldom told or heard, Hayslip turns to a rhetoric of healing that, while an important concern for her and other Vietnamese subjects, is most beneficial to the American nation’s struggle to deal

²⁷ See the documentary *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (2003) by Errol Morris and McNamara’s *In Retrospect: The Tragedies and Lessons of Vietnam* (1995).

with the aftermath of the War. Leslie Bow states that Hayslip's texts "perform the experience of America's "Other" in order to contest, confirm, or otherwise define American national identity," yet ultimately they "further a conservative multicultural agenda by reconciling Le Ly's racial, gender, and religious alterity with American liberalism" (181-182). That is, Hayslip leaves the door open for and invites the incorporation of her story into the existing pattern of American representations; therefore, it is with ease that her texts have been appropriated and used to reinforce American ideals and mythologies about the war. It is precisely her politics of healing and her assimilability that allows America to remember her and to reserve a place for her story in the overarching narrative it has written.

In the short prologue to *WHAECF* subtitled "Dedication to Peace," Hayslip's position is unequivocally on display. Not only does it provide an overview of her life and give context to her story, but it also reveals who her intended audience is: the American GI. She writes:

If you are an American GI, I ask you to read this book and look into the heart of one you once called enemy. I have witnessed, firsthand, all that you went through. I will tell you who your enemy was and why almost everyone in the country you tried to help resented, feared, and misunderstood you. It was not your fault. It could not have been otherwise. Long before you arrived, my country had yielded to the terrible logic of war. What for you was normal – a life of peace and plenty – was for us a hazy dream known only in our legends. Because we had to appease the allied forces by day and were terrorized by Viet Cong at night, we slept as

little as you did. We obeyed both sides and wound up pleasing neither. We were people in the middle. We were what the war was all about (xiv-xv).

Hayslip specifically directs her didactic tale towards the American GI so that she may absolve his guilt and behavior in war. A few lines later, she tells him: “You came to Vietnam, willingly or not, because your country demanded it [...] The least you did – the least any of us did – was our duty. For that we must be proud” (xv). By construing the foreign soldiers’ actions, which he’s not responsible for, as his duty, the fulfillment of his country’s demands, she also precludes blame from being placed on the United States as well. For Hayslip, the GIs must be proud that they have followed their nation’s demands regardless of what those may be or their possible ramifications. She depoliticizes these “demands” – not taking into account that they are based on global politics, on the lack of ability and will to understand, and oftentimes, on lies.²⁸ The rationale for America’s

²⁸ The Vietnam War was fought as a part of the larger Cold War between the U.S and the former Soviet Union. One of the most pervasive arguments made in defense of U.S. military intervention was the domino effect theory, which states that if Vietnam falls to communism, then other Southeast Asian nation-states would eventually suffer the same fate. Communism would then spread worldwide and threaten the freedom and democracy of the U.S. Hence, U.S. policy on Vietnam, spanning almost two decades, usually included some element of the containment of communism. Many historians have also pointed to the fact that the Chinese and French had vested imperial interests in the issues being played out in Vietnam. The specificities of what was happening in Vietnam had ramifications on and were influenced by various global forces. Thus, in some ways, Vietnam (the country) was of little consequence in the eyes of the foreign powers involved in the War. See Robert D. Schulzinger’s *A Time For War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941-1975* (1997) and Robert Mann’s *A Grand Delusion* (2001).

Perhaps the biggest lie the U.S concocted was in regards to the missile attack incident that precipitated the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution (which was tantamount to a declaration of war) in 1964. The claim that the North Vietnamese navy launched a missile at U.S. patrol ships pushed congress to pass the resolution, allowing President Johnson to take drastic military measures to respond to future aggressions and begin the escalation of war in Vietnam. Recently, the release of classified documents provided

involvement and military escalation in Vietnam, the choices made by the architects of the war, are not condemned or criticized by Hayslip. Rather, the demands of the nation and their fulfillment are both represented as honorable and heroic. Indeed, she paints GIs as heroes and saviours -- in line with former policymakers' image of America as the protective parent of Vietnam -- with the best intentions of helping the Vietnamese, ignoring the many senseless acts of violence done by them (such as the My Lai massacre) and the fact that most GIs were young, poor, uneducated teenage boys ordered by the military to kill indiscriminately.²⁹ Hayslip's valorization of the GIs in order to exonerate them from wrongdoing translates into her forgiveness of America the nation, because for her the GI's honor overshadows his nation's questionable actions.

To further her neutralization of the United State's participation, Hayslip portrays the war in Vietnam as inevitable (she sees the war as just a civil war). Again, Hayslip fails to take into account the global dimensions of the War, eliding the United State's role in shaping it. Moreover, according to her, war was an inevitability for Vietnam, a fact of life for hundreds of years; and what she finds "terrible" is not the decisions and policies (American) men made, but the "logic of war" -- the concept and structure of war itself.

conclusive evidence that no such attack by the North Vietnamese happened in the Gulf of Tonkin. See Peter Grier's "Declassified study puts Vietnam events in new light" in *The Christian Science Monitor* (2008).

²⁹ Christian Appy states that, "roughly 80 percent [of American combat troops] came from working-class and poor backgrounds. Vietnam, more than any other war in the twentieth century, perhaps in our history, was a working-class war" (251). The average age for the men who fought in Vietnam was 19 compared to the same statistic for WWII, which was 26. In "A Grunt's Life," Gerard J. deGroot discusses the destructive consequences of "search and destroy" tactics employed by the U.S military. He reiterates the common understanding that the biggest indicator of progress was the daily body count, regardless of whether those bodies are civilians, children, or Viet Cong.

Here, Hayslip adopts a kind of fatalism (possibly connected to her Buddhist beliefs) by accepting that Vietnam's suffering was inevitable in order to minimize American guilt. Thus, if anyone or anything is to be blamed, it is War and not the U.S. or American GIs. The American intervention, the countless misjudgments and mistakes made by the administrations, and the ravaging of Vietnam are all forgiven by Hayslip.

This message of forgiveness is what makes it so crucial that Hayslip should become what Viet Nguyen labels an "emblematic victim" (*Race and Resistance* 112). Issacs is partly correct when he says that Hayslip's story of loss, with variations, was "repeated millions of times over in Vietnamese villages during the long years of violence" (*Washington Post*). It is important to remember that Hayslip's is not an extraordinary tale in the context of war-torn Vietnam; that millions of people from various social, economic, and religious backgrounds went through some of the same horrors. In this way, Hayslip's life story can act as a somewhat accurate representative for the Vietnamese. Frances FitzGerald, in a blurb for *WHAACP*, writes, "this is the book for those who want to know what the war was really like." In another blurb, *Kirkus Reviews* claims that the memoir "reveals the soul and suffering of a people torn by civil war that escalated into near-Armageddon." Hence, Hayslip's life story "can serve as a metaphor for the heartbreak of an entire country" (Issacs). For better or for worse, Hayslip's text has become, for America and Americans, the authoritative text on the perspective of the Vietnamese. As the emblematic Vietnamese victim, she has the power to bestow on America a forgiveness which it can readily receive and accept. Her story tells Americans

that Vietnam and the Vietnamese people are willing to -- if they have not yet already -- let bygones be bygones.

Herein lies the danger of her politics: the mainstream reception of Hayslip's text purports that it speaks for Vietnam and all the Vietnamese and America sees in her voice the speech of a whole country and people. Viet Nguyen explains that in American refugee discourse, the figure of the emblematic victim "makes no difference between representative and represented; that is, the fact that one of the oppressed speaks is taken to mean that the oppressed in general have spoken" (*Race and Resistance* 112). It is this neat conflation of disparate and, oftentimes, conflicting groups of individuals who share ethnic origins at work in and around Hayslip's text that calls into question her form of remembrance. The American reception of Hayslip's texts suppresses other Vietnamese / Vietnamese American perspectives. There are Vietnamese diasporics who hold steadfastly to their hatred of the Vietnamese communist state. There are those who still harbor anger towards the U.S. for its withdrawal from Vietnam. There are those who struggle to assimilate socially, economically, and culturally into American society. There are those whose stories and politics do not get recognized. There are those who are not ready to forgive and make amends. Yet, Hayslip's politics of forgiveness and reconciliation has become a stand-in for all these positions, eclipsing them on the center stage that is the American mainstream.

Tied to Hayslip's construction as an emblematic victim is her immigrant success story. For America, it is important that the representative Vietnamese is also a model (read: economic) minority for she functions to reinforce the ideals of democracy and

capitalism in the name of which the war was supposedly fought. Her story acts to display what is possible for and achievable by the millions of refugees who fled Vietnam after 1975; and in the process the War is rewritten to have a belated “victory” for America and (South) Vietnamese exiles. Hayslip’s is a classic story of the American dream, a literal rags-to-riches tale. Her transformation from the peasant girl in the Vietnamese countryside to a millionaire entrepreneur in California through her own resourcefulness, her knack for business, and her inheritance from her two deceased husbands is one of the most remarkable aspects of Hayslip’s tale. Her path of upward mobility also fulfills a basic tenet of model minority discourse as it appears to be achieved solely through her individual abilities and talents. Hayslip comes to possess several real estate properties and restaurants in the U.S. and raises three “American” sons by herself, doing so as the fortunate beneficiary of American-style freedom. According to Keith Osajima, the model minority thesis presents “a picture of American society that resonate[s] with dominant ideological precepts. Asian achievement confirmed that the United States was indeed the land of opportunity” (167). America, the land of opportunities, generously welcomes the immigrants desperately fleeing post-1975 Vietnam, seen in comparison to the U.S. as an impoverished, culturally and socially backwards, and politically repressive state. Hayslip’s incredible life story is one of the tales, albeit a powerful one, that purports to demonstrate the superiority of the American way of life and value system.

Yet, the designation of “model minority” was not originally placed on Vietnamese Americans, who have generally had a difficult time assimilating to life in the U.S.³⁰ Linda Trinh Vo has talked about the lack of economic opportunities along with the cultural disconnection and isolation Vietnamese refugees experienced as a result of American assimilationist policies, which lead to secondary migrations and the establishment of ethnic ghettos like the Little Saigon district in California. Hien Duc Do states that “Vietnamese Americans are not a ‘model minority’” (63), citing sociological work that reveals the many problems younger Vietnamese Americans have had in adjusting to school life; “some have turned to gangs, drugs, gambling, and other illegal activities” (64). Further, “depression, isolation, loneliness, loss of family and homeland, and a feeling of helplessness are among the most prevalent problems” (64) faced by elderly Vietnamese Americans. Hayslip’s story itself does not fit many aspects of the model minority mould: there is a lack of a stable nuclear family in her narrative -- she is a single mother who enters into several abusive relationships with American men. Model minority discourse, however, is very much dependent on a notion of strong nuclear families and traditional Asian cultural values that stresses the importance of family life. Thus, in this respect, Hayslip fits more into the “pathological” life attributed to African American single mothers and Black minorities, which model minority discourse was originally

³⁰ The term was first used in the early sixties to describe Japanese Americans and then Chinese Americans who have had remarkable success in adjusting to American life despite the history of racist policies and hardships they have had to endure.

mobilized against.³¹ Yet, Hayslip was able to overcome these impediments and difficulties supposedly through individual merits and so she adapts her narrative to the model minority story. Her story can be used by the dominant to “demonstrate the successful particular instance of a universal – freedom” (Nguyen-Vo 165) as she ends up a healed subject in liberal American society.³²

In painting America as the land of opportunities, Hayslip also sees the opportunity to counter Vietnamese American anti-communist sentiment. She says: “I’ve talked to some Vietnamese right-wingers who are very much against communism. I think they should say “thank you” to the Communists. In 1975 a lot of people came to the United States because of the Communist takeover. Now they have cars. Some are very, very rich. Some have children who are becoming doctors and lawyers. Very successful. So why don’t we take the opportunities and say, “Thank God Communists made it happen”” (Ho 115). In her mode of thought, the U.S. becomes the desired destination, the land of dreams, and the War is problematically construed as the positive catalyst for Vietnamese Americans to achieve a better life than the one they would have had in Vietnam. Hayslip’s logic recreates the stereotypical polarization of the two nations, not to mention that it depoliticizes and dehistoricizes the war. The Vietnam War is reduced to an event that fulfills Vietnamese Americans’ destinies. Hayslip continues, “change negative to positive. Yes, some of them [Vietnamese right-wingers] were in the camps for fifteen,

³¹ See Gary Okihiro’s *Margins and Mainstreams: Asian in American History and Culture* (1994). 139-47, and Robert Lee’s *Orientalists: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (1999), 180-204.

³² On the model minority as a figure who originally experiences severe hardship but eventually, through personal struggles, emerges as a healed subject, see David Palumbo-Liu, 395-418.

twenty years. Perhaps, because of his karma, he has to give back his due. Accept it. Now he comes over here. He's sixty years old. He has a hard time. That is his choice to come, too. I came here when I was twenty. I've been widowed twice. I also had a very hard time. But that's me. I am not condemning Americans. I am not condemning Vietnamese. I have to deal with it, do you see what I mean? It's a totally different point of view. I want to change the negative to positive" (Ho 115). Hayslip views everything that happens to her, to the Vietnamese and to Vietnam as determined by karma or "destiny, luck, or god" (*WHAACP* 366), which takes responsibility and blame away from the "human" participants in politics and history. This logic, then, represents the limits and danger of her spiritual outlook. Hayslip's belief in the power of the spiritual world, in addition to giving her agency, also leads her to accept a kind of religious determinism. Hayslip's view blends fatalism, privatization, and individual merit together to produce an image of a good, successful refugee. It also completely elides the fact that the success of the U.S. economy -- which some Vietnamese Americans are now participating in -- depends on such things as the exploitation of cheap Asian labour, including labour in Vietnam. Hayslip does not acknowledge these global forces such as the flows of capital and labour, instead choosing the liberal narrative of success by individual effort. Thus she avoids having to consider her own business ventures, and the charity that results from them, as in any way suspect.

Hayslip's view is that she has become so successful, has flourished economically, socially, and spiritually, that she is able to give back some of her good karma. Hayslip's charity work helps the less fortunate in Vietnam, but her project also seeks to heal

Vietnam veterans in the U.S. She tells the veterans reading her book: “If you have not yet found peace at the end of your war, I hope you will find it here [in her book]” (*WHAACP* xv). Thus, Hayslip sees herself as and takes on the role of the healer. In *CWWP* Hayslip recounts the therapy-like sessions she has with the veterans who congregate at her restaurant. She also involves herself in missions to take them back to Vietnam in order to exorcise their demons by exploring the land and getting to know the people through travel tours and aid work.³³ Thus, in Hayslip, the model minority figure is not only able to overcome various hardships and struggles (mainly on her own resources) to find success in the U.S., but can also repay her good fortune to her host society. The good Vietnamese refugee, with the benefit of American opportunities and values, can carry the residual burdens of those who have had a hand in bringing about her suffering. In an interview with Seth Mydans, Hayslip tells him she believes that “fourteen years after the war ended [...] Vietnamese may have had more success than American veterans in coming to terms with the hardships that some of those veterans inflicted” (*New York Times*). Her assessment is misleading as it emphasizes the resilience of Vietnamese refugees to suggest that they can now function as the means to help in America’s healing process; it erroneously celebrates the ease with which Vietnamese refugees can heal and come to terms with their losses. As I have discussed earlier, Vietnamese Americans and Vietnamese refugees have had a very difficult time adjusting to their new lives in America, a narrative taken up by later writers like Aimee Phan and le thi diem thuy.

³³ See Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Fifth Book of Peace* for a parallel story of an Asian American woman embracing Buddhism and helping Vietnam veterans heal from the psychological damages of war.

A decade since the publication of *WHAACP* and twenty-five years after the end of the War, the dominant representations of Vietnamese Americans and Vietnam veterans in mainstream media remains virtually the same as the ones depicted in Hayslip's memoirs. In her analysis of major media outlets' coverage of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the fall of Saigon, Yen Le Espiritu identifies two overarching narratives, the good refugee / model minority and the innocent and heroic Vietnam warriors, that together operate to support the "cultural legitimization of the Vietnam war" (330). The construction of Vietnamese Americans as successfully assimilated, grateful to America for the freedom and economic opportunities she offers, and staunch anti-communists serves to present the War as a rescue and liberation mission and the Vietnam warriors as benevolent liberators. Espiritu calls this historical revision of Vietnam the "we-win-even-when-we-lose" syndrome, which seeks to impose a different ending to the hot war. Espiritu's findings are telling of the way America has and continues to remember Vietnam on its own terms, holding on to select narratives and images with little regard to the historicity and continual social and material impact of the War.

It is impossible to discuss Hayslip's texts without touching on the fact that they were coauthored, especially the fact that *WHAACP* was co-written with a white, former U.S. Air Force pilot during the Vietnam era.³⁴ Hayslip initially came to Jay Wurts with a 300-page rough draft of the manuscript, and she describes the subsequent collaborative process as one of constant negotiations and compromise. She says:

³⁴ Jay Wurts also served as an editor on the second book.

He [Wurts] went home and read through it [her manuscript] and put in question marks for me and questionnaires for me. Then he sent it back. Either I wrote up a response, or I recorded it in the cassette tape [...] He would take it home and pick what he liked or leave out what was too bold. Yes, I lost lots of things I wanted to say. But the message came out the same. Then he sent it back to me. I either approved or disapproved it. I added on or took off what I wanted, and then I sent it back to him. He would work on it again until it was finalized. Then we sent it to the editor. (Ho 116)

Though Hayslip claims that her message was not lost, Wurts' editorial act of cutting important parts of her story cannot be ignored. Hayslip's reliance on a native speaker of English to help tell her story placed a form of censorship on her voice; it is clear that she was unable to tell her life story exactly the way she wanted. In addition, Hayslip has revealed that her publisher (Doubleday) cut one-third of the manuscript before agreeing to publish it, citing events such as her multiple rapes as being too repetitive.³⁵ While it is not possible to discern how much of what in the published version of *WHAACP* was Hayslip's original message, Wurts' participation in the writing process and the publisher's further revisions point to the layers of filters that her voice went through in order to be heard. This suggests that even before publication, Hayslip's tale was already being appropriated and shaped by others who occupy positions of power in comparison to her. Ultimately, we only have the tool of conjecture to ask questions such as: To what

³⁵ Hayslip has since maintained that the published version of *WHAACP* is entirely accurate. See Janette's article and Christopher's analysis of Hayslip in her book.

extent was Hayslip's politics and narrative molded and influenced by white, male Americans?

V.

Despite Hayslip's employment of a melancholic form of remembrance that has the potential to truly disrupt and unsettle the American mythologies around Vietnam, she is also guilty of the selective and constructed memory that plagues America. Viet Nguyen's astute comment summarizes the dilemma at the center of Hayslip's memoirs: "Her's [Hayslip's] is a conflicted text. It is progressive in its attempt to understand the intimate connections between the histories of Vietnam and the United States despite the artificial boundaries of culture and nation. It is also regressive in its attempt to construct a narrative that imposes a different conclusion, with a sense of wholeness, of closure, of harmony with the past, than the story warrants" (*Race and Resistance* 123). However, this harmony with the past, this reconciliation is crucial to the purpose of her work. Michele Janette says of the foundational texts of Vietnamese American literature, to which Hayslip's memoirs belong, that they are a "literature with a mission [...] tied to the promotion of a specific cause" (269). Both Bow and Christopher have pointed out the activist aspiration of Hayslip's memoirs. Bow writes: "Hayslip's work reflects the activist potential of autobiography where the life of the individual is intended as an allegorical commentary. The book's purpose is fairly straightforward – its goal is to "heal old wounds" by elucidating the effects of war and to call for the rebuilding of Vietnam through activism and humanitarian aid" (170). Her politics of reconciliation is thus meant

to elicit sympathy from the West and a sense of responsibility from Americans for the Vietnamese who must live and endure the material aftermath of the War. It is precisely the material value of Hayslip's charitable work for the less fortunate in Vietnam that makes it difficult to disregard her writing. In the end, her tale of loss, her melancholic remembrance, arrives at an activism that is productive, that seeks to change and improve the quality of life for thousands in Vietnam. Hayslip is genuinely interested in helping facilitate the healing process of her (former) country and her people -- this is a point that must not be lost.

But as much as Hayslip wishes for peace and healing, as strongly as she believes in and advocates a positive, hopeful message that provides a conclusion to the conflict between the U.S. and Vietnam, there are no easy resolutions. In some ways, she wants mourning to be completed, for the wounded and suffering subject / nation to fully heal and move on. But the very fact that Hayslip was and is still campaigning for Western aid for Vietnam suggests that there is still healing and work left to be done -- that the story of the U.S. and Vietnam continues to be played out. There is no end in sight yet; history is still open to be written and rewritten. Hayslip concedes: "As much as everyone wants the wounds of war to heal, they are reopened whenever a farmer steps on a forgotten mine or burns incense to a victim of war" (*WHAACP* 219). Hayslip's invocation of a common, daily remembrance and mourning ritual for the Vietnamese suggests that loss cannot be forgotten, that melancholia is still being engaged.

Chapter Three:

“‘We Need A Movie That’s More Than Just American Losses’³⁶: Oliver Stone’s *Heaven and Earth*”

I.

In the same year that Le Ly Hayslip’s *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* was published, Oliver Stone bought the rights to turn the book into a movie, beating out a strong bid by actress Joan Chen (who later played Hayslip’s mother in Stone’s film). In 1991, after finishing his controversial film *JFK*, Stone started working on the screenplay for *Heaven and Earth* and began casting for the film. This was not done, however, before he had a personal meeting with the woman whose story he was about to tell on film. Upon meeting the director, Hayslip instantly approved of him. She says of the meeting: “I saw in Oliver a kindred spirit who could help my story touch a much bigger world audience” (CWWP 359). Stone, likewise, was impressed with Hayslip and hired her on to be a part of the project as a consultant.³⁷

After having read a working manuscript of Le Ly Hayslip’s *Child of War, Woman of Peace* on a plane ride during pre-production of his film adaptation, Stone immediately knew the shape his piece was going to take. He knew of and wanted to convey the difficulties Hayslip had had in adjusting to life in America, which was exactly what the

³⁶ Oliver Stone, quoted in Riordan (446).

³⁷ During the making of *Heaven and Earth*, Stone experienced a spiritual transformation leading to his conversion to Buddhism. His many conversations with Hayslip and the preparations for the film were two of the main factors that encouraged him to explore Eastern philosophy.

second book chronicled. Thus, before filming began, Stone decided that his film would be an amalgamation of Hayslip's two books in order to show the many different stages of her life (Riordan 448). In 1993, *Heaven and Earth* was released to complete what is now referred to as Stone's Vietnam Trilogy (the other two films being 1986's *Platoon* and 1989's *Born on the Fourth of July*).³⁸ *Heaven and Earth* was heralded as the first Hollywood film to take up the perspective of the Vietnamese and Stone's first "female-centered" movie. With the success of Stone's previous films in the trilogy and Hayslip's book, the film was highly anticipated; yet it opened to mixed reviews and low box office earnings. While purporting to tell the story of Le Ly Hayslip and thus do something that has never been done before on celluloid, *Heaven and Earth* is, in actuality, another film about the veteran's struggle. It is a cooptation of Hayslip's story, perhaps the ultimate, in order to once again tell the story of the victimized veteran and his struggle to adapt to post-war life in America. Stone's film is a retelling of a Vietnamese woman's story in a popular medium, one that subsumes and represses elements of the original voice to refocus the lens onto America and its concerns. The film reveals that the Vietnamese are being remembered in America through an amnesiac memory, one that performs an act of remembering by creating memories of forgetfulness. The guise of remembering the Vietnamese, of giving them visibility, becomes another way to deny them visibility.

³⁸ *Platoon* dealt with the grueling combat experiences of soldiers in Vietnam, while *Born on the Fourth of July* focused on the returning veteran and his disillusion with the War and American society. *Heaven and Earth* is, on the surface, about how the War affected the Vietnamese. Overall, the trilogy treats different aspects of the Vietnam War experience while critiquing warfare.

Film has become an important site for America and Americans to represent and remember the Vietnam War. It is a place where differing narratives about the war are contested and certain stories are (re)inscribed as history. Michael Anderegg writes that, as opposed to WWII, the Vietnam War “has been given its imaginative life primarily through film”; adding that “cinematic representations [...] seem to have supplanted even so-called factual analyses as *the* discourse of the war, as the place where some kind of reckoning will need to be made and tested” (1). Similarly, Marita Sturken claims that “contemporary Hollywood films have come to represent the ‘authentic’ story of the war. They have eclipsed the documentary images of the war” (86). It seems that, in postmodern hyperreality, filmic representations of the War have come to replace the War itself. Films, then, are fitting and powerful tools in the re-fighting and (re)writing of the most visually represented war, the “television war,” in American history. With its ability to appeal to a mass audience and provide a legitimate experience of the War for general viewers (watching a war film is like going to war)³⁹, films give a sense to how Vietnam and the War are being understood on a collective, national level. Thus, it is important to shift our attention to this cultural arena, and especially to *Heaven and Earth*, to examine how Hayslip’s story is being deployed as the Vietnamese perspective.⁴⁰

³⁹ This is a popular sentiment that Sturken discusses in *Tangled Memories*. See pages 96-98.

⁴⁰ A distinction needs to be made between filmic (non-archival) and photographic images of the War. Marita Sturken says that, as opposed to docudrama films, iconic photo images “offer not closure but a sense of the war’s horror” (94). Indeed, famous photographs like the one of a naked Kim Phuc, burned by napalm, running down the road and the one of South Vietnamese General Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing a Viet Cong officer by shooting him in the head convey the Vietnamese as victims. They were also instrumental in changing the American public attitude towards the War.

John Hellman explains that Hollywood films have been employed to depict and represent the war in Vietnam because the American national myth of the frontier is entrenched in and through film. He writes that, “in the frontier myth, Americans have remembered their history within a master-narrative shaped by their ideology of individualism, freedom, success and special mission” (177).⁴¹ It is this myth, scripted in the genres of the Western film and those of the Second World War, that was projected onto Vietnam during the beginning years of American intervention and that has affected America’s relation with Vietnam ever since. Hellman says, “because film, specifically the Western, played such a crucial role in the performance of the national myth that Americans expected to stage in Vietnam, film has been the most important site for Americans’ remembering of the war. There they have re-enacted their memory of the war through the lenses of their original dream of it” (185). Michael Klein similarly observes that, “what is occurring in Hollywood narrative fiction film in the years after the war is that Vietnam, like the West in the days of Indians and cowboys or the South in the time of plantations, has become a setting within which ideological constructs are explored and contested” (22).

Constituting a large body of works, with well-know films such as *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Coming Home* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), the *Rambo* series (1982, 1985, 1988), *Platoon* (1986), and *Born on the Fourth of July*

⁴¹ Leo Cawley also discusses the importance of the frontier myth in relation to American history and the Vietnam War in his essay “The War about the War: Vietnam Films and American Myth.”

(1989), Vietnam War films follow certain patterns and revolve around common themes.⁴² At the same time, there is no unity of perspective; the films range widely in their politics (pro-war / anti-war) and points of critique or valorization. However, what is most characteristic of these films is the absence of the Vietnamese. In Vietnam War films, “it is as if the recent past is being recounted by a victim of historical amnesia or by a narrator whose tunnel vision compels him/her to censor or repress certain material” (Klein 24). The victim, once more, of this “cultural myopia” (Desser 97) is the Vietnamese, who do not register in America’s filmic (in addition to and overlapping with historical and cultural) consciousness or if they are present at all they are represented as untranslated (thus, speechless and incomprehensible), feminized enemy “others.” David Desser notes: “In virtually all of these films about the war ‘except as targets, the Vietnamese scarcely exist; they are absent as people’ [...] Even twenty years after the Vietnam War, few films deal with, or even acknowledge, the Vietnamese as subject” (86-87).

The eschewal of the Vietnamese is a consequence of the overwhelming concern these films have for the “grunt” and his struggle to rehabilitate and arrive at some kind of closure. They are either about the horrors of war and what it did to “innocent” Americans or how the heroic, individual American can derive a sense of victory from the war America officially lost. In this way, the primary victims and subjects of loss are the soldiers and veterans, and through them, the American nation. The focus on the veteran’s homecoming and his subsequent psychological anguish does two concomitant things.

⁴² Vietnam War films, as a group, do not constitute a genre as it borrows heavily from the conventions of westerns and war films. See Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud’s introduction in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film* (1990).

First it privatizes the war; in an often-referenced quote from *Platoon*, Chris Taylor, the protagonist of movie declares: “We did not fight the enemy, we fought ourselves – and the enemy was in us” (*Platoon*). This personalization of the war erases the historicity of the war; it does not interrogate the reasons why America became involved in Vietnam or examine the local and global forces that shaped the conflict. Second, and as a result of this privatization, Vietnam is removed as a participant of the war -- Americans were only fighting themselves in Vietnam. Subsequently, Vietnam War films have become important cultural objects that contribute to the process of effacing Vietnam and the Vietnamese from America’s cultural and historical memory.

This disregard for Vietnam and the Vietnamese allows for a more unified, less complicated narrative of the War to emerge. Tony Williams claims that, “all Vietnam films attempt to impose some form of narrative order upon a conflict that refuses, both historically and fictionally, any form of convenient definition” (116). The desire, in these films, for narrative order is a desire for resolution and closure. The filmic effort to understand the soldiers and veterans and what they went through in war seeks to reconcile them to American society and history; these films are about the healing of the veteran and the American nation. Indeed, “the popularity of these films, with rare exceptions, resides in their ability to provide absolution and a sense of redemption” (Sturken 113). Vietnam War films function in American culture to work through the Vietnam quagmire and offer a meaningful conclusion to the conflict, one that is acceptable and complementary to the American sense of self.

Trinh T. Minh Ha makes the provocative claim that “media images are a continuation of the war” in which, “if the Americans lost the other, they have certainly won this one” (Trinh 88). Trinh’s assertion points to the asymmetrical power the U.S. possesses in representing the War. In this case, it is the loser that is, almost exclusively, producing cultural artifacts (along with historical narratives) for future generations to understand the War. The profusion of media images conceived, produced, and received by Americans, taken together, results in a different outcome for the U.S.⁴³ Trinh’s statement also indicates film as a new battleground, where the war is being re-fought, where history of the Vietnam War is being written; it is also a most important battlefield where the Vietnamese are being filmed outside of this history, are being misrepresented or plainly forgotten.

II.

Stone’s *Heaven and Earth* was intended as a remedy to the effacement of the Vietnamese both in American culture and filmic representations, to the lack of a Vietnamese perspective that results in an incomplete picture of the war experience -- one that, ironically, he has had a hand in shaping through his two earlier Vietnam War films. Evaluating the situation Hollywood has created, he says,

Now there’s one job left for Hollywood to do. We’ve got to tell the Vietnamese people’s story. We need a movie that’s more than just American losses. We need

⁴³ I take media images to mean narrative films, documentaries, photographs, war memorials, art pieces, etc.

both sides. We need to explain the whole ideology of the war (qtd. in Riordan 446).

And, thus, Stone sees *Heaven and Earth* as responding to

The blind militarism and mindless revisionism of the Vietnam war as typified by a certain odious brand of thinking that has snaked its way into our culture over the past decade or so, in which the conflict is refought in comic book style with a brand-new ending ... we win! Within the moronic context of these ideas, hundreds of nameless, faceless Vietnamese are casually shot, stabbed, and blown to smithereens, utterly without the benefit of human consideration. Entire villages are triumphantly laid to waste, within not one microsecond of thought or care given to those inside the little bamboo hamlets. Who were they? (qtd. in Kagan 209).

These two quotations from Stone show that he was well aware of the void he was trying to fill, the enormous task he was taking on -- to mourn Vietnamese lives, to recognize their losses and to give subjectivity to a Vietnamese American woman. Yet, as well intended and aware as his gesture at remembrance was, it is ultimately an empty one, for the film, like Vietnam War films that preceded it, remembers, first and foremost, the American soldier. With *Heaven and Earth*, Stone has made another film about America and Americans, not about a Vietnamese protagonist.

Bryan Marinelli has effectively shown how Stone used the film as a vehicle to tell his own experience of Vietnam.⁴⁴ Marinelli isolates the conflation of four different American men Hayslip was romantically involved with into the character of Steve Butler (played by Tommy Lee Jones) as the most problematic aspect of the film.⁴⁵ Stone has defended this change, saying that the move was done for narrative purposes and time constraints, and Hayslip has said publicly that she has no objections to Stone's decision. However, Marinelli takes issue with the writing of Butler as a veteran when Hayslip never married one. This move on Stone's part serves to provide him with a way to return to his usual subject: the American soldier. Marinelli argues:

Stone's fusion of the attributes of four different men into a constructed, volatile ex-soldier is concordant with his directorial custom of inscribing his 'signature' upon each of his features [...] [It] reveals the director's persistent inclination to depict the emasculating effects of 'Nam' upon the American men who served [...] From the moment we are introduced to Butler in Da Nang, the film begins to evolve into the epic of a distraught Vietnam veteran, subsequently overshadowing the saga of the resilient heroine (242-244).

The specificities of Hayslip's life get obscured, augmented, and manipulated as a means for an American ex-veteran to explore his own identity and the post-war concerns that matter to Americans. The issue here is not so much about an adaptation's fidelity to the

⁴⁴ Stone says, "in some ways, I am the Tommy Lee Jones character in the movie" (Salewicz 89). He is also a veteran of the War and has voiced the immense impact it has had on him.

⁴⁵ Hayslip married Ed Munro and Dennis Hayslip. She had affairs with Dan DeParma and Cliff Parry. DeParma served in Vietnam while Parry (a pathological liar) claims to have been an assassin in Vietnam.

original but that of a minority voice -- a voice from the Vietnamese side, a side that seldom gets heard -- being modified in a way that further silences the speech act. Stone's adaptation can be seen as the final integration of Hayslip's voice into the American dominant, where it is being used to shore up American narratives and ideologies surrounding the war in Vietnam.

In addition to falling back into the dominant themes of Vietnam War films, *Heaven and Earth* consciously includes but fails to provide context for two scenes from Hayslip's books, resulting in a misrepresentation of her account; it also introduces gender power relations that are at the center of Vietnam representations. This is apparent when we consider Stone's points of emphasis in the film. In the editorial act of sifting through over 800 pages of detailed events from Hayslip's life, Stone deemed it important to choose two events to include in his narrative. The first is a minor one in Hayslip's book; it recounts an episode where Hayslip's father slaps her mother in the face. She explains that it was highly unusual for her father to lay hands on her mother and that the act was done because her mother failed to offer food to flood refugees from a nearby village, causing him to lose face. In Stone's film, Hayslip's father slaps her mother over a quarrel concerning their sons going to war. The violence is precipitated by the War and Hayslip's father is presented as a strict patriarch. Even Hayslip's mother tells her, "I made your papa lose face, if you ever do that to a husband, I'll have both your cheeks glowing, one from him and one from me" (*Heaven and Earth*). Stone highlights traditional Confucian male authority and dominance in Vietnamese culture, establishing the feminine subjection to the masculine in his film. Operating within Stone's movie is an attempt to

reinscribe masculine ideology by employing Vietnamese masculinity to restore patriarchal order through Confucian values, only to later co-opt that masculinity into an overall presentation of Vietnam as feminine.⁴⁶

The second scene in the film emphasizes Hayslip selling her body for money. Though Stone does show the difficulty and enormity of Hayslip's decision, he fails to explain that the amount of money Hayslip received from sleeping with two GIs supported her family for over a year. The incident in the movie suggests that Hayslip was tempted by a large sum of money into prostitution, which seems incongruent with her moral courage and traditional upbringing. Hayslip's role as prostitute is foregrounded in this scene and it recalls the representation of Vietnamese women as prostitutes in a number of other Vietnam War films -- most notably in *Full Metal Jacket*, from which phrases like "me love you long time" and "suckie suckie five dollars" have become associated with Asian prostitutes and women in popular culture. Even when the Vietnamese woman is presented as heroic, like Kim in *Miss Saigon*, she is still a prostitute / bar girl. Moreover, Stone's depiction of Hayslip caressing Steve Butler and sleeping with him on their first meeting after repeatedly protesting "Le Ly good girl" (*Heaven and Earth*) to his advances serves to suggest her sexual acquiescence and availability. Through these scenes, Hayslip is coded as a passive, sexualized female, and because she represents Vietnam, the country is feminized in the process.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Marinelli says that Stone's / Butler's central concern in the movie is to "regain some sense of manhood through the establishment of patriarchal order after his discovery that success as a soldier is questionable as a basis for masculinity" (254).

⁴⁷ Historically, the East has typically been understood in the West as feminine, Asian "others."

It is suitable for America that Vietnam's representative is a woman, and a sexually available one at that, for both women and Vietnam can be subordinated. Stone's treatment of gender mitigates the symbolic castration of the American nation in losing the War, the anxieties of a lost masculinity. Susan Jeffords argues that, "Vietnam representation is only topically 'about' the war in Vietnam or America's military strength or political policymaking. Its true subject is the masculine response to changes in gender relations in recent decades, its real battle that of the masculine to dominate and overpower its 'enemy' – the feminine" (167). Stone's strategic use of two episodes from Hayslip's life stages this gender battle. Vietnamese men can dominate Vietnamese women, but America can dominate all of Vietnam.

Despite Stone's problematic interpretation of her life story, Hayslip has had nothing but praise for the film. She says: "Oliver has given us many sons [...] I'm pleased and honored that, with Heaven and Earth, he has now also raised a daughter worthy of his warrior's heart" (Kagan 225). In fact, she was present on set during the entirety of the filming process as a technical advisor and consultant, thus, making the film somewhat of a collaborative act.⁴⁸ After working with Stone, Hayslip even considered him to be one of her soulmates. However, one way to read Hayslip's lack of criticism for

⁴⁸ Hayslip was hired to verify the authenticity of a scene for Stone. Yet there is indication that she was sometimes reticent in her role, she confesses: "The assignment seemed simple enough. But I soon learned that if I said, 'Oh, my father would have looked out the window before he said that – to see if anyone was listening,' or 'The MPs wouldn't let those black-market girls so close to the compound,' he would call everyone back and re-shoot the scene. After a few of these episodes (and some irritated looks from the hard-working crew), I discovered the difference between comments that truly helped our 'offspring' to grow and those that merely stopped the show" (qtd. in Salewicz 91). Though the incidents recounted by Hayslip are minor, her anecdote suggests the possibility that her voice / opinion was compromised on set.

the film and its director is to look at the power differential between her and Stone, especially in light of the fact that Stone was a major benefactor of the medical clinics she had built in Vietnam (the Mother's Love Clinic and Peace Village Clinic). Thus, Hayslip's charity work was very much dependant on Stone's star power and monetary resources, which would make it difficult for her to fault Stone's filmic vision of her life even if she had wanted to. This relationship, then, constitutes another level of cooptation, another limit, whether felt or not, placed upon Hayslip's voice in addition to the many others discussed in the previous chapter. Part of the reason Stone gains Hayslip's support is that he was – and, for Hayslip, hopefully will continue to be – instrumental in helping her to achieve her humanitarian goals. Indeed, the intertitle at the end of the film references Hayslip's work and her East Meets West foundation, exposing the organization to a wider public.

In addition to mentioning the efforts of Hayslip's aid-relief foundation, the film concludes with another note of healing: it presents Vietnam as a country that has survived and recovered from the ravages of war and that is ready to move forward. In the film's opening sequence, Vietnam is depicted as an idyllic village with images of sweeping rice fields, towering mountains, and farmers peacefully at work. The intrusion of both Viet Cong and American / South Vietnamese soldiers into the countryside disrupted the way of life for the peasants profoundly. In a voiceover, Hiep Thi Le, in the voice of Le Ly Hayslip, tells us that with the coming of the War, "the peasant countryside changed forever" (*Heaven and Earth*). However, the end of the film restores the village to the picture of paradise it was before the War. The structuring of the film, from peace to war

to peace, suggests that Vietnam has healed from the traumas of war. This visual representation has the effect of encouraging closure; if Vietnam has come to terms with the War, then the U.S. can also close this long and dark chapter in its history, absolved of any lingering guilt it might feel for the destruction it leveled on Vietnam and its people. In the final sequence, the character of Le Ly Hayslip walks along a Buddhist temple-cemetery complex and out into a wide field of rice. Hayslip has arrived home. Vietnam is the beautiful country it once was. Closure. Peace.

In the film, healing is achieved at the expense of ties with ancestors and ghosts, a letting go of the past. As I have demonstrated in the previous chapter, Hayslip's melancholic attachments to her father and the spirits of the dead are central to her literary and humanitarian work and her spiritual sense of self. Stone's attempt to parallel Hayslip's healing with the healing of Vietnam contradicts the productive melancholia she describes in her texts. One final scene pairs an image of Hayslip sleeping on a bamboo cot in her father's house with the following voiceover: "That night, I slept in the house my father built. Afterward, he felt no need to visit me in my dreams" (*Heaven and Earth*). The implication is that, with her return journey, Hayslip has successfully mourned her losses. Because she has now attained a sense of peace, the past and its ghosts are no longer factors in her life. The past is truly past; there are no more melancholic attachments that allow the past to have a place in the present, to continually question and critique history. Furthermore, in the last voiceover of the movie, Hayslip's character says: "the gift of suffering is to bring us closer to god, to teach us to be strong when we are weak, to be brave when we are afraid, to be wise in the midst of confusion,

and to let go of that which we can no longer hold” (*Heaven and Earth*). The ending of Stone’s film presents a picture of mourning in the traditional Freudian sense, one that allows for the past and the losses it contains to fall away so that healing and closure may be the sentiments to take center stage. Ultimately, the film glosses over and simplifies the complex forms of remembrance active in Hayslip’s memoirs.

Stone’s *Heaven and Earth* is an instance in which America mimes acts of remembering that are in tune with the political climate. It is no accident that the release of Stone’s film coincided with talks of diplomatic and economic normalization between the U.S. and Vietnamese governments. In 1995, the Clinton administration announced the normalization of relations with Vietnam and the following year a trade agreement blueprint between the two countries was drafted. The message of healing and reconciliation in the film was exactly in line with what the administration promoted so that it could extend its neoliberal ideology to yet another Third World country. With the test of time, as it is often said, the U.S. has truly won the war in Vietnam; the importation and adoption of American neo-imperialism in Vietnam is a testament to that victory.

We must be reminded that “the ‘culture of amnesia’ actually involves the generation of memory in new forms, a process often misinterpreted as forgetting” (Sturken 2). The new forms of memory are ultimately ones that repress the complexities of history. They are memories of expedience, feigning remembrance so that certain narratives can be told, and certain ideologies established. Vietnam and Hayslip, as the personification of her (former) country, are remembered in order for “American” issues

to be discussed and debated. Both Vietnam and Hayslip are spectacles upon which Americans can involve themselves in an ideological refighting of the war.

Oliver Stone wanted to show the struggle of a Vietnamese woman to come to terms with the Vietnam War in the U.S., but instead ended up making a movie about an American veteran and his struggles. Ultimately, *Heaven and Earth* did not stray far from the formulas of Hollywood films about the Vietnam War. America and Hollywood have yet to remember Vietnam in any genuine sense.

Conclusion:

“Remembering Otherwise and Remembering Vietnamese Others”

I.

My thesis has endeavored to show how American cultural and historical memory has forgotten Vietnam and Vietnamese people(s) or remembers them in a particularly problematic way. As a difficult memory, the Vietnam War and its aftermath have had a unique position in the American historical / cultural imagination. Over thirty years after the end of the War, the profusion of history books, memoirs, novels, and films produced by mainstream America have generally effaced the presence of the Vietnamese or have included them only to tell nationalistic stories or to support certain American liberal ideologies. I have employed Le Ly Hayslip's memoirs *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* and *Child of War, Woman of Peace* as a case study to explore America's amnesiac memory in relation to Vietnam and the Vietnamese. I have examined both what Hayslip's texts and American memory forget, and what and how they remember. Furthermore, I have considered how remembering can also be an exclusionary or forgetful act in both dominant and minority discourses.

Thus, against the culture of historical amnesia, against the American forgetting of Vietnam, it is crucial not only to remember, but as Roger Simon has advocated, to remember otherwise. Simon argues for a practice of remembrance that opens up historical memory or pedagogical memory to consider the histories and experiences of others. In doing so, notions of the past, present and future may become less static and

singular. For Simon, “the touch of the past” -- allowing the past and its multiplicity to come alive in the present -- holds the promise of a more democratic future by making room for social, political, and historical critique. He writes:

We will have to consider a form of public history that opens one to both the demands of, and the responsibility to, the alterity of the historical experience of others – an alterity that disrupts the presumptions of the ‘self-same.’ Furthermore, to begin to think through practices of remembrance differently, clarifying their ethical, pedagogical, and political implications, we need another understanding of the futurity inherent in remembrance. This means becoming less concerned with the consolidating identificatory effects of practices of historical memory and attending more to the eruptive force of remembering otherwise (4).

Remembering otherwise involves an approach similar to that of a historical materialist, where the past is permitted to have, what Simon calls, a transitive function; that is, to interrupt “one’s self-sufficiency, demanding an attentiveness to an otherness that resists being reduced to a version of one’s own stories” (Simon 5). Melancholic engagements with the past, as outlined by Benjamin, Butler, Eng and Kazanjian, have the potential to bring about this attentiveness to others by keeping the past active and open. To counter the amnesia of official and mainstream history, it is important to remember otherwise by remembering others.

Similarly, in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed warns that others’ pain and suffering can easily be appropriated by the one who recognizes and acknowledges that pain. A testimony of pain can be taken away from the enunciator and

be construed “as if it were about our feelings, or our ability to feel the feelings of others” (35). This can and does occur on a national level, where histories of injury are being subsumed into narratives of reconciliation and healing. She argues that, “our task is to learn how to hear what is impossible. Such an impossible hearing is only possible if we respond to a pain that we cannot claim as our own” (35). Responding to others’ pain in a way that does not turn that pain into one’s own is a form of “un-housing” (36) for the individual or the nation, it results in an unsettling and a transformation of the self.

America’s task is to remember otherwise and listen to the impossible; that is, to attend to the pain and loss of the Vietnamese people(s) in an ethical way that does not co-opt those histories of injury and suffering to further its national sense of unified self. Ultimately, it needs to recognize the Vietnamese as true victims of the War. Invoking the memory of Vietnam and the Vietnam War should not be only a way for the U.S. to discuss what “Nam” did to America and Americans. Vietnam has got to be more than a “syndrome” the U.S. needs to or has overcome.⁴⁹ Since the fall of Saigon, discourses on the War have focused on how it brought about a divisive American society, on America’s emasculation in losing the War, and on the thousands of victimized American veterans. These narratives do not allow the Vietnamese their victimhood or agency in the history of the War. They fail to remember the Vietnamese people(s). For the American nation, it is by listening to multiple Vietnamese voices and recognizing their loss and pain without motive that a more complex and a better, fuller understanding of the Vietnam War may

⁴⁹ In 1991, at the end of the Gulf War, President George Bush Sr. proclaimed to a group of state legislators: “The specter of Vietnam has been buried in the desert sands of the Arabian Peninsula [...] By God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all.” See William Schneider’s article “The Vietnam Syndrome Mutates” in *The Atlantic*.

emerge. When such forms of remembrance occur, it is possible for the past to redeem the future and the future to redeem the past; the history of the Vietnam War might possibly then be “citable in all its moments” (Benjamin 256).

Moreover, acts of remembrance by Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans must also be closely interrogated. According to Viet Nguyen, endemic in Vietnamese refugee art, literature, and politics is the remembrance and mourning of the dead. Yet, remembering the dead comes with certain ethical responsibilities. Nguyen observes that, “what we find in Vietnamese refugee memory is that it presents its own narrative of memory and amnesia, of insight and blindness, of ethical responsibility and ethical failure. This narrative occurs even as Vietnamese refugees may seek to do justice to the ghosts of their past” (“Speak of the Dead” 32). Nguyen’s statement describes well the work of Le Ly Hayslip. In her narrative there is an impetus to remember and avow the losses of the Vietnamese, yet in some ways it also does not acknowledge certain elements of history and glosses over the complexities of U.S-Vietnam relations in order to espouse a message of healing and reconciliation.

Viet Nguyen argues for an ethics that is “haunted by the dead, the forgotten, the missing” (“Speak of the Dead” 33); in other words, an ethics that involves speaking with and for the dead, an ethics achieved through melancholic remembrances. In addition, Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong writes: “As mourners, we must be hospitable to all the dead of that war and its aftermath if we are to form our memory of that war without cannibalizing all of these histories into the single story that becomes us [...] A single version of history means a single version of ourselves [...] allowing others to consume our history for their

own ends, as though we have all died” (171-172). As I have shown, Hayslip understands the importance of communicating with ghosts, and it is precisely the ability to communicate with the dead that has allowed her to remember and mourn her losses and the losses of the Vietnamese people and Vietnamese Americans. However, as Viet Nguyen and Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong would urge, Hayslip (and other Vietnamese Americans) has to be aware and cautious of how her “truth,” her own story, can be and is consumed and co-opted by others for their own ends. It is within the context of this caution that I have analyzed the complexities -- the value and danger -- inherent in Hayslip’s memoirs and their adaptation by Oliver Stone.

II.

The new generation of Vietnamese American writers, comprised mainly of the 1.5 generation (Vietnamese born in Vietnam and raised in America, arriving as children or young teens as “boat people”) but also of some American-born Vietnamese, has continued to deal with issues surrounding the Vietnam War. The main theme for recent Vietnamese American texts like Andrew X. Pham’s *Catfish and Mandala* (1999) le thi diem thuy’s *The Gangster We are All Looking For* (2003) Aimee Phan’s *We Should Never Meet* (2004), and Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge* (1998) is the exploration of identity in the context of transnationalism. Yet, in considering what it means to be Vietnamese or Vietnamese American in America and the globalized world, these writers inevitably take up the issue of loss: what their immigrant parents have lost, what the Vietnamese diasporic communities have lost, and what they themselves have lost. The problems and

ideas I have presented in this thesis, especially a theory of productive, melancholic remembrance connected to ancestor worship, are relevant and applicable to these new Vietnamese American texts. Future scholarly work will need to examine how the new generation takes up the issue of loss, how they engage with mourning and melancholia, how they speak with, of, and for the dead.

I would like to conclude by returning to Le Ly Hayslip and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. In the late 1980s, Hayslip made a short visit to Washington D.C to see the Wall. Here is how she describes the experience:

I stopped and put my fingers on one of the names. I wondered if I had talked to or seen this man during his tragic, one-way visit to my country [...] I also wondered how much taller and sadder this wonderful monument would be if the names of all the people killed in the war were added – the millions of Vietnamese, including civilian women and children. It would remind us that war is only a factory for building bad karma and reinforcing blind vengeance – not some kind of athletic field for showing patriotic prowess. The spirits inside the giant statues of politicians would never allow such a monument to be built, of course. With such a terrible truth staring them in the face, no men born of women could ever again order their sons off to war (CWWP 266).

Hayslip's reflections at the Wall call for remembrance of all the casualties of the Vietnam War, and it is by doing so that the American nation and people can begin to learn the true lesson of war: its sinister and cyclical nature, its futility, its tragedy. She perceives that an

inclusive and sympathetic form of remembrance, one that Simon and Ahmed argue for, would lead to a more just world -- a world where peace is possible.

As it is now, the Wall represents an instance of failed remembering, a symbol of America's selective, amnesiac memory. Remembering Vietnam and the Vietnamese in this way has enabled the U.S. nation to continue its imperialistic tendencies in the twenty-first century. In 2003, when the Bush administration invaded Iraq, commentators began to make comparisons between the new war and the Vietnam War. Memories of the war in Vietnam were invoked to either justify or condemn the war in Iraq. Yet, George Dutton asserts that "the 'lessons' of the war in Vietnam have largely served not as a caution against involvement in such wars, but as a blueprint for more effectively waging a successful public relations effort to sustain American popular support" (121). In forgetting the Vietnamese people, the American nation has failed to truly learn the lessons of the Vietnam War. The invasion of Iraq and future wars stand as consequences of what happens when an amnesiac memory prevails.

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