The Right to Pain and the Limits of Testimony

by

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Table of Contents

List of Figures iii

Abstract ivv

Introduction 1

Chapter 1// Disabled Nation: The Disability Aesthetics of Ugly and Beautiful Suffering in the War Remnants Museum 27

WRM Background 42

National Testimony 43

Audience/ Tourism 46

Disability as Testimony 58

Disability Aesthetics, Guerilla Aesthetics 60

Ugly Suffering 63

Beautiful Suffering 79

Heroic Suffering 91

Conclusion 102

Chapter 2// “pain itself was a voice”: Witnessing Rejected Experiences in Le Ly Hayslip’s Memoirs 105

The Economy of Gender under Militarism and Transhistorical Pain 119

Witnessing Incompatibility 134

Illness Testimony and Healing Strategies 147

Testimony as a Gift 162

Chapter 3// The Disabled Structure of Testimony in Monique Truong’s *Bitter in the Mouth* ... 164

Embodied Testimony 170

Constructing Intimacy 181

Adopting Narrative 186

Re-Witnessing 191

Becoming and Forgiveness 210

The Ellipse of Testimony 217

Bibliography 224

List of Figures

Figure 1: Poster description of Thanh Phong Massacre 34
Figure 2: Collage of Mr. Bui portrait, his daughter, and Mr. and Mrs. Bui's graves 35
Figure 3: Three portraits of the three witnesses of the Thanh Phong Massacre 36
Figure 4: Framed photograph of the famous "Napalm Girl" 42
Figure 5: Portrait of a young boy whose face has been damaged by phosphorous bombs........... 65
Figure 6: A collage, produced by the author, of photographs of maimed or dead bodies............ 66
Figure 7: A black and white photograph of Vietnamese bodies spread on top of each other 67
Figure 8: A photograph of Ho Van Dang 69
Figure 9: US war machines from the Vietnam-US War 71
Figure 10: A profile-view portrait of a middle-aged man, Vo Van Khiem 74
Figure 11: A framed photograph of young male, Bui Nhat Quang 75
Figure 12: A family portrait of US veteran Dan Loney 80
Figure 13: Large photograph of eight-year-old boy, Do Duc Duyen 84
Figure 14: Black and white photograph of the faces of mutated fetuses 85
Figure 15: A collage of photographs of disabled children interacting with people 88
Figure 16: Life Exhibition of Disabled Vietnamese 90
Figure 17: Nine photographs of disabled people performing various actions 96
Figure 18: Collage of extraordinary disabled Vietnamese 96
Figure 19: A corner of the temporary exhibit 99
Figure 20: Crossword puzzle with handwritten letters 164

Abstract

"The Right to Pain and the Limits of Testimony" centers on two questions: Who has the right to pain? Who is permitted to speak about issues of injustice affecting them? I contend that the indifference, disavowal, or appropriation of pain results from a structure of witnessing that accepts violence and injuries on some subjects as deserving, natural, or unreal. Pain, illness, and disability are naturalized within marginalized communities because the terms of death are gendered, racialized, classed, and ableist. By analyzing Vietnamese American memoirs, novels, photography, and the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City as testimonies, I make connections among Critical Refugee Studies, Disability Studies, and Visual Culture Studies to reveal the military, economic, and racial systems that expose immigrants and refugees to overlooked danger. These textual, visual, and physical sites present the debilitations produced by the Vietnam-US War by adopting strategic frames of reference, narrative construction, and language in order to connect with the observers, revealing that witnessing maintains an asymmetrical power structure. Models of witnessing give too much interpretive power to the witness, allowing a privileged group to define what counts as pain, the identity of victims, the language of testimony, and appropriate reparation and healing methods. In the closed system of witnessing, the savior is often also the perpetrator.

By looking at moments in which witnessing fails the testifier, I deromanticize witnessing, shift interpretative power, and assemble an alternative archive on the Vietnam-US War, pain, and healing. My dissertation presumes that witnessing fails while clings to the potential of testimony.

Each chapter examines the body as testimony—the visible Agent Orange impairment and invisible illnesses of transhistorical pain and synesthesia—as another way to know the war. The disability as an index of debilitation is a bridge that links history to the present, event to language, self to an audience, imbuing the testimony with urgency and ethical dimensions. My attention to the limitations of witnessing raises concerns and strategies for accounting for silent voices. My project promotes the value of the victim's language, frame of reference, unique vision, and particular demands in order to resist the listener's power as ultimate savior in the exchange. I view testifiers as neither innocent victims nor unfeeling objects but as complex agents, intensely negotiating motives, languages, frameworks and multiple audiences.

The focus on pain accounts for the complexities and the ongoingness of debility of Vietnamese affected by wars, colonialism, poverty, and dislocation. Recognizing the limits of visibility to engender compassion and necessary changes, my work also attends to personal and communal healing strategies. The attention to marginalized forms of care emphasizes agency and rejects the white savior complex that underlies leading scholarship on ethics by Emmanuel Levinas, Paul Riceour, and Judith Butler. I attend to the creativity, endurance, and commemoration associated with pain. The survival strategies evident in Vietnamese American art and literature have aesthetic and epistemological value that expand understanding of trauma and reshape engagements with discourses of race, war, globalization, and community formation.

Introduction

Vietnam and the US have crossed paths by destructive and creative histories of militarism, diplomacy, commerce, and tourism. Since normalization in 1995, mass debilitation, a product of the Vietnam-US War, has acted as a bridge between the former enemies. I began writing this dissertation on the memory of the Vietnam-US War during another major shift in the relationship between the two nations: Vietnam becomes a US strategic partner in 2016. In 1991, President George H. W. Bush named the Persian Gulf War victory as the end of the Vietnam Syndrome: "By God we've kicked the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all" (n.p). He marked 1991, sixteen years after the end of the military war, as the end of the US cultural war with Vietnam. And yet, President Barack Obama seemingly underscored an ongoingness of the war by naming the 2016 lifting of the arms embargo as yet another end to the war. Rendering the "Vietnam War" a thing of the past in the address to the Vietnamese people in Hanoi on May 24, 2016, he remarked, "I am not the first American President to come to Vietnam in recent times. But I am the first, like so many of you, who came of age after the war between our countries." Pointing to the growing number of people who do not have memories of the "Vietnam War," he explained that his first exposure to Vietnam and the Vietnamese people was the Vietnamese American community in Hawaii, not the war.

Since the end of the Vietnam-US War, debilitation has been constructed as an opportunity for reconciliation, healing, and progress. In the same address, Obama draws attention to war-produced disabilities as an example of alliance:

> the very war that had divided us became a source for healing. It allowed us to account for the missing and finally bring them home. It allowed us *to help* remove landmines and unexploded bombs, because no child should ever lose a leg just playing outside. Even as we continue *to assist* Vietnamese with disabilities, including children, we are also *continuing to help* remove Agent Orange — dioxin — so that Vietnam can reclaim more of your land. We're proud of our *work together* in Danang, and we look forward *to supporting* your efforts in Bien Hoa. (Obama n.p., my emphasis)

Obama's speech highlights the two issues that remained important to the US after the war: the missing US[1] servicemen and the effects of Agent Orange. The emphasis on US assistance in reference to US-produced problems masks its war crimes and ongoing contributions to the killing of children born on the toxic, bomb-filled land even as it acknowledges them. If there is a perpetrator within the humanitarian rhetoric of this speech, it is the Vietnamese state unable to care for their innocent children. In the same speech, Obama gently warns Vietnam to uphold human rights in order to maintain normalized relations. He rhetorically lightens the chastisement by adding that "The rights I speak of I believe are not American values; I think they're universal values written into the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They're written into the Vietnamese constitution . . . That's in the Vietnamese constitution" (Obama n.p.). Obama's reference to human rights and, more specifically, Vietnam's violations of human rights, calls on a post-World War II universal humanitarian ethos and affirms US global dominance built upon its identity as a nation committed to rights, freedom, and capitalist prosperity. Obama's speech

[1] The term "American" to describe people from the US linguistically erases the majority of other Americans. I use US instead of American to describe people from the US in an effort question and resist the imperialistic and US-centric claim to the entire American region.

rewrites the Vietnam-US War as “we-win-even-when-we-lose" account of the war, in which the US has been recuperated as heroic warrior (Espiritu “Thirty”). The construction of war, debilitation, and death as “a source for healing” utilizes the visuality of vulnerability to uphold US morality, which has sanctioned violence and has been the grounds for the wars the US continues to wage.

The mobilization of disability serves as an opportunity not only for the US to heal its “Vietnam Syndrome,” but also for Vietnam to escape poverty, reclaim land, and promote national unity and moral superiority. The Vietnamese government capitalizes on the liberal sentimental gaze as it calls on a diplomacy based on visible victimhood. Disability’s visibility in public memory is a relatively new part of Vietnam’s postwar development. Analyzing revolutionary photographs from the US War, Thy Phu shows that “[b]ecause injured and dead bodies were considered dispiriting and demoralizing, they were rarely seen, and pulled from circulation if not censored outright as unsuitable for revolution, perhaps even as counterrevolutionary” (304). She explains that Vietnamese photographs from the US War follow a “revolutionary looking,” which is “a practice that . . . attends to the importance of repurposing salvaged material, making do with the resources available in one’s environment,—and alternately acknowledging and disavowing injury” (316). In post-embargo Vietnam, *claiming* injury is a “revolutionary looking” in the memory war, repurposing the hegemony of humanitarianism indicative of the post-World War II order that upholds Western power through the framework of morality.

During and after the war, Vietnam saw the undeniable power of the mobilization of disability on the global stage with international attention and emotional connection to Phan Thi Kim Phuc, “the napalm girl.” While after the war the US extended President Richard Nixon’s

1964 trade embargo to all of Vietnam until 1994, the image of Kim Phuc and photographs of victimization brought Western reporters and humanitarian aid to Vietnam. When *Life* magazine published its annual "The Year in Pictures" issue in December 1972, it featured a single entry related to the conflict: a two-page spread of a portrait of a smiling Kim Phuc inset with the famous picture of her running naked as napalm seared into through her flesh under the headline "The War and Kim Phuc, Memories Masked by A Smile" (54-55). Kim Phuc became an official war victim to negotiate a reconciliation between Vietnam and the US and its allies. When she was eighteen, nine-years after she was captured on camera running from the napalm strike, government officials from the information ministry of the People's Committee found her with the goal of leveraging people's emotions towards her to sponsor a new narrative of victimhood and friendship in order to influence the US and its allies to lift the embargo and provide aid and investment. She promoted Vietnam's legibility on the global stage as a symbol of the sympathetic victim in need of foreign attention rather than as a hostile country to avoid. The Vietnamese state exploited Phan Thi Kim Phuc through what I will detail in the first chapter as the disabled aesthetics of beautiful suffering, in which it mobilized her victim status as proof of US colonialism against her will. The communist regime constructed her into a propaganda tool by repurposing the narrative formed and disseminated by Western media. She is the perfect war victim precisely because she embodies beautiful suffering. The napalm missed her face, and her scars could be hidden under clothes. Because the war—not her—triggers shock, disgust, and grief, she can embody hope. Originally nameless in the Vietnamese public, Kim Phuc's power comes from Western responses (her experience is too common to carry such weight in Vietnam). Within the Vietnamese context, her body functions as evidence of illegal chemical attacks that harmed and continue to disable Vietnamese people.

In the US context, it is the potential to heal her that makes her a ready symbol. Healing her through surgeries and sending money and gifts provides hope for self-healing and suturing the disruption of US notions of wholeness, beauty, and humanity. She represents beautiful suffering because the intervention in her suffering offers the potential for viewers to see themselves as beautiful. It restores US identity from war criminal to redeemed guardian of freedom. The trace of violence forever marked by the iconic photograph is mitigated by her recoverable body. The US news media transforms Kim Phuc from a war victim into a "Vietnamese Marilyn," according to Judith Coburn in *The Los Angeles Times* Magazine's "The Girl in the Photograph: 17 Years Later." In the same article Coburn adds, "From Kim Phuc's wounds have sprung a passion to be normal," by which Coburn means a feminine desire to marry and have children (n.p). Kim Phuc's Asian feminine beauty directly comes from her racialized helplessness that can secure white masculinity within the military industry that both produces and challenges notions of masculinity defined by the shifting fulcrum of violence and morality. Alongside the 1955 humanitarian project "Hiroshima Maidens," in which the US financially supports plastic surgery for twelve Japanese women disfigured by the atomic bombs, Kim Phuc's role exposes medical humanitarianism as a gendered, racialized arm of the US war machine. The US engagement with disability—a medical and aesthetic intervention towards normalization—reveals its relation to war as healing these female bodies functions as a concrete and tangible way to reconcile the national wound of controversial military interventions.

Kim Phuc's recognizability as an icon of the atrocity that shaped Western reception of the Vietnam-US War represents the power of witnessing. She garnered sympathy and received many donations at the moment that the photograph of "napalm girl" was internationally disseminated. She has since founded of Kim Phúc Foundation, served as a UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador,

and received numerous honors and titles, including membership in the Order of Ontario and several honorary Doctorates of Law. Yet, I begin with Kim Phuc's experiences in "The Right to Pain" to point to the failure of witnessing. Despite the prevalence of her image in popular media and academia, her pain and the condition in which she is called to speak continues to be overlooked. Kim Phuc's debilitation is objectified and appropriated by dueling nationalist projects. The Vietnamese government workers provided Kim Phuc with a script that emphasized her happiness and success under communism despite the US produced injury, a script from which she could not deviate. While she could speak about the physical suffering from her napalm burn since it was caused by an imperial force, she was chastised "for embarrassing the regime by speaking of the difficulties of life in postwar Vietnam" even as her family did not have enough to eat (Chong 201). The full-time role as official war victim eventually forced her out of college despite her tremendous effort to become a medical professional and her repeated pleas to stay in college. When she tried to hide from officials, they harassed and threatened her parents. Kim Phuc's impoverished life and her struggles as a hostage of the state reveal the exploitation of pain and victimhood for a nationalist agenda.

Kim Phuc, as Mimi Nguyen cogently shows, is *made* into an agent of liberal empire, "negating murderous structures of race and coloniality as the present of liberal violence" and "redeeming empire from being held hostage to a shameful, irreversible past" (130, 86). Just as Kim Phuc did not want to be a cultural soldier for postwar Vietnam, she did not readily choose to become an ambassador of liberal empire. Poverty, lining up weekly for food, clothes, and diapers for her baby, and her uncertain refugee status motivated Kim Phuc to sell her story: "Driven by their [her and her husband's] desperate financial straits and their guilt at being unable to send money to their families in Vietnam, Kim Phuc relinquished her plans to 'stay quiet'" (Chong

357) Her biography *The Girl in the Picture* opens with Kim Phuc hiding, full of anxiety, in her Toronto apartment from journalists who have discovered her address. She laments to her husband that the "journalistic hounds" felt like "a bomb falling out of the sky," equating the trauma of being a propaganda victim with being physically injured by war (6). It seems an unlikely coincidence that she and her husband gained permanent residence in 1995 (three years after they entered Canada) shortly after she re-entered public life (357). The precarious condition in which Kim Phuc speaks reveals that the testifier remains under duress. The limited framework of her testimony—one of forgiveness and grace—also shows the labor demanded of the Vietnamese female refugee in the memory war and her role as financial and cultural caretaker of her nation and family.

The hypervisibility of Kim Phuc's napalm burn masks the particularities of her life, simplifies the destruction of war, and marks it as over within a narrative of reconciliation and healing. The mobilization of disability reveals the effacing power of the regime of visibility to dehumanize not only people out of sight, but also the very people recognized. Moving across national, media, and temporal borders, her war-produced debilitation has attached to new narratives beyond the confines of her body. The symbolization of her napalm burns as the horror of the US military violence disappears her daily experiences of bodily pain. If the goal of witnessing is recognition of the perpetrated subject, then, indeed, witnessing fails not only Kim Phuc, but also the other millions of Vietnamese, Hmong, and Cambodians killed and maimed during the Vietnam-US War.

This dissertation aims to move the injury back to the body: to recognize the right to pain, not simply to live or die, but to experience all the complexity of pain. I am concerned with the possibility of caring about Kim Phuc's daily experiences of intense chronic pain, her mothering

as a burn survivor who cannot feel her children's touch, and her everyday movements and knowledge production as a result of the pain. The interiority of her life does not depoliticize the war-produced debilitation; it shifts the conversation away from the state's intentions, violence, and control and toward the subjects the state aims to encapsulate. Considering her pain through her interactions of being a daughter, wife, mother, neighbor, and friend humanizes her. The repetition of a few images collapses the meaning and depth of atrocity through verbal and visual cues.[2] Photographs become a metonymy for a larger terrain—an era, a culture, a war, a nation, a people. The faces of the Vietnamese civilian, immolating monk, and Vietnamese communist prisoner become the war and country. These images capture people, highlighting pain and fear on faces; however, they articulate a landscape. Frozen within the frames of black and white photographs, Vietnamese bodies are present but their subjectivities are absent. Vietnamese American writer Thanhha Lai recalls that "I . . . had my arm hair pulled the first day of school. The fourth graders wanted to make sure I was real, not an image they had seen on TV" (Author's Note). The need for Lai's classmates to pull her arm hair attests to the petrifaction power of images that makes it difficult to imagine her existence even as she stands, studies, and speaks in front of them. Recognizing the right to pain, then, returns the blood and flesh to the two-dimensional flatness of photographs and imagines the flinch and alienation Lai might feel when her arm hair was pulled.

My interest in Kim Phuc's daily interactions with pain highlights four key themes that I will explore throughout "The Right to Pain": 1) The relation between knowledge (via vision or

[2] When certain images are repeated without variations, these images can easily become accepted as truth. The process of turning people into objects not only results from the repetitive nature of media coverage, but also from the documentary nature of photographs. Please see Barbie Zelizer's *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye*.

voice) and justice; 2) How the structure of witness that calls on war-victims to speak reproduces power structures that permitted the injury; 3) The temporality of war-produced debilitation as ongoing and chronic, in which rescue and cure operate within the system of violence rather than as a termination point; and 4) The victim's body, as a testimony, carries indexicality and authenticity that resists appropriation by its very presence. Kim Phuc's testimony upholds the power that has injured her since it depends on the understanding, sympathy, and material responses of the power-wielding witness; however, it simultaneously has subversive command. Kim Phuc's daily experiences of pain—what her body knows—expand the scope of her appropriated testimony to consider how a victim enacts her own politics and recovery projects. The interiority of pain rejects both the objectification and romanticization of victimhood. I focus on pain because it centers vulnerability and encourages us to consider what it means to be interdependent. When it is shared *and acknowledged*, pain promotes social change, knowledge production, and community formation. I recognize war-produced debilitation as an encounter because the injury was produced by a violent collision *and* because pain elicits a reaching out—arms wide open, running towards us. The nature of the encounter creates social narratives, myths, and values. Ultimately, this dissertation recognizes that all testifiers, to various degrees, have the power to shift dominant culture and narrative and to hurt and exclude others.

Debility/ Trauma/ Pain

Wars are often bracketed by concrete dates; however, I am interested in the slow violence of military legacies, to use postcolonial eco-critic Rob Nixon's term, on Vietnamese bodies during and after the war. This dissertation examines visible disablement, invisible disabilities, unborn fetuses, congenital diseases, mining accidents, dioxin poisoning, suicide, collective trauma, rape, poverty, guilt, shame, anxiety and loneliness. War-produced disability reveals the

communal nature of the mass debilitation of millions, who are stitched together by shared pain, but who also pull away from each other because pain ruptures each body uniquely, at times enveloping and choking to prevent communication, understanding, and connection. While I use pain, disability, debility, injury, and trauma interchangeably, I favor the term "pain" because it captures a collective debilitation and also carries subjectivity to highlight individual knowledge. Pain is both specific and universal. The term's common deployment operates inside and outside medical and psychoanalytical frameworks. Its vagueness blurs the Western body-and-mind divide. The Vietnamese, after all, understand grief as the rotting of one's bowels: *buon thoi ruot*. As the term "debilitation" aims to acknowledge injured bodies not recognized or identified as disabled and the obscured endemic forms of debility, the term "pain" seeks to illuminate the living on with debilitation—the daily engagement with that injury in a continuously harmful environment. The term "pain" captures the material reality of debilitation while also attending to the everyday experiences of creating, loving, surviving as disabled.

Despite war-produced disabilities' root in a mass debilitation, I call on the importance of also thinking about pain on an individual level. Julie Livingston and Jasbir Puar have disrupted the understanding of disability as individual experience. Julie Livingston, writing on bodily impaired miners in Botswana who do not necessarily articulate their plight in relation to disability, uses the term "debility," to capture "experiences of chronic illness and senescence, as well as disability per se." Her coinage critiques Euro-American disability studies that often rely on "a notion of individual selfhood, complete with an individually bounded body that is itself a social construct" (113). Puar mobilizes the term "debilitation" to highlight the "massification" and endemic violence experienced by marginal people that is sanctioned through its normalization "as a normal consequence of laboring" (xvii, xvi). Livingston's and Puar's

contributions to disability studies reveal the disability identity for marginal communities as inaccessible and, in effect, harmful because it fails to acknowledge the mass debilitation of so many people who experience poisoning and violence even before birth. Disability is normal.

The massification of such violence has led Asian American studies and ethnic studies in general to perform the work of disability studies without using the language of disability because the field conceptualizes illness as experienced by an individual body rather than a politicized community. Jigna Desai, in "DSM: Asian American Edition" of *Open in Emergency,* writes, "'disability' is a word that our immigrant tongues did not utter; we swallowed it whole, choking on its foreign sound" (118). Asian American Studies' de-emphasis of disability results from its grassroots history, constructed to challenge systematic exclusion and discrimination against Asian-marked bodies. Many of us are more familiar with colonialism, war, exile, racism, and poverty. Formed from what Yen Le Espiritu coins "reactive solidarity," Asian America seeks to resist systematic oppression and to disrupt and transform.[3] As Viet Nguyen writes, "bodies in Asian American literature are never just individually significant but point instead to the intersecting relations of race, class, gender, and sexuality that ascribe the meaning and substance to the very idea of an *Asian American* body" (*Race* 17, emphasis in text). Indeed, war-produced disability (both the direct injury caused by the war in the Vietnam and the injuries produced by exile, poverty, and racism in the US) is collective by nature. I share the investment in material historicity; however, I also find it to be a limiting framework for considering the voices and interiority of people living in pain. Illness may be considered a personal tragedy that does not add to collective advancement. However, there are ethical and material ramifications for this

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[3] Espiritu, Yen Le. *Asian American Panethnicity*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992.

elision, bolstering negative stereotypes of disabled people, upholding the model minority myth, and exclusive politics. I am cautious about how these frameworks might not make room for some illnesses, such as cancer, fibromyalgia, and STDs.

Understanding the operation of debilitation on marginalized people reveals little about the people. The attention on the bodily level rejects the dominant tendency to reduce a marginal collective to an abstraction (which also leads to objectification). A focus on bodily pain as a critical source of knowledge is not a claim for individuality. It asserts a claim on intimacy—to be a mother, daughter, partner, or friend. In order to demonstrate the importance to attending to individual and collective levels of debilitation, I consider the police killing of a 25-year-old, poor Vietnamese American woman. On July 13, 2003, Bich Cau Thi Tran, a mother of 3- and 4-year-old boys, was fatally shot in her home by a San Jose police officer who was investigating a report of an unsupervised child. Tran was holding a vegetable peeler that the officer claimed looked like a cleaver. Tran's murder is an example of the debilitation of a marginal community that is too familiar to working class immigrants (particularly in light of the police killing of Brian Duy Pham, a 29 year-old Vietnamese American man with mental illness, in his home): police excessive force on brown bodies, neighbor surveillance, perpetual foreignness deemed threatening, and therefore, necessary to kill. Tran's health also articulates the endemic nature of her debilitation within a neoliberal economy. The court and many news articles remark on Tran's mental health, which led to several incidents with the police and hospitalizations between 2001 and 2003. Her partner notes that her psychiatric problems began after the birth of their younger child in 2000 and that she often stopped taking medication because it made her tired.[4] As with

[4] See Gathright, Alan (23 Oct 2003). "Woman shot by cop called no threat." *San Francisco Chronicle*. Retrieved 13 Jan 2020. Glionna, John M.; Tran, Mai (July 22, 2003). "Police killing divides San Jose." *Los Angeles Times.* Retrieved 13 Jan 2020.

many acts of violence, her mental illness was called on to explain a preventable killing. The combination of her mental illness, the foreignness of an Asian vegetable peeler to the police officer, and her poor English (as argued) marked her as threatening to the neighbors and the officer. Her death, then, reveals the overlap of racism and ableism to justify the debilitation of immigrants in the US. The correlation between her illness and her child's birth raises concerns about the lack of postpartum care and affordable childcare options for working-poor women. The naming of Tran's pain as "mental illness" inadequately captures all the variables that led to her death. While her decision to not take her medication was seen to indicate noncompliance, it reflects the inaccessibility of medical intervention under debilitating living conditions in which she cannot afford to be tired. Even before her death, she was already marked as disposable within a US capitalist and exploitative society. Tran's murder reflects a debilitation of a people. Recognizing that her murder by a police officer could happen to any of them, the California Vietnamese community protested to demand accountability and compensation for her family.

While recognizing the material reality of Tran's death, I am also curious about her daily expressions of mental illness and coping with that pain. Her life deserves details. She is more than the mental illness, the debilitation, police brutality, the condition of her migration, and the structural violence that resulted in her murder. What were her daily interactions with her family members and various communities? My interests in the intimate space is not to place blame on individuals but to consider the possibility of her neighbor asking Tran if she needed help that day, offering to watch the children, or to pick up the toddler herself if she was concerned about his immediate safety rather than to call the police. The type of interventions I have in mind are at the level of personal engagements—how to witness as a neighbor, classmate, partner, parent, and teacher. How might her children's teachers engage with them and destabilize the multiple forms

of debilitation that killed their mother? How does her death shape her sons' lives as they position themselves in the US as Vietnamese American men? Tran's murder represents the ongoingness of debilitation long after the Vietnam-US War, unveiling the impossible preconditions and demands of romanticized institutions of asylum, marriage, and humanitarianism and the slow torture of her sons, who watched their mother get shot in front of them by a guardian of secrutiy and must live motherless. In chapter two, I explore the pedagogical gifts that a close focus on a victim's life can offer as an intervention to a conversation on US maiming and killing systems of working-poor immigrants—such a discussion can never truly include us (Vietnamese Americans, immigrants, disabled people, poor people). I am not particularly invested in the affirmative and identitarian understanding of disability promoted by dominant Western disability studies; however, the social, cultural, financial, and political possibility of claiming a disability identity for all individuals is important not only for material resources but for community formation, particularly for immigrants and refugees who live in predominantly white spaces. Outside of disenfranchised communities colonialism, war, exile, racism, and poverty might not be recognizable (and therefore, ineffective) for capturing illnesses.

Failure to Witness

Models of witnessing give too much interpretive power to the witness, allowing a privileged group to define what counts as pain, the identity of victims, and appropriate reparation and healing methods. This permits the system that endorses the act of violence to judge if that act has caused harm. In the closed system of witnessing, the savior is often also the perpetrator. The limited scope of Kim Phuc's pain and the Vietnamese state's adoption of hegemonic depictions of disability in the post-World War II culture of human rights reveal that the success of a testimony depends on its ability to translate the testifier's experiences into the language and

frame of reference of the witness. Language (verbal or visual) is critical to discussions of witnessing. However, the question of legibility places the responsibility on the victims to convince the onlookers that they deserve intervention. The focus is on the worth of the speaking testifier, rather than on the violent system debilitating a population. Concerns about legibility present observers as unknowing even as they benefit from the maiming structure.

I contend that the indifference, disavowal, or appropriation of pain results from a structure of witnessing that accepts violence and injuries on some subjects as unexceptional. Despite the wide circulation of pain in every medium—including photographs, videos, and texts—evidence of pain has not halted systematic and casual acts of violence. Visual evidence is not an objective perceptual phenomenon. Why has our infrastructure of justice failed to offer relief, accommodation, and justice for the person in pain despite awareness of physical and psychological pain? The question "Who has the right to pain?" is a recognition of the limitation of visual knowledge to promote justice. The question seeks to expose that the pain experienced by some marked bodies is perceived as deserving and natural. Pain, illness, and disability are naturalized within marginalized communities because the terms of death are gendered, racialized, classed, and ableist. The politics of witnessing is the politics of life.

I define witnessing as a mode of knowledge in which an individual incorporates another person's experiences. Witnessing is highly subjective. Its subjective nature is most powerful because it works profoundly on the individual's imagination and affective economy and, thus, has political and kinetic momentum to reach out to individuals in pain. However, witnessing that depends on relatability and proximity inevitably fails the most marginalized people of society because their experiences cannot easily be incorporated in normative narratives. As I will detail further in my discussion of the War Remnants Museum (WRM), it is precisely Western nations'

failure to recognize Vietnam as a part of its community that allowed the atrocities to occur. As Hannah Arendt notes, what matters most was "not the loss of specific rights, then, but the loss of a community willing and able to guarantee any rights whatsoever" (297). The precondition of inclusion is a reason witnessing so often fails the person in pain. That question of how to witness the suffering of others prioritizes the position of the spectator and presumes that the observer might not be a refugee from empire and its wars. Ethics discourse values the formation of the ethical self through the relation to the other. An ethical self, then, results from a philosophical discovery of an abstract Other, an intellectual exploration on the politics of reading or seeing, or a self-empowerment through an interaction with a person in pain while leaving intact the system that produced the pain. Within this framework, the victim has no room to be moral. The self and other dichotomy draws a border of humanity. As a result, I do not consider empathy or compassion to be indicative of a successful testimony. While I am invested in affective shifts within the witnessing exchange, an emphasis on empathy or compassion privileges the analytical position of the listener/observer. In reality, marginal bodies tend to draw negative affects of disgust and anxiety, which sanctioned their debilitation in the first place. The listener's empathy says little about the system of violence or the testifier.

In lê thi diem thúy's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (2003), the nameless narrator compares her father and other Vietnamese refugees to a butterfly in a paperweight that cannot be heard. Believing that it is alive, trapped, and crying, she begs her uncles to help her free the butterfly. Unmoved by the possibility of the butterfly's tears, the uncles ask the narrator, "What does crying mean in this country? Your Ba cries in the garden every night and nothing comes of it . . . nothing" (27). The child repeatedly sees her father crying in the dark and "staring at the moon like a lost dog" and fears that his tears would cause them to "spill out of [their] bodies"

and “dissolve” (8, 109). The child’s translation of the butterfly’s crying points to the importance of the legibility of language to secure help; however, the uncles point to the failure of a universal language (crying) to elicit concern. Knowing does not guarantee action or even sympathy. The cry is audible but irrelevant. I honor the cry (the testimony) because the disavowal of pain is also a denial of her father’s devotion to his wife left behind in Vietnam, his mourning of his son who died during the journey into the US, and his desires to protect his daughter. Pain and expressions of pain reveal individual desires. The right to pain is the right to love. Studies on ethics and witnessing that focus on the viewing or listening habits of the witness without deep attention to the victim’s narrative risk reinscribing the denial of life.

Testimony

My dissertation centers on two questions: Who has the right to pain? Who is permitted to speak about the issues of injustice affecting them? I explore these questions through examination of what I will broadly define as testimonies by US Vietnamese and the Vietnamese state. I consider testimonies as an expression of a direct, authentic experience of pain with the deliberate goal of reaching out for change. Each chapter explores different genres, forms, and audiences of testimonies. I move between visual and literary representations alongside social and political contexts, weaving together representations of realities and fictional narratives. My experiences as a disabled Vietnamese American mother and those of my community are also objects of investigation. At times, I use the plural first-person when the experience of the testifier is also my own and those of my family and community. At other times, I am present because my field work in Vietnam demanded my physical presence as I interviewed, took photographs, and observed museum visitors and objects. Much of my knowledge in this dissertation comes from my engagements—from the conversations often shared in a whisper—with my community. Part

of my work is to create an archive of Vietnamese American stories—to index experiences from people who cannot write or speak publically for various reasons.

I value each of these different critical sites of knowledge on pain because victims express pain in various forms based on complicated access, power, and personal artistic considerations. At times, oppressed writers may choose to testify through fiction, which feels safer than nonfiction forms and maintains loyalty to their communities. Debates about genres and style that do not consider the needs and safety of the artists have been used to dismiss marginal voices. For example, trauma studies in literary fields have prioritized fragmented, nonlinear narratives, as they mirror the conceptualization of trauma that manifests through flashbacks. This preference leads to the dismissal of literature that falls outside of, to borrow Stef Crap's words, "a relatively small body of mostly Western high-brow works of art" (43). The valuation of one narrative form over another reveals an ideology of interpretation of traumatic experiences that risks erasure and normalizes pain outside Western societies. Many art and literary disability studies scholars, such as Tobin Siebers, Maren Tova Linett, and Michael Davidson, are particularly interested in modernist uses of disability as a metaphor for the instabilities and traumas of modernity. Siebers describes the prevalence of disability in modernism as "modern art's love affair with misshapen and twisted bodies, stunning variety of human forms, intense representation of traumatic injury and psychological alienation, and unyielding preoccupation with wounds and tormented flesh?" (4). The prioritization of modernism as a site of study overlooks non-Western narratives and misses critical opportunities to acknowledge debilitations across diverse communities and their disability art and cultures.

The study and valuation of certain forms (while also making them inaccessible) reflects the problematic demand for the testifier to speak in a particular language and frame of reference.

Autobiographical writing as a genre has served as a vehicle through which many disabled and ethnic writers have gained publication and recognition. The ethnic writer is forced to meet expectations of the writing industry, which Viet Nguyen explains is part of the war industry (*Nothing* 218). People who have been historically silenced and whose speech is heard through dominant narratives depend on crude sympathy—*please don't look away.* Can tourists understand Vietnamese pain in abstract forms? Would they pause long enough to do interpretive labor? Could the tourist industry promote a Vietnamese art museum? Marginal people constantly beg for a witness. With deep reservations, we display our dying or dead bodies because the structure of witnessing demands them. Safe, healthy, and wealthy people always demand more proof. *This did happen. My mother is shot. My father is dying. Here are my scars.*—there is no room or time to dress up our dying. Our shock, our pain, our desperation, our illegible language, we can only offer a scream, which often becomes hoarse and deadens to silence. Exasperated, our parents turn blind or to poison, waiting for us to learn a language and pick up a pen. The urgency for intervention prevents pain from being sublime or beautiful. Form as category of aesthetic value acts as another means for silencing pain.

Indexicality

I consider the WRM, US Vietnamese fictional accounts, photographs, and memoirs as testimonies because they carry indexicality. By indexicality, I simply mean a literal trace of the Vietnam-US War. "The Right to Pain" focuses on disability, as a material and bodily connection to the war, as the index. The war-produced debilitation is a bridge, linking history to the present, event to language, self to an audience. The connecting power provides the testimony with urgency and ethical dimensions. As I described with the mobilization of Kim Phuc's napalm scars, the imprint of the war can be detached and circulated to make pain into theatre. Within the

context of erasure and appropriation, I focus on the index as a way to claim authenticity and truth and to return to the person in pain the narrating power. I am not interested in the trace's alliance to realism, as evident by my investment in the testimonial value of fictional accounts. However, the incessant doubt and demand for proof position truth as a matter of life or death. The acknowledgement of the referentiality of war produced injuries, then, is an affirmation of existence. As I have stated, I hold onto the importance of testimony despite the limits of witnessing. The return (again and again) to the trace permits infinite opportunities to challenge refusal to see violence and pain. While its power may not be immediate, the circulation of testimony destabilizes the narrative control of people in power and builds communities.

Time is a critical consideration of testimony—when is it safe to tell? When is there an audience to tell? When is there language to tell? The focus on the indexicality of a testimony calls for urgency, rejecting notions of the past. Positioning pain as an index imprints not only the violence, but the subjective knowledge and experience. What becomes clear is that the index shifts with time. Kim Phuc's burn heals, undergoes surgeries, and ages. In 2016, Kim Phuc received free laser treatments, which significantly reduced her pain and allowed her feel her grandson when she holds him for the first time.[5] Despite the drastic changes of her burn, its presence still indexes the raining of napalm bombs on June 8, 1972. The condition of the imprint depends deeply on how the testifier is able to reach an audience. The speakers of the testimonies that reach an audience are the ones alive, safe, and secure enough to speak. Their safety, as their testimonies indicate, is exceptional. As a result, testifiers most commonly testify on behalf of others. Each chapter of this dissertation presents the ongoingness of debilitation—the ever-

[5] Free, Cathy. 22 Sept. 2017. "Vietnam War's 'Napalm Girl' Sees Her Scars as 'Beautiful' Following Innovative Burn Treatment: 'I Fought for My Life.'" *People Magazine.* Accessed 17 January 2020. https://people.com/human-interest/vietnam-wars-napalm-girl-kim-phuc-burn-treatment/

presence of the wound, the daily effort to heal, the still toxic living conditions, the intergenerational effect, and the ongoing wars and dislocation of so many millions. I find the framework on ongoingness important to consider the widely discussed presence of landmines and toxic chemicals from the war that still disable and kill Vietnamese alongside the banishment of disabled people whose disablement cannot fit neatly into the narrative of foreign invasion; the domestic violence in conjunction to the granting of asylum through marriage; the orphaning of Vietnamese children and rape alongside the adoption of a Vietnamese child into a wealthy, white family. These juxtapositions present saving/healing acts of humanitarian aid, marriage, and adoption as part of the debilitation process. The preconditions and demands of these institutions are themselves debilitating. Dressed by narratives of cure, asylum, or aid, they silence the reality of debilitation.

Forgiveness

Testimony attempts to build a community with people who have already marked the victim as an outsider not worthy of the same living conditions that they enjoy. As a result forgiveness acts as a guiding force for testimony even as the motives and expressions vary in different cultural productions. As we see with the US and Vietnamese deployment of Kim Phuc's pain, forgiveness can be appropriated as readily as disability. The transformation of Kim Phuc from the most visible victim of the Vietnam-US War to an ambassador of peace and forgiveness, as Mimi Nguyen cogently shows in *The Gift of Freedom,* ultimately legitimizes the violence inherent within liberal empire's promise of freedom. I agree with Nguyen that the US does (and successfully) usurp refugees' forgiveness and success to promote the myth of US exceptionalism; however, to end the conversation on the politics of forgiveness with the intentions and use of the state erases the refugees' reality and politics.

If the common understanding of state torture is a physical disciplinary act to force the victim to say what the regime wants to hear, slow torture might be understood as a psychological disciplinary act and withholding of resources. The misrepresentation of forgiveness *is* torture, "the obsessive display of agency," showing the absolute power of the one not in pain to misunderstand, overlook, and dismiss pain (Scarry 18). There is a long history of the US exploiting the successes of Vietnamese refugees to validate capitalist expansion, discipline other marginalized communities, self-promote its benevolence and role as protector of democracy, and justify new wars. US Vietnamese scholars have been outspoken about the deployment of US Vietnamese narratives to garner war support, essentially using Vietnamese refugees as weapons. Opening the first monograph on US Vietnamese literature with President Bush's speech to Veterans of Foreign Wars on August 22, 2007, Isabelle Pelaud shows that "Vietnamese refugees' tears, losses, and blood were suddenly reinserted into the historical narrative, not to learn from these experiences but to request more funds to continue a war in Iraq. This revisionist national rhetoric appropriates human rights violations to allow America to shed itself of national responsibility and guilt, and rationalizes conquest and war" (7). In *The Gift of Freedom,* Mimi Nguyen also connects the War in the Middle East with the Vietnam-US War in order to show not only the continuing deployment of liberal war/peace rhetoric, but also how the Vietnam-US War is recuperated within US American public discourse to justify new wars. She begins with a preface about Operation Iraqi Freedom to present "liberal war and liberal peace as conjoined operations" that produces hostile living environments that people must escape while only offering refuge to relatively few people (xii). Pelaud, Nguyen, and many US Vietnamese artists, activists, and scholars are deeply concerned about all wars because we live with its effects.

This context of mobilizing forgiveness and refugees' success demands further exploration on the politics of forgiveness. The misrepresentation of forgiveness disappears the wounded body and depoliticizes violence, making pain visible while denying and falsifying it. Forgiveness marks an occurred atrocity, belonging to the person in pain. The focus on indexicality—to insist on presence of the wound— resists the appropriation of testimonies that absorbs the victim's pain and translates an act of civility to verification of the regime's liberalism. As I will detail in each chapter, the testifier forgives for multiple reasons— to assert moral authority, to make material demands, to cope, and to have community. Surviving, as all three chapters will show, depends on forgiveness.

Chapter Outlines

Each chapter of "The Right to Pain" examines the body as testimony—the visible Agent Orange impairment and invisible illnesses of transhistorical pain and synesthesia—as another way to know the Vietnam-US War. The first chapter "Disabled Nation: The Disability Aesthetics of Ugly and Beautiful Suffering in the War Remnants Museum" continues the discussion that this introduction initiated: the use of visible war-produced debilitation by the US and Vietnam to construct coherent national identities and promote geopolitical agendas. These two nations present a narrow definition of disability under the regime of visibility, designating what counts as war-produced injury. By masking numerous other debilitations, they absolve their responsibility to those with invisible disabilities. Drawing on my numerous visits to the state-sponsored WRM and interviews with its director, I consider the museum as a national testimony and argue that Vietnam leverages the affective registry of disability through two distinct disability visualities—ugly and beautiful suffering—in order to testify to US war crimes, demand reparations, and promote a postcolonial identity based on shared victimhood and sacrifice.

Forgiveness, in this national testimony, is conditionally given in order to both accuse and reconcile. This chapter reveals witnessing as an inadequate model for regarding the pain of others as it maintains an asymmetrical power structure in which the privileged few determine who is worthy of relief from pain. Vietnam depends on a rhetoric of victimhood, which is ultimately limiting, to claim moral superiority over the more influential US. Effective testimony operates within a larger context of power that determines how the testifier speaks, who gets to judge the legitimacy of the testimony, and the reparations. The deployment of disability as evidence of foreign aggression presents disability as inherently abject and in need of cure and fails to imagine a society that accommodates, includes, and values disabled people. The disabled Vietnamese who falls outside the state-sponsored narrative becomes the collateral damage of this memory war.

Chapter two, "'pain itself was a voice': Witnessing Rejected Experiences in Le Ly Hayslip's Memoirs" shifts focus from visible disability to the normalized violence of rape, poverty, and the destruction of families and culture, overlooked in discussions of war. Rather than staying trapped in conversations about the national structures of debilitation that would never fully recognize the victims, I center their experiences and agency and, following Anne Cheng, to "ask what it means, for social, political, and subjective beings to grieve" (7). I read Hayslip's memoirs *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, (cowritten with Jay Wurts,1989) and *Child of War, Woman of Peace* (cowritten with James Hayslip, 1993) together as an illness testimony, a site of knowledge constructed from an individual's authentic experiences of illness with the intention of promoting legal or social change at an intimate and institutional level. I begin by naming Hayslip's illness as transhistorical pain to present how her body indexes the embodied cumulative impact of colonialism, war, dislocation, and sexual assault. I call for the

reading of her testimony as a gift. The illness testimony establishes the economy of gender under militarism as a maiming and killing war machine and teaches readers a witnessing practice across difference and incompatibility and her healing strategies that do not privilege Western medical conceptions of illness.

In the third chapter, "The Disabled Structure of Testimony in Monique Truong's *Bitter in the Mouth*," I examine the retrospective bildungsroman about Linda Hammerick, a Vietnamese adoptee with synesthesia, to raise questions about testimony's accessibility and truth. I begin by suggesting that Linda's synesthesia is an index of the Vietnam-US War, being orphaned, trans-racial adoption, and ontological difference. Her bodily responses to the deep pain of isolation and rape also index the sexual terrorism produced by the gender economy under militarism, racism, and the impossible demand for her to perform physical and cultural labor for the US. This chapter shows that witnessing places great burdens on the victim, demanding answers she cannot, does not want to share, or does not know. By focusing on Linda's negation of her own pain, amnesia, and deliberate withholding of information, I call for re-witnessing, an interpretive practice that foregrounds somatic knowledge, recognizes the unreliability of storytellers, and incorporates the historical and social contexts of imperialism, war, and race. Re-witnessing permits *becoming*, a term I borrow from Linda. Becoming is an affective and accountable response that does not objectify or appropriate the testifier's pain. Becoming initiates the start of a community. It makes demands of the privileged observer to participate in the burden and responsibility to pronounce the violent history. Constructing intimacy and forgiveness are central to this testimony. Linda's testimony seeks intimate belonging rather than criminalization and reparations.

In this dissertation I resist the framework of testimony as a relationship between testifier and witness, in which the listener is positioned as savior/analyst/ healer, and instead, point to the complexity of testimony—its tense negotiation of motives, languages, frameworks and multiple audiences. In the conclusion, I surface other components of testimony that I have not covered, namely domestic violence. I consider domestic violence in 1.5- and second-generation Vietnamese texts as an ellipsis of a testimony, as indexed history postponed for future discussion. I distinguish between the desire and demand for secrets to account for different modes of censorship from various sources: self, family, community, and the publishing industry. In doing so, I call for a future of US Vietnamese studies that focuses on ugliness—that is, to move away from desirability, beauty, independence, and progress. I want to look closely at our bodies—the bleeding, evicted, intoxicated, aborted, shaking, self-mutilated, anxious, lonely, running away, dying, and hung bodies— in order to consider the possibility of healing.

1// Disabled Nation: The Disability Aesthetics of Ugly and Beautiful Suffering in the War Remnants Museum

> "In my personal view, I hated them and I am very hostile to them. At this time if I saw them again I could kill them, but now it's happened a long time ago everybody's getting old. Maybe I can forgive them but I request them to get compensation for my family because I didn't have the money to give them a decent grave." Bui Thi Luom, 2001[6]
>
> I want to meet Bob Kerrey and talk to him . . . All my relatives are dead and it would be great if he could offer me something." Bui Thi Luom, 2017[7]

In 2001, Bui Thi Luom, a forty-four-year-old Vietnamese woman living in Thanh Phong, became a public figure when CBS's *60 Minutes II: Memories of a Massacre* reported on the military operation led by Bob Kerrey in Thanh Phong on February 25, 1969. Kerrey's Navy team initially reported that they had killed twenty-one Vietnamese communist fighters. However, Gerhard Klann, a Navy SEAL who was at Kerrey's side that night, contradicted the account when he disclosed that women and children were rounded up and shot at point-blank range that night. Bui and Pham Thi Lanh were the two Vietnamese eyewitnesses who corroborated Gerhard Klann's account. Bui's statement to *The Associated Press* reveals the structure of testimony when the testifier remains under duress. In need of economic support, she constructs the crime as the past—"a long time ago"— and promises forgiveness. Bui's request for compensation reflects

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[6] "Vietnam Kerrey." *AP Archive.* 6 May 2001. Accessed 27 January 2020. http://www.aparchive.com/metadata/youtube/892db4a2c50e35d221f2b6bb87ef98fd

[7] Godfrey, Calvin. "Forgetting Thanh Phong." *VN Express International.* 5 Jan 2017. Accessed 27 January 2020. https://e.vnexpress.net/news/travel-life/forgetting-thanh-phong-3523710.html

not only to her poverty but also to the Vietnamese culture of ancestral worship. A “decent grave” is not a luxury, but a way to help the murdered dead pass peacefully into the spirit land. The money would help her carry out her obligations to her ancestors, which is considered a human duty in her culture. Bui did not remain in in the public eye; sixteen years later she still repeats the possibility of forgiveness and need for compensation.

In 2016 she briefly reentered public consciousness when Kerrey was appointed chairman of the board of trustees of the US-backed Fulbright University Vietnam (FUV). The college, Vietnam’s first independent, private, and nonprofit liberal arts university, is part of the effort to make Vietnam a strategic partner of the US, along with lifting the US arms embargo, the invitation of the Peace Corps to Vietnam to teach English, and visits from President Barrack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry. The controversy of his appointment brought reporters back to her door. Speaking to Calvin Godfrey in 2017, Bui says, “I have scars all over my body, and my knee injury is the largest one . . . I can still feel the pain” as she rolls up a pant leg to point to the visible evidence. When asked about Kerrey’s appointment, she points to the ways the reconciliation and development of the two former enemies have not included her: “I don't think my kids or grandkids would ever make it there . . . They'll drop out of school around the eighth grade to start working” (n.p). Now 61, Bui has still not received financial assistance for the doctor’s visits she requires for the knee wound from the raid. Isabelle Taft reports that Bui “says she is tired of talking about the massacre, and the next time a journalist comes to town she won’t . . . she still thinks someone—Kerrey or the US government—should do something to make amends for Thanh Phong’s suffering. She does not believe it will ever happen” (n.p). Her declaration that she will stop speaking to journalists reflects the frustration and hopelessness of many poor victims who live with the ongoing consequences of the atrocity which remain

unalleviated and overlooked.[8] Bui's rejection of the imperative to testify challenges the humanist investment in narration and points to the need for socio-economic and material change. Despite demands for Bui's testimony in 2001 as a way to contextualize Kerrey's appointment in 2016, Bui's experiences remained within the cultural realm without translating to caring for the violations she faced and continues to live with. Bui's public engagement highlights the gap between knowledge and action. It also raises questions on the visibility of war-produced injuries, as her injuries appear and evaporate, while Kerrey's amputated leg arouses sympathy, admiration, and gratitude. Awarded the Medal of Honor for heroism in Vietnam, Kerrey enjoyed a prominent political career as governor, senator, and presidential nominee after the war. Even after the truth about the Thanh Phong Massacre became public knowledge, Kerrey served as president of The New School from 2001 to 2010. The difference between the recognition of their war injuries loudly presents who has the right to pain.

As I described in the introduction, the two former enemies mobilize the visuality of disability—a selective and erasing visuality—to simultaneously reconcile and assert their own righteous identity in the memory war. The appointment of Kerrey to the chair of an US-backed university displays a US war victim, who is not only physically disabled but also psychologically haunted by the war. The US upholds the new relationship as an unequal one, in which Vietnam is the fortunate beneficiary of US magnanimity. The US's role in the production of Vietnamese injuries and deaths is erased. The FUV Establishment Ceremony took place at the Rex Hotel, the location of daily press briefings during the war, in which body counts were announced as indicators of US military success. In response to the controversy of Kerrey's appointment, US

[8] See, for example, Christopher Colvin's "'Brothers and Sisters, Do Not be Afraid of Me': Trauma, History and the Therapeutic Imagination in the New South Africa." on the opposition by the victims of the apartheid era of violence to the therapeutic ethic informing the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

leaders defended him as a hero. Thomas Vallely, a key figure behind the university, expressed surprise at the backlash to Kerrey's appointment. He explained, "I don't think Thanh Phong is a negative. I think Thanh Phong is an asset" (Taft n.p.). As an economic term, "asset" is deeply entrenched in neoliberalism and US exceptionalism. Vallely implicitly argues, then, that the war is Vietnam's greatest asset to development because it effectively draws US generosity.[9] The naming of a massacre as an asset echoes Obama's naming of the war as a gift that "allowed us" to help remove landmines, clean land filled with Agent Orange, and assist disabled Vietnamese (n.p).

The positioning of the war as an asset not only demands forgetting, it re-writes the lost war into a successful humanitarian project. Speaking on the FUV, Obama explains that it will offer Vietnamese students "full academic freedom" and "a world-class education right here in Vietnam" with the subtext that only through partnership with the US can Vietnam become modernized and desirable to its own citizens. At the FUV Establishment Ceremony in Ho Chi Minh City, Secretary of State John Kerry echoed Obama's subtle chastising of Vietnam's human rights violations: "Its students are optimistic and eager to make the most of their talents and skills, and they're also outward-looking. Today . . . millions have grown accustomed to expressing themselves freely on the internet. This is hugely important because freedom of inquiry, freedom of thought, freedom of expression, are essential to a 21st century education." The word "freedom" rings over and over, establishing a moral divide between the US and Vietnam. Obama and Kerry imply that in order for Vietnam to enter the 21st century, US intervention is imperative. By pointing to the "outward-looking" students, Kerry directs his

[9] Part of the US money used to fund Fulbright University Vietnam comes from Vietnam, which agreed to repay about $140 million worth of war-time debt incurred by South Vietnam demanded back by the US in 1997. In 2014, Bob Kerrey persuaded Congress to allocate $17.5 million remaining in the Vietnam Debt Repayment Fund to institutional innovation in Vietnam.

comments to the majority of Vietnamese who grew up after the US War ended, "the war is an indelible but an increasingly distant memory. And for most, it's not a memory at all. Certainly, the students who are going to enroll at this university are far more interested in plugging into the world economy than in being stuck in the past or re-living memories of events that took place long before they were born" (Kerry n.p.). In Kerry's formulation, modernization and global integration are antithetical to memory. The invocations of rights and freedom serve to legitimate the intervention in Vietnamese education and the construction of its history, ultimately elevating the US to a superior moral status within a country that has most challenged that identity. Similarly, Bob Kerrey, unsurprised by the controversy of his appointment, simply and flatly stated, "To me, the question is, do you really want to live in the past or do you want to live in the present, trying to build a better future?" (Taft n.p.). Like Obama and Kerry, Kerrey associates progress with forgetting. There is a demand for Vietnam to forget US war crimes and affirm the US as a humanitarian leader if it wishes to advance. Kerrey has also responded, "I have come to admire the Vietnamese people greatly and intend to continue doing all I can do to help them" (Paddock n.p.). In this instance, rather than engage the controversy directly, he shifts attention to his humanitarian labor ("all I can do to help them"). The focus on his charity adheres to a white savior complex that has guided colonialism under the guise of paternal altruism, and the ongoing temporality ("to continue") blurs his contrasting roles in Vietnam as a leader of a massacre and of education reform.

I use the example of Bob Kerrey's appointment as chairman of FUV's board of trustees to contextualize the conditions of testimony, in which evidence of pain is ignored. US leaders refused to register Vietnamese indignation and losses. Economic and social advancement are presented as only possible through Vietnam's willingness to silence its ongoing war pains. Even

though these contemporary US projects in Vietnam have immediate security and economic benefits to the US, they construct the Vietnam-US War as a philanthropic effort to rescue Vietnam. US politicians capitalize on Vietnam's vulnerable economy and military during a time of escalated border disputes with China by rejecting Vietnamese pain from the war and denying accountability for US military aggression. When manifestations of pain are actually mentioned (the children's amputations and birth defects caused by landmines, unexploded bombs, and Agent Orange in Obama's address), they are framed as problems the US helps to fix rather than problems the US produced. Together these speeches raise questions about who controls memory and the productivity of memory for economic and military development. They expose the structure of witnessing, in which the testifier does not have authority and the testimony can be dismissed as antagonistic to progress, and thus, raise moral concerns of the unequal power of interpretation. What are the human costs of dismissing some experiences of pain as antithetical to progress?

Despite its weaker economic, cultural, military, and political power, the Vietnamese state is not passive. While Vietnamese officials were initially reticent about the appointment, in 2017 the Minister of Information and Communications Truong Minh described the appointment as an effort to distort history: "There have been several articles in the mainstream media that not only sought to legitimize the appointment, but also conflated the tasks of a soldier with war crimes that violate international laws." He explained that Kerrey had confessed to the crimes, which were initially exposed by US media. The minister's article demonstrates that over the course of a year, it became safe to challenge the US appointment and the Vietnamese need to point to US media and international laws when it speaks out against the US. He also depends on a rhetoric of evidence: "There is even proof of the event on display at the War Remnants Museum" (Godfrey

n.p). By early 2017 the president of FUV Dam Bich Thuy quietly took on the position of de facto chair. It would take two years, in 2018, for Kerrey to be officially replaced by Helen Kim Bottomly, who previously served as President of Wellesley College. Despite the US insistence on forgetfulness, the WRM officially remembers the raid on Thanh Phong. The memorialization of the massacre begins with a poster size description of the event in Vietnamese and English:

> From 8 PM to 9 PM on February 25th, 1969, a group of Seal Rangers . . . led by Lieutenant Bob Kerrey . . . cut 66 year-old Bui Van Vat and 62 year-old Luu Thi Canh's necks and pulled their three grandchildren out of their hiding place in a drain and killed two, disembowelled *[sic]* one. Then, these rangers moved to dug-outs of other families, shot dead 15 civilians (including three pregnant women), disembowelled a girl. The only survivor was a 12-year-old girl named Bui Thi Luom, who suffered a foot injury. (Figure 1)

The detailed and graphic of the brutal events conveys chilling violence, verisimilitude, and firsthand witnessing. To visually substantiate the poster description, the exhibit also shows two images of Bob Kerrey— a service photograph from 1965 when he was in Vietnam and a contemporary portrait when he was a senator— to show his prestigious status despite *and because of* his leadership in the massacre—portraits of Vietnamese witnesses, the names of the twenty victims from the massacre, a collage of the Bui family, and part of the drain in which the Bui children hid.

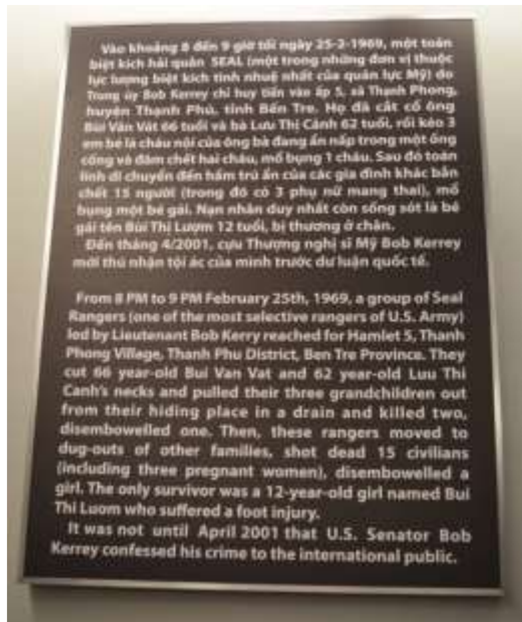

Figure 1: Poster description of Thanh Phong Massacre, in Exhibit "Toi Ac Chien Tranh Xam Luoc: Aggression War Crimes"

While the verbal description reveals the gruesome murders, the images of the Bui family focus on honoring the dead. The collage shows five graves, their living daughter holding a photograph of Mr. Bui, and a close-up of that photograph (Figure 2). The cleanliness of the altar with burning incense and the beautifully maintained graves show the ongoing care of the deceased couple. The close-up of Mr. Bui, sitting on a chair in the traditional ao dai and khen dong, follows the Vietnamese popular style of honorific portraiture; a similar portrait can be found on the altar of nearly every Vietnamese household. The photograph of the graves reflects an improvisation because there are no images of the boys. The three portraits of the witnesses of the massacre allow the museum to assume a plural first-person voice of a testimony even as it includes various public sources (Figure 3). Through the list of victims' names and photographs of the murdered grandparents and boys' graves, the museum presents itself as a memorial to the victims of war.

The exhibit also includes the photograph of the drain in its original location and the actual object, donated to the museum in 2009 on the fortieth anniversary of their deaths. The

caption for the sewer provides the boys' names, ages, and the manner in which they were each killed. The sewer, like all the other displayed Vietnamese remnants in the museum, represents an object used as makeshift defense, sharply contrasting with the numerous US military items of bomb parts, shells, mines, cartridges, and fragments of B-52 planes in the same exhibit. The donated sewer from the family presents the communal construction of the museum. The communal contribution and everyday object—the emphasis on civilian life—reveal a critical element of testimony: its simultaneous extraordinariness (the crime ruptures expectations about normal life) and quotidian nature. The museum's inclusion of the actual objects, photographs of the victims and witnesses, Kerrey and graves, and list of names reflects an asynchronic assemblage of memorialization that echoes the construction of a testimony. The sewer, the photographs, and graves carry an indexicality, which has tremendous power to stand up to the command to repress memories.

Figure 2: Collage of Mr. Bui portrait, his daughter, and Mr. and Mrs. Bui's graves. His daughter is holding Mr. Bui's photography in front of his altar. Exhibit "Toi Ac Chien Tranh Xam Luoc: Aggression War Crimes"

Figure 3: Three portraits of the three witnesses of the Thanh Phong Massacre. Exhibit "Toi Ac Chien Tranh Xam Luoc: Aggression War Crimes"

The WRM's presentation of the Thanh Phong Massacre refuses silence and politeness, and by extension, positions the museum as a critical and unique cultural and political site for Vietnam. Despite the official national remembrance of Bui's experiences, there is a discrepancy between this honored status and her material reality. As I have mentioned, Bui has received no assistance from either the US or the Vietnamese government. In another form of public commemoration, the Vietnamese government built a monument to the victims at the site of the massacre. Taft notes that "the gray pillar inscribed with the story of the massacre is weather-beaten, the letters difficult to read, a purple blossom sprouting up through the crack between the base of the monument and concrete surrounding it, a few incense sticks slowly disintegrating in an urn in front" (n.p). The number of incense sticks means that few people have come to offer respect, suggesting the monument's lack of relevance to Vietnamese outside and inside of Thanh Phong. The jarring contrast between the high-profile national commemoration at the WRM and Thanh Phong's impoverished state raises questions about the purpose of testimony. The inclusion of Bui's portrait and wartime experiences at the WRM follows what Barbie Zelizer calls "remembering to forget." The construction of the WRM is an intensive memory work, in

which "Collective memories allow for the fabrication, rearrangement, elaboration, and omission of details about the past . . . to accommodate broader issues of identity formation, power and authority, and political affiliation" (Zelizer 3). There is a gap between knowledge and reparations, as evident in the poverty that Bui and the people of her village face. Even if Bui's brutal experiences in the Thanh Phong massacre is remembered, her living conditions and those of the other members of the hamlet are not as registered within conversations on development. Accountability to Bui and her family, the murdered victims, and the villagers who currently live with the ongoing consequences of the war falls outside discussion of national healing and progress.

I begin with Bui's words, despite the lack of compensation they have garnered, to give her pain attention and to emphasize their authenticity and truth. The testifier remains vulnerable to death, disability, and poverty, while the savior tends also to be the perpetrator, who wields the power to maim, witness, and decides who to save. Examining when a testimony is publicly called upon, this chapter demonstrates four points: 1) The power of the US to repress and deny pain forces the Vietnamese state to testify to its war-injury in a counterhegemonic manner that does not adequately capture its reality; 2) The state and media make pain visible without attending to the material reality of the pain; 3) The state regime of visibility mobilizes some war injuries while disappearing other disabilities in order to advance its nationalist goals; and 4) The appropriation of disability at the WRM shows the difference between national commemoration and personal mourning.

In the rest of the chapter, I explore these components through my research trips at the WRM and interviews with the museum director Huynh Ngoc Van.[10] I explore testimony in

[10] For the remainder of the chapter, I will refer to her as Ba Van, "Mrs. Van," the proper address in Vietnamese.

which the perpetrator continues to wield power over the testifier. Aware of the already failed potential of witnessing, the testifier adapts the framework and language of the observer and offers conditional forgiveness. Vietnam testifies to its war-related pain within the context of what Edwin Martini argues is the ongoing "American War on Vietnam," in which the US exerts economic and diplomatic pressure that forces Vietnam to adopt global standards of development that push the Vietnamese to accommodate an "invisible enemy" (2). While Martini's focus is on the period from 1975 to 2000 and the normalization of relations between the two nations in 1995 blurs the line between enemy and partner, the US still exerts economic, cultural, and political control over Vietnam. Testimonies of Vietnamese suffering necessarily engage with the ongoing struggle over the meaning of the US War/the Vietnam War, in which, through Hollywood, book publishing, and education, the US has won the memory war on the world's cultural fronts outside of Vietnam (V. Nguyen 15). The "Vietnam War" is internationally legible.

In the context of unequal representational power, I read the WRM as a national testimony to recognize the material reality of debilitation. The museum stages a Vietnamese narrative that strategically uses the very rhetoric of human rights and humanitarianism and the linear narrative of economic and military development prominent in Obama's and Kerry's speeches to advance its own agenda. The national cultural institution reveals the tension between the economy and historical memory and Vietnamese state's precarious global position as it stages its history. The museum uses the trope of disability in order to construct and uphold pacifism and moral superiority.[11] The allegory of disability visibly juxtaposes US war crimes and Vietnamese innocence, and thereby disrupts US political and cultural narrative power and emboldens the

[11] Disability operates as a common metaphor for colonial conditions in other national contexts. See Kyeong- Hee Choi's "Impaired Body as Colonial Trope," for example, for a discussion on how disabled characters in literary texts produced at various times in Korean history during and after the Japanese colonial rule have been read as a metaphor of colonial conditions, deployed to avoid censorship.

legitimacy of Vietnamese experiences on national and global stages. The WRM depends on documentary realism to respond strategically to being associated with "propaganda," using weapons, objects, and photographs from the first and second Indochina Wars and real disabled people. Examining these artifacts and the display of real people, I argue that the WRM uses disability aesthetics—the ugly and beautiful suffering—to control the witnessing experience. Disability representations carry an indexicality that has tremendous ethical weight and evokes predictable responses. The affective registry of disability carries the power to shock and invoke pity, and thus, connect with its diverse audience.

In its goal to both accuse and reconcile, the museum offers a strategic but anxious response to an anticipated international audience. Assessing the power dynamic between the US and Vietnam within a binaristic discourse, however, fails to account for the complexity of power within the structure of witnessing and upholds the centralization of the US, in which everything exists only in relation to the international superpower. In addition to waging a memory war, the WRM uses disability as a symbol for wounded postcolonial unification and independence to assert a singular and unified Vietnamese experience and identity. Postcolonial, postwar disabled subjecthood presents the Vietnamese as wronged by colonial force, but fully human and entitled to resources and dignity. Even as I make the argument that the WRM resists narratives of US innocence and benevolence through the emphasis on bodily testimony, I also critique how the counternarrative occludes the complexity that distinguishes the victim from the oppressor. The WRM deploys disability aesthetics to evoke emotional outrage that may in fact be disconnected from the lived issues and needs of those most affected by legacies of war violence and imperialism in Vietnam. Disability acts as a powerful tool of the Vietnamese state at the WRM. The national institution capitalizes on the overdetermined conceptualization of disability to

create and disperse its own meaning of disability. That is, the exploitation of disability demonstrates another layer of failed witnessing, in which pain is made visible but unaccounted for—this is the relation of knowing pain through public forms and letting the person in pain remain in pain. Witnessing, the complex layering shows, reflects a power system among multiple audiences and speakers. While the mobilization of disability as a testimonial tool does offer some disabled people financial, medical, and social support, the treatment of disability as a visual metaphor for Vietnam's plight on the global stage silences them. It appropriates disabled people to deliver shock and traps them in the static role of war victims. This chapter reveals the exploitation of pain and victimhood for a nationalist agenda and how testimony can fail the person in pain even as it demands action towards accommodating pain. I am pointing to the strategic salvaging of a useable past for various gains and injury. The disabled Vietnamese who falls outside the state-sponsored narrative becomes the collateral damage of this memory war.

Even in its efforts to subvert US exceptionalism and shift away from the US as a primary reference point for understanding the war in a global context, my work also marks an inability to escape its cultural and sociopolitical power. My research on war-produced disability at the WRM rather than other types of disability reflects the impossibility of leaving this power system to choose my own frame of reference and language within the US-dictated focus on MIAs and Agent Orange. More specifically, the question of the presence of the 1972 famous photograph of Phan Thi Kim Phuc prompted my research on the WRM. US tourists' control over which images and narratives can be used in the Vietnamese national testimony of the American War makes the WRM an important site to consider articulations of pain and the conditions of testimony. Christina Schwenkel observes that museum officials curated to include more western images in acquiescence to tourists' feedback that the museum was too biased. She explains that this

strategy at times backfired and led to the removal of the Kim Phuc photograph which "was condemned by certain US visitors to the museum as propagandistic and exploitative" ("Exhibiting" 76). Her discussion of Western pressure to include Western content and remove the photograph reflects the US claim over this photograph and the debate over its meaning raise questions of ownership of pain and narrative that felt critical to my interests in testimony. To my surprise, during my first research trip in 2016, I found the iconic photograph in the "Toi Ac Chien Tranh Xam Luoc: Aggression War Crimes" exhibit, framed and given to the WRM by Nick Ut (Figure 4). Ba Van tells me that the photograph has been part of the museum since before she joined the museum staff in 1991. She explains that it may have been temporarily removed in order to feature other napalm victims, and that it has been on display permanently since Nick Ut gifted the photograph to the museum in 2013. I integrate my own interest in the famous photograph and the WRM to convey yet another layer of witnessing, as it asks questions about accuracy of interpretation, translation, and academic authority. The absence/presence of the photograph also reveals that the museum is alive—evolving to reflect Vietnam's current socio-political needs. Witnessing, as a system of knowledge, is subjective and volatile. Witnessing presumes a mutual understanding or reciprocity, which is so rarely the case.

Figure 4: Framed photograph of the famous "Napalm Girl." The caption notes that the photograph was gifted to the museum by Nick Ut. Below the photograph is a glass case of neatly organized remnants of US American weapons. Exhibit "Toi Ac Chien Tranh Xam Luoc: Aggression War Crimes"

WRM Background

The War Remnants Museum, a critical site to create citizenry like other postcolonial and post-civil war institutions, presents the birth of modern Vietnam on September 2, 1945 and touts its development as a picturesque country despite its history of foreign aggression. Opened in 1975 as the Exhibition House for US and Puppet Crimes (*Nhà trưng bày tội ác Mỹ Ngụy*) in the former United States Information Agency building, the exhibition documents the violent struggle for national independence against imperial powers. The exhibition was built in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) in an effort to connect with southerners after the Civil War. According to museum director Ba Van, "at that time the city government just wanted to show the people from the south of Vietnam about the truth of the war. Most of them did not understand clearly of the reason and the truth of the war" (Jan 2017). Since its conception, the WRM has sought to promote a single, unified Vietnam based on shared suffering from colonial aggression by showcasing US weapons, as well as photographs of war-related destruction, disabled children, and victims of war. Twenty

years later in 1995, the exhibition house was transformed into a museum and renamed, following the normalization of diplomatic relations with the US. Today, the museum houses seven permanent exhibits and a temporary exhibit that changes several times a year.[12] The structure of the museum follows a linear narrative of development that concludes with peace and friendship. Ba Van explains that the museum follows a progressive narrative, designed so visitors first learn the history of the war, then the consequences of the war, and finally "on the ground [floor] you can see the support all over the world to the Vietnamese people. That means I want visitors to finish their visit at the museum with . . . wishes for peace and relationship between people. We started from the war, but we finish with the anti-war movement and friendship and relationship between people all over the world." (March 2016 interview).

National Testimony

The WRM depicts a collective memory and identity typical of postcolonial nations: national unity achieved through tremendous sacrifices and triumphant national liberation. It performs communal construction, hosts several community building efforts, and demands reparations and change for a collective people. The museum resembles a testimony as it narrates war crimes committed by France and, much more prominently, by the US to ask for reparations rather than simply to offer an alternative historical account or for national coherence. As a testimony, the WRM asks for recognition by foregrounding authentic experiences as a critical site of knowledge with the intention of seeking transformation. Like oral testimonies, the museum attempts to register pain for people who did not directly experience it, resurrecting past

[12] As their names suggest, the permanent exhibits emphasize the US's role as imperialist, Vietnam's suffering, and international protests against the "American War": 1) Nhung Su That Lich Su: Historical Truths;2) Ho Niem: Requiem; 3) Hau Qua Chat Doc Da Cam Trong Chien Trang Xam Loc Cua My O Vietnam: Agent Orange Aftermath in the US Aggressive War in Vietnam; 4) Che Do Lao Tu Trong Chien Tranh Xam Luoc Viet Nam: The Prison Regime in the Aggression War Against Vietnam; 5) Toi Ac Chien Tranh Xam luoc: Aggression War Crimes; 6) Bo Cau Trang: Dove Children Education Room; and 7) The Gioi Ung Ho Viet Nam Khang Chien: The World Supports Vietnam in its Resistance.

violence in the present in order to compel change for the future. As with all testimonies, the museum targets specific wrongdoing while obscuring information that complicates or challenges the evidence of the crime. The WRM, for example, excludes South Vietnamese perspectives and elides communist Vietnam's own participation in violent wartime activities and the punishment of many Vietnamese who had connections with the losing side after the war. It also has no space for people whose alliances are ambiguous and whose experiences of violence are not physically visible.

Thus, the WRM brings together multiple individual testimonies under a single nationalist voice. As a consequence, the individual's testimony loses its complexity and narrative agency. The museum allegorizes trauma and knowledge, and by extension objectifies and translates pain towards a state agenda that may both benefit and hurt individuals. I coin the term "national testimony," distinguishing it from "autobiographical testimony," to emphasize the overlapping benefits, narrating structure, as well as the conflicting power dynamic between postcolonial Vietnam, first-world nations, and individual Vietnamese war victims. The term "national testimony" highlights the material goals (reparations, reconciliation, and national unification) that the museum aims to achieve and also reveals the structure of testimony— its indexicality, frame of reference, vocabulary, and relation to its attendants as an intersubjective space. The framework of testimony allows me to foreground the museum as interactions among multiple relations. As James Clifford explains, "When museums are seen as contact zones, their organizing structure as a *collection* becomes an ongoing historical, political, moral relationship––a power-charged set of exchanges, of push and pull" (192; emphasis in text). Recognizing that the collections and displays are formed by coercion, inequality, and conflict, he also emphasizes resistance and mobilization, arguing that museum collections are "unfinished historical processes

of travel, of crossing and recrossing" (213). The WRM determines belonging, exclusivity, and solidarity based on which experiences of pain and death it finds useable for facilitating social, cultural, economic, and political connections. The narrating language (Vietnamese, English translation, war remnants, photography, actual bodies, and disability aesthetics) and influence of the WRM expose transnational circuits of colonial and neocolonial relations. Considering the museum as interactions reveals the constructed nature of testimony through its continuous curation as artifacts and images are added or removed based on global economic and political transformations. The relationship between the WRM, as an agent of the state, and the displayed individual subjects/objects, as triangulated by visitors, demonstrates how legibility is critical to the effectiveness of a testimony.

Furthermore, I read the WRM as a national testimony in order to intervene vis-a-vis current scholarship on this museum specifically and the Vietnamese tourist industry in general, which does not adequately acknowledge the presence of pain and Vietnamese agency. Western scholarship on Vietnamese tourism, which critiques Western narcissistic consumption of the country, ultimately ends up erasing Vietnam's agency: "It's Ours! We said it! We wanted it! And indeed We got it; Our phantasmic reality; Our domesticated Vietnam."(Alneng 482). Victor Alneng asserts that the memory war on the Vietnam-US War "has turned Vietnam into the poorest country in the world in terms of identity," in which Vietnam is "Our worldwide wet dream come true" (482). Alneng is wrong. Vietnam is not absent of identity— indeed, the understanding that Vietnam is for sale or consumable marks the very failure to witness that centers this dissertation: the power to hear and see what the witness desires, rather than what is carefully indexed and displayed. In order to center the WRM as an epistemological site, I emphasize notions of truth and authenticity underlying the definition of testimony. Tracking

indexicality, the material relationship between the past and present through museum objects, has urgent and ethical dimensions as a response to demands to forget Vietnamese war pain as a new military alliance is sutured to produce ongoing, racialized debilitation. Locating indexicality rejects the dismissal of pain through claims of propaganda and revisits scholarship that prioritizes US perspective. When all nations use propaganda to disseminate their own narratives, the naming of propaganda as a tool of dismissal is a hypocritical and liberal imperialist logic. I simultaneously emphasize constructedness, particularly the exploitation and denial of some pain, and the undeniable trace of history because the WRM functions as both the wielder and the victim of power, that which both silences and is silenced. Below I will detail the context in which the WRM testifies war-related pain, its tactical maneuvering to the demands of geo-political shifts and a diverse audience, and the human cost of its narrative.

Audience/ Tourism

Tourism guides how the museum narrates Vietnamese war-related pain. As a unit under the Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism Ho Chi Minh City, the WRM is a part of the tourist industry, as evidenced by its gift shops, advertisement stands, the use of English, its content and rhetorical choices, and the events (such as, for example, tours for US veterans and musical performances by disabled people). In *Tours of Vietnam: War, Travel Guides, and Memory,* Scott Laderman deftly tracks how tourist literature, which adheres to a Cold War worldview that positions the US as a benevolent protector against communist evils and omits its imperialistic dispositions, shapes how Western tourists engage with the WRM, guiding them to dismiss the displays as propaganda. More generally, the culture of tourism, particularly how it designates the subject and object of sight and sense of entitlement, endorses how attendees react towards the content of the museum and, by extension, how the museum narrates its history. That

is, tourism permits a culture of indifference towards Vietnamese postwar conditions as it demands that Vietnam be inviting and catering. The socioeconomic position of tourists allows them to ignore—even enjoy—signs of pain.

Vietnam has become a popular destination for backpackers, foodies, beach-lovers, and veterans. Sex tourism, humanitarian tourism, war tourism—anything is purchasable. These types of tourism overlap as the history of colonialism and wars make the country a cheap tourist destination. Economic dependency is a war-torn and postcolonial condition, and tourism is the chief means by which Vietnam extricates itself from poverty. Laura B Kennedy and Mary Rose Williams explain that Vietnam has rebranded itself as an international tourist destination as "a response to Vietnam's failed economic policies and its increasing economic isolation in the 1980s" (140). War tourism, in particular, signifies peace, as military sites are transformed into sites of leisure and entertainment. In *The Country of Memory,* Hue-Tam Ho Tai describes contemporary Vietnam:

> To be sure, the landscape is also an important lure, but it is *a landscape emptied of menace.* Where once Vietnamese peasants were mobilized to repulse foreigners, now they are expected to welcome them. *Visual reminders are in fact everywhere, but the pain has largely been anaesthetized.* In the Cu Chi tunnels, tourists—including returning American veterans of the Vietnam War—are greeted by young men and women clad in the drab guise of communist guerrillas who point out the spots where American B-52s rained bombs on the site and the underground chambers where the Tet Offensive, with its memorable attack on the American embassy, was plotted. In the compound's kitchen, visitors are invited to taste samples of the grim diet of taro roots and salt that guerrillas ate every day; in

> the souvenir shops, they are invited to purchase silver opium pipes or wooden Disney figures. Shell casings are made into souvenirs tanks, empty soft drink cans turned into miniature helicopters. (13-14; my emphasis).

Analyzing the tour at Cu Chi Tunnel, Hue-Tam Ho Tai highlights the commodification of the Vietnam War that renders it digestible for foreigners, showing that tourists can purchase "Vietcong" experiences through sight, embodiment, and taste. Indeed, the souvenir shops, the invitation for tourists to enter the enlarged and lit tunnel, the cafe, and the firing range where visitors can shoot an AK-47 all suggest a likeness to an amusement park.

Touristic commercialization of violence and trauma partly reflects Vietnam's colonial and military history, as it allows China and the US to influence public memory formations as a result of its continued economic, military and political dependency. Kennedy and Williams argue that Vietnam has delegated "authority over its own self-image to international commercial interests" (161). The commodification of the Vietnam War is not limited to historical sites; the streets of Hanoi and Saigon are lined with purchasable "Good Morning, Vietnam!" T-shirts and fake war antiques. As of 2020, the Apocalypse Now nightclub remains on many lists for Saigon nightlife recommendations. Guide blogs mention the presence of local women as a draw, while others complain about the presence of sex workers. The club's name and the promise of "boom boom," a term made popular by Vietnam War movies, gesture to the opportunity for tourists to recreate the hypermasculine glamour of Hollywood movies.[13] Fantasy has always been a

[13] In his investigation of how visitors engage with the WRM, Alneng observes that Western visitors consume the display of Vietnamese death and suffering through the mediation of American popular Vietnam War movies, making the viewing experience entertaining, "The war pictures can thus be stirred into a prefab potpourri; the picture of the napalmed Kim Phuc merges with its movie replica in *A Bright Shining Lie*; the photos of the My Lai massacre intermingle perfectly with an analogous scene in *Platoon*; the picture of a VC refusing to answer questions and thus being thrown off a flying helicopter blends well with its simulation in *Heaven and Earth* – a scene solely the product of Stone's imagination; it is not to be found in Hayslip's book – and so on. The cinematic images are enjoyable while the real ones are horrendous, but, blended together, the former lose their imaginary quality while the latter are deprived of their connection with reality" (477).

component of war, as evidenced by popular films, video games, and war toys. Pleasure, then, becomes a common default response to a site of violence rather than the acknowledgement of pain. While a focus on tourists' responses to the WRM depicts the context in which visitors consume the WRM, the singular interest in the Western experiences is yet another articulation of Western solipsism even as Vietnamese studies scholarship aims to be critical of Western viewing habits. A focus on tourist experiences without considering the indexicality of the war on the landscape and people and Vietnam's social and pedagogical gain beyond financial benefit reflects the unequal power of interpretation—the power to not hear, not see, or to dismiss alternative voices as being "stuck in the past" (Kerry n.p.).

The assertion of the anaesthetization of pain privileges the witness, accepting interpretation as truth while ignoring war injuries and willfully excluding diverse Vietnamese experiences. I want to separate tourists' voyeurism with actual experiences and memories of war. The overemphasis on the influence of tourism and foreign diplomacy dismisses Vietnam's agency and strategic construction of war. Studies that demonstrate the ongoing control the US has on Vietnam expose neoliberal conditions of global capitalism; however, they overlook Vietnam's social and political investment in tourism to construct and disseminate its nation-building objectives[14]. They also miss the opportunity to focus on an alternative narrative of pain/war and by extension uphold a discourse in which the US dominates globally. The Cu Chi tunnels, WRM, and other tourist sites that bear physical scars of the US War simultaneously capitulate their authority and authenticity through its commercial appeal and assert its aura as historical references. Regardless of economic and political imperatives to self-censor, pain continues to be present. Violence always leaves a trace as Jasbir Puar, Mel Y. Chen, Julie

[14] Please see my bibliography for works by Victor Alneng, Hue-Tam Ho Tai, Laurel B. Kennedy and Mary Rose Williams, Scott Ladderman, and Christina Schwenkel.

Livingston, and other scholars working on the intersection of race and disability studies have shown us. The physical markers of the landscape and damaged bodies are referents of US military aggressions. The presentation of the Cu Chi tunnels system—the preservation of bomb craters, the three-dimensional figures enacting living conditions during the war, the guerilla garb worn by staff members, the humble meal of taro or cassava roots for tourists to consume—promotes realism (poor nations' dominant aesthetic). It depicts poverty, interrupted childhood, and life-threatening surgical operations in the dark tunnel during the war. The memorial park documents suffering and ingenuity. Indexicality has an ethical dimension as material testimonies of violence and horror, permanently offering an invitation to reinterpret infinitely even if the witness does not register it. Objects, space, images have testifying powers as Mel Y. Chen's *Animacies* demonstrates: all matter have racialized, sexualized, and political agencies.

Consider alterations, such as the added light and widening of the Cu Chi tunnels, as a response to the demands of the international tourist market *and* as state efforts to expand the audience to assert its national identity of self-determination, liberty, and endurance as a postcolonial country.[15] In other words, the alterations and enhanced accessibility force tourists to see history from local point of view—a guerilla history lesson. The tourist responses to the Cu Chi tunnels and WRM range from disgust to admiration. Many remarks in the museum's guestbooks that are placed outside each exhibit room and its reviews on Tripadvisor express interest, grief, and thoughtfulness as they comment on the importance of the Vietnamese perspective, connections to current US wars, and the value of seeing the atrocity as a critical intervention to the glamorization of violence in Hollywood war movies. These responses reflect the effectiveness of the Vietnamese state's ability to engage Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese

[15] For further discussion on how tourism is harnessed to mythologize the nation see Lisa Yoneyama's *Hiroshima Traces: Time, Space and the Dialectics of Memory.*

visitors with a Vietnamese positioning of the US War. Tourists are ambushed by a Vietnamese history lesson even when they're seeking apolitical experiences. During a bus ride from Hanoi to Ha Long Bay when I visited in 2008, a tour guide pointed out where the US bombed several times daily. The guide emphasized the new infrastructure that masks the destruction, showing pride in Vietnam's postwar developments. On the way back to the city from the world heritage site, the bus stopped at a souvenir shop of, we are told, artwork made by orphans affected by Agent Orange. These direct invocations of the Vietnam-US War ask foreign tourists to think about the impact of the US War and the Vietnamese resilience, even if fleetingly. By asking English-speaking visitors to buy souvenirs made by youths disabled by US toxic war chemicals, the tour company appeals to visitors to assuage the ongoing effects of war. These insertions of the US War mark efforts to make visible the history of a violence that the world seems to have forgotten and to resist the dominant power of US American representations, regardless of whether tourists register ongoing and past war trauma.

By forcing tourists to see bomb-cratered land at the Cu Chi tunnels and the disabled orphans during the viewing of the UNESCO World Heritage Site, Vietnam strategically uses physical disability of the land and bodies as a trace of the war to draw attention to pain, coloniality, and the ongoingness the destruction. Like the WRM, the Cu Chi tunnels and Ha Long Bay, then, are nation-building testimonies. The WRM adopts similar tourist strategies. It is the most popular museum in Vietnam and attracts foreigners, many of whom are from Asian and non-Western countries. Any search of attractions in HCMC will point people the WRM. Tripadvisor, Vietnam-guide.com, lonelyplanet, and popular travel blogs such as rustycompass and wanderlust, all place the museum at the top of things to do in HCMC. The cheap ticket price (about 10 cents for Vietnamese and 1 USD for foreigners) makes it financially inviting. Tour

buses bring hundreds of visitors daily, some of whom unenthusiastically and even irritably scan the exhibits because the museum stop is part of their tour package, rather than a self-selected choice. Ba Van explains that the staff actively promotes the museum through tourist companies and international universities (March 2016). Tourists, through the tour packages, have been booby-trapped into witnessing the counternarrative of the "Vietnam War." The museum's ability to secure a wide audience allows it to present difficult information that many tourists would rather avoid. Its display of the war-damaged bodies and US war machines contrasts with the picturesque commercialism of other parts of the tour package and tourist experiences. As a result, the museum does not have to shy away from arousing emotions as it documents torture and mass murders committed by "American imperialists." For example, the exhibit "Che Do Lao Tu Trong Chien Tranh Xam Luoc Viet Nam: The Prison Regime in the Aggression War Against Vietnam," located outside among the helicopters, tanks, and fighter-bombers, visually and verbally places tourists at a site of atrocity. The prison exhibit displays photos of the Phu Quoc Prison Museum and Con Dao prisons, recovered torture devices, models of soil layers from the excavation of a mass grave of prisoners, and contemporary pictures of torture wounds from living prisoners. One museum visitor, Tony Diep, told me as he was looking at the photographs of the Phuc Quoc Prison Museum that he had been unable to see the museum when he was in Phuc Quoc because the people on his tour bus voted against stopping at the prison, stating that it would be too upsetting (Personal Interview January 2017). The sheer number of images of torture, torture devices, and realistic three-dimensional sculptures of torture make it impossible to look away. The prison exhibit displays images and a quotation from one former Phu Quoc prisoner, Mr. Doan Thang Phuong, who compares one of the confinement areas to "the gas chamber in which people died everyday *[sic]*." Visitors might connect the gas chamber reference

to the better documented torture at Auschwitz and compare the US to the Nazi regime. The museum uses simple and direct language in order to make a clear claim. The charged use of "American imperialist," "aggression," "crimes" and "torture" explicitly identifies the US as the criminal. Unlike the nearly empty Phu Quoc Prison Museum, the WRM gains narrative control through its ability to secure several hundred thousands of diverse attendees annually, over half of whom are foreigners.

The WRM recognizes its precarious status as an unreliable narrator to an international audience because of Vietnam's status as a third-world nation—there is a hierarchy of knowledge production guided by race, history of colonialization and militarization, and cultural and economic wealth. As an intersubjective and transnational site engaging with diverse communities, the national site employs visual strategies of documentation and a rhetoric of objective truth to establish credibility. Maps, statistics, photographs, quotations from international scholars, politicians and newspapers, and objects from the war—cameras, uniforms, machines, and weapons— dominant the museum space. These war remains, numerical data, and the names and photographs of the Vietnamese dead marshal authenticity to assert authority in a testimony. The museum turns to international sources because the success of a testimony depends on its ability to translate the testifier's experiences into the language and frame of reference of the witness. The pain of the marginalized does not matter until the empowered witness says so. The imperative for the testifier to adapt to the witness's comfort and frame of reference is reflected in the visitors' frustration by the grammatically erroneous English throughout the museum. Rather than acknowledging personal linguistic shortcomings for not being able to read Vietnamese, attendees consider the imperfect English as an indicator of a lack of authority to teach about the war. The museum, as a response, transplants many international

photographs and objects. The use of international sources that denounced US involvement in Vietnam creates a transnational conscience to corroborate the museum's charge against the US and long quotations from US veterans and politicians act as confessions to further affirm the testimony.

The reliance on international sources reveals the way power operates in the structure of testimony. Vietnam's own words do not have sufficient rhetorical power and therefore need supplementation. The pain of Vietnamese people is normalized as communist propaganda and forecloses critical engagements with the museum exhibits and attempts to justify massacres and the bombing of civilians. The simplification of the museum into an example of communist propaganda echoes the Cold War worlding, which sets up a democracy/communism binary that associates democracy with objectivity, morality, and progress and rejects any truth-value of the Vietnamese photo-documentations of injury, death, and loss. This viewing habit mirrors killing practice during the war in its refusal to incorporate the pain of the Vietnamese. As Marine John Musgrave states plainly, "I will never kill another human being as long as I'm in Vietnam. However, I will waste as many gooks as I can find. I'll wax as many dinks as I can find. I'll smoke as many zips as I can find — but I ain't gonna kill anybody." (Musgrave qtd. in Burns). The dismissal of Vietnamese pain, life, and death without challenging personal morality and identity results from US military, political, and cultural exclusion of Vietnamese people from the human community. The failure to witness Vietnamese pain in the WRM, then, leaves the ideology of carnage intact. Vietnamese people's experiences and narratives do not carry the same weight as those of other people. The asymmetrical power of influence, legitimacy, and interpretation between Vietnam and the US necessitates Vietnam to include international and US images, remnants, and quotations into its memory architecture.

While I am pointing to the significance of acknowledging the context of Vietnam's precarious global position and the ways in which it testifies, I recognize the museum's authority as shared and collaborative, most evident in the donated materials from US veterans and the permanent exhibits of photographs curated and/or taken by non-Vietnamese people, but to dismiss Vietnam's agency would mark another failure to witness. The use of international sources is a guerilla tactic that echoes strategies adopted during the war, in which Vietnamese people repurposed salvaged US weapons and materials. The staging of its testimony through the use of international sources reflects logic of transnational justice indicative of the post-World War II order. The Cold War, in particular, solidified the US's status as a moral leader, as violations of human rights are identified with communism and undemocratic regimes. Costas Douzinas argues that after the collapse of communism, "the ideological controversies of the past have given way to general agreement about the universality of Western values and have placed human rights at the core of international law" (177). By engaging with international voices, the museum adapts a recognizable lexicon—human rights—among museum visitors. Douzinas refers to human rights as the "lingua franca of the new world order" (32). The notion of human rights has been widely accepted as a Western creation and value. This normative assumption that the protection of human rights is a Western agenda, perpetuated by the inundation of videos and photographs of third-world poverty and violence outside of historical contexts and social factors of war, colonialism, debt-bondage, and neoliberalism. Because Vietnamese people have been regarded as rightless people, they must appeal to recognized rights discourses and specific legal documents of rights like the US Declaration of Independence, Geneva Conventions, and court rulings that provide compensation for US veterans exposed to Agent Orange.

By co-opting the language of rights and laws, the WRM challenges the US cultural-political power across the global stage and declare its moral position. The exhibit "Toi Ac Chien Tranh Xam luoc: "Aggression War Crimes" begins with an excerpt of the American Declaration of Independence the US dehumanization of Vietnamese people. The American Declaration of Independence parallels The Declaration of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam shown in exhibit "Nhung Su That Lich Su: Historical Truths." If the hypocrisy is not clear to Vietnamese attendants, an untranslated, blue 8''x11'' laminated paper spells out the US violations of its own fundamental belief when it invaded Vietnam and tortured, imprisoned, and killed Vietnamese civilians. Next to the excerpt of American Declaration of Independence is a picture of an US soldier executing a Viet Cong soldier, depicting the US failure to recognize a Vietnamese as "man." By invoking both nations' Declaration of Independence, the WRM counterpoints the US legitimacy as the leader of democracy. As US politicians point to Vietnam's humanitarian violations, the WRM showcases US crimes against humanity that defy international military laws. The same exhibit room includes an excerpt from a declaration signed by 1000 professors and lecturers that was published in the *New York Times* in May 1965 and an excerpt from the conclusions of the Bertrand Russell Tribunal - Stockholm session, May 2-10, 1967 and Copenhagen session, November 20 - December 1, 1967, which states that "The US government is guilty of genocide vis-à-vis the Vietnamese people" and holds the US responsible for its war crimes under the terms of international law against Vietnam. Another informational poster in the "Historical Truths" exhibit, which declares "The massive spraying of Agent Orange . . . violated the U.N. Charter mandate . . . [this] illegal use of weapons has caused so much pain, suffering, and anguish to at least 3 to 4 million Vietnamese and their families," calls upon the post-World War II transnational conscience materialized through the formation of the United

Nations. The rhetoric of responsibility and accountability demands action and recompense, as seen on an adjacent information display: "We think that the USA should acknowledge the consequences caused by Agent Orange to the Vietnamese people, and should implement their responsibilities . . . to Vietnamese victims in the same way as they have done to the American veterans [sic] victims." The WRM seeks to delegitimize the US national self-image as an exemplary sponsor of human rights and equality by showing US violations of its own core principals and the demands of the international communities to end US illegal actions and compensate Vietnam. The museum uses non-Vietnamese voices to articulate Vietnamese pain and losses in order to claim neutrality, legitimacy, and historical accuracy. This repurposing of US documents and international sources demonstrates the ongoing negotiation of the meaning and history of the war, international hierarchy, mobilization, and resistance in testimonial construction.

While the museum space is a tourist destination and a critical site of cultural diplomacy, its primary goal since its inception in 1975 has been national unity. As a national agent formed after civil war, it attempts to connect with and legitimize itself to South Vietnamese and younger generations who are skeptical of or indifferent to the goal of a coherent national identity. No scholarly work has examined the museum's direct invocation of Vietnamese patrons and annual programs of events. The museum engages with Vietnamese audiences through oral stories as knowledge and social construction within the Vietnamese culture. Ba Van shares that the museum hosts many traveling exhibits annually twenty seven in 2016 alone (Jan 2017 interview). The traveling exhibits disseminate memories and narratives of the US War to a wider Vietnamese audience throughout the country by more accessible modes than the museum space. They directly reach younger people who did not experience the war. For example, Ba Van brings

veterans to a factory to share their wartime love stories with the young workers and shows objects and photographs to an elementary school in a rural village (March 2016 interview). The museum also sponsors a range of programs for Vietnamese nationals that promote direct engagement with the war's history, such as a grandparent's day that invites veterans to bring their grandchildren to the museum and the use "chatter guides," middle school students trained to conduct tours. These middle school guides perform the act of narrating a history they did not experience. The museum also routinely hosts school tours. I often saw tour guides dressed in ao dai leading groups of students from various education level. In other words, the museum deliberately interacts with students in order to propagate a particular national affiliation. The museum also communicates with Vietnamese people while excluding foreigners through blue laminated papers of untranslated Vietnamese throughout exhibitions. These examples of the museum's efforts to connect with Vietnamese people highlight the museum's fundamental goal of promoting a particular public culture and memory among its people in addition to reaching an international audience. These details challenge claims that singularly focus on the influence of Western tourists on Vietnam's memoryscape. More importantly, an acknowledgement of the museum's interactions with Vietnamese people is a reminder that there are multiple and simultaneous audiences of a singular testimony reminder that rejects the power of any single witness to overlook pain and shifts the focus to the testimony.

Disability as Testimony

Like the inclusion of maps, statistics, quotations, and actual objects from the war, the use of disability is part of the WRM's evidence-based rhetoric. The visualization of disability reflects one of many examples of adopting the witness's language and frame of reference. The museum communicates to diverse audiences through its deployment of disability, which centralizes the

war-injured Vietnamese body via the culture of humanitarianism and transnational justice. The body that maps violent transgressions as injuries has tremendous power as the most universal lexicon. Impairment, inseparable from war and foreign aggression, carries social representative power. Disability, in the WRM, functions as a potent visual metaphor for Vietnam's plight as a war-torn, postcolonial nation and for the desire to repair the nation. The WRM presents disability as a communal, rather than individual, problem caused by foreign powers, and by extension promotes a solidifying message of national suffering. The divided nation might ideologically unite under a narrative about imperialist aggressors.

The museum's utilization of disability takes advantage of the post-World War II culture of human rights and transnational justice to develop Vietnam during a period of heightened isolation. In 1981, the United Nations placed disability at the center of the international human rights and development conversation by declaring the International Year of Disabled Persons. As a public awareness campaign on disabled persons and to encourage disabled people to ''form organizations through which they could express their views and promote action to improve their situation,'' the United Nations called for ''full participation and equality'' for disabled persons (''International Year''). Disability can be easily instrumentalized because of its symbolic power. Disabled bodies, particularly through the humanitarian framework, have the power to unite enemies because of the universality of the human body. The power of disability to garner sympathy across racial and national borders depends on the hegemonic belief that disability is always and only negative. While disabled bodies are often victimized as passive, war-wounded people can also be regarded as heroes within nationalist rhetoric. Kim Phuc and other war-injured Vietnamese bodies, as I explained in the introduction, can be co-opted within different strategic political projects since disability within a human rights context is so entrenched in

antagonistic discourses. Vietnam strategically employs disability to stage its identity as a recovering postcolonial nation and world peacemaker because there is power in the victim position, which is also reflected in the US mobilization of stories on traumatized veterans and its Vietnam Syndrome to cure its guilty conscience. It is specifically disability's universality placed into a nationalist framework that allows injury to be successfully used as protest to demand reparations and claim moral authority.

In the process of allegorizing war-injured people as diplomatic currency, the WRM objectifies pain and translates disability in a very narrow framework of militarism and foreign violence. The state (ab)use of testimony frames the ambiguity surrounding the WRM's deployment of disability as part of its effort to collectivize a postwar experience. The interstices of power, authority, and resistance in the use of disability at the WRM complicate binaries of resistance/dominance and victim/oppressor, calling into questions the objectivity, authority, and agency claimed by realism (and nothing is more real than the wounded body). Testimonies are full of ambiguities, inconsistences, gaps, and often contradictions that requires reinterpretations.

Disability Aesthetics, Guerilla Aesthetics

Influenced by Tobin Siebers's use of Alexander Baumgarten's definition of aesthetics as "the way some bodies make other bodies feel," I consider disability aesthetics as the affective process produced by an interaction with disability (1). I place disability aesthetics in a testimony context to interrogate the contact space between the testifier and the addressee via disabled bodies. The WRM, recognizing the power of disability to shape how people think about who has the right to be protected from harm and who deserves care on the global stage, relies on aesthetics of disability to generate affective responses that would garner the most support for reparations and reconciliation while also promoting national solidarity. Disability aesthetics

typically elicits predictable responses; namely, pity, wonder, and shock. In the framework of testimony, the ethics of engaging with disability aesthetics includes the material history of disability and the social meaning of disability. War-produced disability embodies an evidence-based "I was there" narrative integral to effective testimonial construction. Marginal voices depend on disability's realist value and its ability to trigger urgency. Disability aesthetics becomes a central avenue to foster contiguity between disabled Vietnamese subjects and the diverse audience of local, foreign, disabled, and nondisabled museum visitors. Disability, whether in abstract or realist, visible or invisible forms, is tethered an ethics of interaction. Disability studies scholars have produced a rich literature engaging with aesthetic and affective norms in society[16]. As Ato Quayson states, "Disability serves . . . to close the gap between representation and ethics, making visible the aesthetic field's relationship to the social situation of persons with disability in the real world" (24). Disability aesthetics in a testimony politicizes debilitation, the reality of injury, by disturbing the witness's emotions.

In its national testimony, the WRM revolutionizes disability aesthetics by de-individualization of the injured body in its memorialization of two distinct visual representations of disability, which Suzannah Biernoff calls ugly and beautiful suffering: "*Ugly* suffering can provoke anger or guilt (in this sense, ugliness has positive value in anti-war art) . . . *Beautiful* suffering, however, is more commonly used to elicit compassion or pity – and charitable donations" ("Picturing Pain" 168, emphasis in text). I borrow Biernoff's distinctions between these two types of suffering to demonstrate what seems to be a progressive representation of

[16] See, e.g., Elizabeth Barnes, *The Minority Body: A Theory of Disability* (2016); Simi Linton, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (1998); Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (2007); Susan M. Schweik, *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* (2009); Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (2010); ; Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*; Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* (1996); Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy* (1995); Harlan Hahn, *The Appearance of Physical Differences: A New Agenda for Research on Politics and Disability* (1995).

victimization at the WRM as the museum calls on more international attention. My distinction between ugly and beautiful suffering addresses the museum's attempt to intervene with contradictory responses to Vietnamese pain, to engage with the various languages within the intersubjective experience of witnessing. The museum depends on both types of disability representations to balance indignation and call for compassion.

Even as I make a distinction between the disability aesthetics of ugly and beautiful suffering, I will show how they overlap. Siebers's Disability Aesthetics emphasizes beauty: "disability aesthetics embraces beauty that seems by traditional standards to be broken, and yet it is not less beautiful, but more so, as a result" (3). I believe that the effectiveness of disability aesthetics calls on ugliness, even as it aims to subvert its definition and parameters of normal, beautiful, human, and community. Strangeness and exoticness linger in all disability representations; ugliness, death, and (im)morality operate in tandem with beauty in disability art. The dual nature makes disability aesthetic powerful, promoting an encounter in which the beholder questions acceptable morals, knowledge, and history. Disability aesthetics promotes a crisis of identification that can encourage an ethical experience. On the other hand, the viewer may reject the invitation to embrace disability and return to the values of harmony, bodily integrity, and health as standards of beauty. Aesthetics is a political sphere, in which new possibilities for community can be denied despite aesthetics' potential to "render visible what had not been, and to make heard as speakers those who had been perceived as mere noisy animals" (Rancière 25). The aesthetic experience is an interpersonal exchange with sociopolitical consequence, and therefore, should not be romanticized. As I stated in my introduction, *there's no room or time to dress up our dying*. For us marginalized people, at times we can only offer a scream, a desperate wailing that might be misunderstood as the sounds of "noisy animals." My

interests in the presence of pain and material history of the curated objects and photographs focuses on the agency of Vietnamese people and follows Mel Y. Chen's work in disrupting animacy hierarchies. The museum offers brutalized bodies to emphasize the human. Disability aesthetics signals trauma, particularly produced by social oppression. The curated representations of disabled bodies in the WRM possess a symbolism of war. However, they also exceed the symbolism to compel the beholder to feel a complex emotional fusion—this is the power of disability aesthetics. The WRM begins with the disability aesthetics of ugly suffering to showcase abjection—the military creation of unrecognizable bodies—and shifts to the disability aesthetics of beautiful suffering to present the postwar, postcolonial body—as disabled but inspirational and hyperabled.

Ugly Suffering

The WRM testifies using the vocabulary of ugly suffering because its evidence-based roots and universal legibility have promoted objectivity and authenticity since the inception of the museum in 1975. The wide adoption of an ugly suffering aesthetic reflects the need for a cheap and fast way to document and disseminate knowledge about violence and its effectiveness to simplify difficult histories and experiences into categories of right and wrong, as specificities of time, location, context, and identity fall to the background. Ugly suffering's ability to clearly demarcate victim (the Vietnamese)/perpetrator (the imperialist) makes it useful to reach a nation in turmoil after the Republic of Vietnam surrendered to National Liberation Front. The majority of the ugly suffering images were produced during the war: charred corpses, bloody children, bodies spread out on the serene agricultural landscape with close-angle focus on disfigurement. Ugly suffering prioritizes the exposure of atrocity. It accuses; it shocks. The universal power of these depictions is that the crime is not against an individual or race, but rather against humanity.

Many photographs of ugly suffering at the WRM are to be found in the most accusative exhibition room "Toi Ac Chien Tranh Xam Luoc: Aggression War Crimes." The disability aesthetic of ugly suffering centers on the passivity of Vietnamese bodies as objects of US American play, for example, a close-up portrait of a nameless young boy, whose disfigurement results from US American phosphorous bombs (Figure 5). The caption simply states, "victim of phosphorous bombs," as if another word would be redundant. His mouth is open, showing his teeth, but there is a ringing silence to this image. The proximity of the camera to the boy's face creates a disturbing intimacy. The stillness of the image shakes the looker. Is he living, dying, or dead? The horror lies in the inability to distinguish life from death. His war-damaged face reveals unforeseen carnage produced by toxic chemicals eating his flesh to unrecognizability. The phosphorus has eaten much of his face, and the looker cannot clearly distinguish his eyes. His anonymity reflects unexceptional nature of his death. The disability aesthetic of ugly suffering documents a crime rather than an individual in seemingly undoctored immediacy. The portrait of the boy manifests visceral bodily response that delimits particular space and time to make the experience available and felt here and now, effectively recomposing perceptual landscapes. Museum visitors come face to face with photograph after photograph of children's corpses. The number of corpses assaults; one looks away only to see another image of horror. I have produced a collage of a few examples of the many images of ugly suffering that surround the portrait of the boy in an attempt to convey the effect (Figure 6). The collage emphasizes the difficulty a visitor confronts in making out the poor-quality images and processing the content of the photographs. I have multiple experiences of seeing these images—moving past them quickly or spending more time with each photograph. No viewing experience offers more clarity or understanding—the same silent horror rings.

Figure 5: Portrait of a young boy whose face has been damaged by phosphorous bombs. Exhibit “Toi Ac Chien Tranh Xam Luoc: Aggression War Crimes”

Figure 6: A collage, produced by the author, of photographs of maimed or dead bodies from the US War that are featured in Exhibit "Toi Ac Chien Tranh Xam Luoc: Aggression War Crimes"

A critical element of these ugly suffering representations is their poor quality. The quality of the black and white photograph of "results of US policy 'burn all, destroy all, kill all' in Binh Duong Province, September 1970," for example, makes it impossible to make out the details (Figure 7). I see legs, arms, a head of hair spread out on top of overlapping bodies. It is unclear which limbs belong to which body or how many people were killed. It is a photograph; however, the poor quality gives it an abstract nature that haunts: there is one body— the Vietnamese body, butchered, splattered, and abandoned. The poor quality adds to the photograph's authenticity and ability to testify to the dehumanization and the extent of evil and barbarity of US policy. The

blurriness echoes its unimaginablity. The poor quality reflects what Viet Nguyen calls "wretched aesthetics." He explains that representations from poor countries not only convey "horrible stories, but also by showing that horror, through the very roughness and bluntness of their wretched aesthetics of memory. This is memory that confronts and exhausts. It is a slap in the face rather than a sermon from the mount" (*Nothing* 261). The grotesque maps a national, social, and moral crisis. The aim of the visuality of ugly suffering is to protest; it shouts, "injustice!" Their maimed bodies, at the edge of death (or past death), irrefutably display the force of the US war machine. The deployment of ugly suffering is an example of the museum's refusal to be polite and social.

Figure 7: A black and white photograph of Vietnamese bodies spread on top of each other. The caption below the image reads, "Results of US policy 'burn all, destroy all, kill all' in Binh Duong Province, September 1970." Exhibit "Toi Ac Chien Tranh Xam Luoc: Aggression War Crimes"

The museum directs the indignation ushered by ugly suffering to the ongoingness of the US War. The temporality of most testimony, after all, is the present as testimonies demand intervention. In the same exhibit room, there is a clear bullet point description of the ways in which the war continues to kill civilians:

> **After the war, Vietnam has:**
>
> - 600,000 tons of bombs left behind
>
> - 6.6 million ha of land area contaminated with bombs and explosives
>
> - 9,284 communes polluted by bombs and explosives.
>
> During 1975 - 2002, there were:
>
> - 42,135 people killed by bombs or explosives.
>
> - 62,143 people wounded by bombs or explosives.

As of 2002, the number of Vietnamese killed after the war ended nearly equals the number of US Americans killed during the war (about 48,000). Below the board of statistics is a photograph of a maimed man, killed on November 6, 2003, from unexploded US ordnance (Figure 8). Unlike the majority of other photographs in this room, this one is in color, showing the rawness of his blood, spilling from his missing leg and other parts of his body. The contemporary photograph still carries elements of the blurriness, the unrecognizability, characteristic of other representations of ugly suffering. He is naked, with a black cloth covering just his genitals, on a bamboo mat that typically covers a bed. He lies in perfect stillness in the wilderness; his body is so out of place. The white cloth above—or on— his head adds to the strangeness of the image. His body is not a body viewers know. The color of the photograph reminds us that the US War is far from being over and invites us to extend our political imaginations to current situation. The visuality of disability not only makes legible a history that has been overlooked or unknown but

also traffics affects that are otherwise unavailable towards Vietnamese people. The raw emotions produced in this aesthetic work to accuse the US of war crimes and make demands for the US to clean toxins from Vietnamese land. Unlike ahistorical addresses by US officials that figure leftover landmines and Agent Orange as opportunities to help Vietnam, this testimonial aesthetic demands accountability.

Figure 8: A photograph of Ho Van Dang. He is lying dead on a bamboo mat. Above the photography is an information display, stating the statistics of bombs, contaminated land, and people killed or wounded by explosives after the war. Exhibit “Toi Ac Chien Tranh Xam Luoc: Aggression War Crimes”

Dying and dead bodies have unmatched capacities to testify. The photographed maimed and dead bodies have the testimonial power of symbolic icons as the referent object of military violence. Visitors can choose to reject Vietnam’s innocence, but they cannot deny the veracity of these photographs. Bodily injuries act as a universal currency to visually orient museum

attendants to suffering that they have not seen, or do not want to see. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag asserts that the circulation of suffering photographs is racialized: The "exotic—that is, colonized—human beings: Africans and denizens of remote Asian countries were displayed like zoo animals in ethnological exhibitions" (72). Ultimately, Sontag focuses on the ocular power of Western viewers who fail to identify with the seen object. Sontag's argument, while cogent and significant to visual culture, is more interested in Westerners' witnessing habits than the suffering of others. It is not a coincidence that both Rancière and Sontag describes the other through the analogy of animals. Dehumanization informed by coloniality and racialization underlies their arguments. The suffering of marginalized people is more photographed simply because we are more exposed to unnatural violations and deaths. Disability and death are unremarkable. Staying visible in and traveling through photographs can be the only way poor people remain alive even as they are presented as maimed or dead. Justice becomes possible not in the present moment of reality, but rather in the future realm of what Ariella Azoulay names "the civil contract of photography." Furthermore, they often lack the cultural means (such as literature, film, art) to protest. Even lynching photographs that were circulated as a tool of terrorism and community formation among white oppressors shift to become resistance to this form of violence.[17] To be clear, I am not debating the multiple meanings or afterlives of photography but pointing to how readily scholars and viewers dismiss the photographic trace of violence embodied by the wounds of the referent. So many marginalized subjects occupy the space of this witnessing residual—unacknowledged but existing. Photographs of pain, like the jar of fetuses in formaldehyde at the museum, carry testifying power that asks the witness to intervene in the suffering.

[17] See Amy Louise Wood's *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890–1940.*

Despite (or perhaps, because of) the power of the aesthetic of ugly suffering to excuse, its message of pain can be rejected, especially when it is mobilized by a nation that lacks cultural authority. Knowing the viewers' inclination to see these photographs as communist manipulation, the WRM carefully mounts a disability aesthetics of ugly suffering beside US voices, bodies, and weapons to amplify the distinct roles of perpetrator and victim. Even before visitors step inside the museum, they see the US war machines (Figure 9). Their massiveness and outdoor positions, so out of place in the Vietnam landscape, immediately disorient visitors. The US war machines dwarf everything around them. The prominent machines seem to have lives of their own as each caption suggests an individual biography that is more detailed than the majority of captions on images of Vietnamese individuals. The biographies describe the power of large and indiscriminate machines to eradicate lives. The emphasis on US weapons, planes, chemicals, bullets, cannons, and missile launchers confirms a Vietnamese position as the victim.

Figure 9: US war machines from the Vietnam-US War are located outdoors at the War Remnants Museum, surrounded by plants. There are a few tourists studying them.

Ba Van explains that the inclusion of the weapons conveys "Vietnam as a laboratory of American weapons" even though the WRM is "a civil museum, not a military museum" (January 2017 interview). Her voice shakes when she speaks about her surprise, fear, and pain from her

encounter with the weapons in the same way as when she describes her depression and need for psychiatric help that result from the job. Many local and foreign visitors pose alongside the machines as a photo op, affirming the entertainment excess of the museum beyond curative intentions. The museum also erects lifelike structures of US soldiers throughout to place the historical context in the contemporary moment as the soldiers occupy the space among the visitors. It also displays photographs of US soldiers in action—interrogating villagers, forcing ethnic mountain people from their homes, burning huts, killing as a young girl begs them "Don't kill my father," pushing living Vietnamese prisoners out a moving plane, counting Vietnamese corpses to measure military success, dragging prisoners by tank to their death, holding part of Vietnamese corpse, posing with a skull (did the soldier decapitate a living Vietnamese to get his trophy?). In addition to displaying photographs of US soldiers in action, most of which were actually taken by US photographers, the museum strategically includes US voices. For example, the captions of the series of photographs documenting the My Lai Massacre are all quotations from the US Army photographer Ron Haeberle. Through the inclusion of US documentation of atrocities committed by US soldiers, the WRM appropriates the US's legitimacy, authenticity, and authority and challenges skeptical viewers inclined to dismiss the documented history as biased communist efforts to criminalize the democratic West.

The WRM borrows the legitimation of other nations by using photographs taken and curated by international photographers and images of US American and Koreans disabled by the US War to heighten the effectiveness of the universal lexicon of bodily impairment.[18] In *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam*, Christina Schwenkel quotes a museum staff member explaining the inclusion of international sources: "we began to use text and photographs from

[18] From September 1964 to March 1973, South Korea sent hundreds of thousands of troops to Vietnam, paid for by the US as a part of South Korea's postwar rebuilding effort.

western sources, like US newspaper and *Life* magazine. We had received complaints about the use of Vietnamese images and interpretation, that the exhibits were too one-sided. . . . We . . . have also diversified the collection with materials from the United States, Europe, and Japan" (169-170). The Agent Orange exhibit displays selected images from a larger collection of sixty-two photos about the aftermath of the US War in Vietnam by two Japanese photographers, Nishimura Yoichi and Yasufumi Murayama. While these are framed, high-quality contemporary photographs, the contents and captions closely align with the disability aesthetics of ugly suffering. Despite using the portrait style and the naming of the individual subject, these images deindividualize to showcase effects of Agent Orange. For example, one of the series of photographs includes a profile-view portrait that focuses on Vo Van Khiem's disfigurement; the subject of the photograph is a tumor that distorts his nose and mouth (Figure 10). The goal of the image is to show the devastating ongoing effects of the US War by narrowing in on the disability that maps so conspicuously onto Khiem's face. The frame includes a smaller photograph of a frontal portrait to show the tumor, which covers the majority of his face, from another angle. In both portraits his eyes are cast downward. The color, rather than any noticeable digital effects, depends on realism to foreground objectivity and unsettle the viewer. The caption flatly states his name, birth year, birthplace, and disease: "Vo Van Khiem—Born in 1965—Phu Cat District-Binh Dinh Province. Disease: Facial soft tissue tumor."

Figure 10: A profile-view portrait of a middle-aged man, Vo Van Khiem. Exhibit “Hau Qua Chat Doc Da Cam Trong Chien Trang Xam Loc Cua My O Vietnam: Agent Orange Aftermath in the US Aggressive War in Vietnam”

Another portrait in the series of shows Bui Nhat Quang, captioned with the identical format name, birthdate, hometown, disease. In addition to featuring his lymphangioma, the photograph reveals his impoverished living conditions, as illustrated by his makeshift bed on the floor (Figure 11). The image displays at least three other beds and another individual in the shadows. These captions and portraits do not seek to invoke hope or joy; rather, they serialize and index the ongoing tragic effects of the war to illustrate the suffering of a mass in postwar Vietnam. The collection was originally displayed as part of the WRM’s temporary exhibit “Scars of the Vietnam War,” produced in honor of the 62nd anniversary of Veterans’ Day on July 27 and the National Day for Vietnamese Dioxin Victims on August 10 in 2009. Murayama states, “The aim of the exhibition is to help visitors understand more about war crimes, as well as to court their sympathy toward Vietnamese war victims.” Murayama connects these war crimes with the atomic bombs the US dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki when he explains, “It is meaningful that the exhibition will last until August, which is an important month for all Japanese people, as

it marks the end of World War II. In Vietnam, the National Day for Vietnamese Dioxin Victims also takes place in August" ("Japanese Photographers"). Like other ugly suffering depictions, the content of this series accuses. This collection shows alliance between two countries that claimed victimhood from US military (Japanese's own imperial occupation of Vietnam is forgiven). The power of this series extends beyond its ability to affirm Vietnamese display of war-related pain to the broader depiction of the US as an aggressor across the trans-Pacific region. As a result, it helps to disrupt the US-centric narrative of the Vietnam-US War that has dominated not only in the US but the world, and thereby, to legitimize Vietnamese testimony.

Figure 11: A framed photograph of young male, Bui Nhat Quang. Exhibit "Hau Qua Chat Doc Da Cam Trong Chien Trang Xam Loc Cua My O Vietnam: Agent Orange Aftermath in the US Aggressive War in Vietnam"

The WRM further petitions to an international community by displaying the damage of Agent Orange on Koreans and US Americans. Like the images by Nishimura Yoichi and Yasufumi Murayama, the photographs of Korean veterans spotlight the terror of war. These

photographs deemphasize the subjectivities of the Korean veterans by hiding their faces. Instead the camera homes in on their bodily injuries—the marks on the skin, the open wound, their gauntness, the skeletal back. The individual's anonymity emphasizes the human cost of the chemical warfare, which exceeds nationality. Their captions also exclude their names, and yet relative to the captions discussed above, they are emotional and complex. The Korean veterans' anonymity does more than reveal numerous people maimed by Agent Orange. Their namelessness underscores their experiences at the border of life and death: "the dried up body like a mummy . . . I wonder if I was really a warrior, who has once run through the jungle on fire at Vietnam front lines when I was full of strength and bravery. Korean veteran from Vietnam War, victim of Agent Orange" and "'What am I? Not a hero nor a criminal, but a victim of history. The body fatally damaged from Agent Orange'. [sic] Korean veteran from Vietnam War, victim of Agent Orange." The facelessness of the Korean subjects suggests shame and emotional suffering in addition to the physical damages. Here, the WRM does not celebrate heroes but rather presents all participants of the war as victims of the US military terror. Like the emphasis on disfigurement in the images by the Japanese photographers, these images of Korean veterans are tragic. The strategic use of international subjects and photographers in the disability aesthetic of ugly suffering, like the use of other international sources to denounce the US's invasion of Vietnam throughout the museum, recognizes a politics of witnessing that regards some testifiers with suspicion while others receive sympathy. Vietnam, in particular, is often associated with propaganda rather than truth and therefore requires international voices to substantiate its claims and voice its indignation.

The visibility of bodily injury viscerally challenges the impulse to normalize or deny violence and carries the weight of truth to give the victim moral authority over the more

powerful person, institution, or nation. While ugly suffering creates distance between the subject and the viewer, it paradoxically stimulates intimacy between the two. Regardless of the location, time, or identity of the photograph, it is tethered to the present, particularly through the bodily response of a shudder or gasp. Museum visitors move from photograph to photograph with hands over their mouths. At times during my fieldwork, I hear English voices let out "Oh my God." The brutal physicality of the images induces somatic repulsion in the witnessing museum goers. Ugly suffering leaves the viewer breathless. Many prominent photography scholars, such as Sontag and John Berger, express deep suspicion of photography's capacity to propel political change. [19] Reflecting on photographs of the Vietnam War in 1971, Sontag writes that the images inform but also lead viewer to "becoming inured" ("Photography in Humanities" 63). "I do not know," she argues "if people become that much more tolerant" of actual violence, but "inevitably there is a process of dissociation" (63).

This argument about the numbing effects of the circulation of atrocity images reflects a privileged positioning of the witness. Apathy results not from the circulation of a significant event, but precisely because the photographic event means so little to the viewer. The lack of response has very little to do with the circulation or even the content of photographs; it speaks more about the viewers' desire to know and not to know; to feel and not to feel. People need more, not fewer, engagements with the photography of suffering in order to reject claims of propaganda or dismissal. The spectators are often unfamiliar with the histories, realities, and interior lives of the people in pain because of the created distance that permitted the atrocity to

[19] In *On Photography,* Sontag argues that photographs not only inform but also aestheticize events, and thus turn violence into spectacle (21). She is especially concerned with the anesthetizing of suffering through the mass circulation of photographs, which "works out not as a liberation of but as a subtraction from the self: a pseudo-familiarity with the horrible reinforces alienation, making one less able to react in real life" (41). I find aesthetics to carry a tremendous communicative power to reach a diverse audience through its ability to circulate specific and targeted emotions.

occur in the first place. Viet Nguyen explains that tourists have trouble engaging with the cultural productions of poor countries because they "had [not] already been socialized, like returning churchgoers, into the customs and rituals of silent mnemonic worship" (259). Tourists do not know how to read the "wretched aesthetics of memory," and their education, culture, and socioeconomic positions have not prepared them to come face to face with the suffering of others (261).

I want to suggest the possibility of engaging with the ugly suffering in a different manner—to imbue it with aesthetic and epistemological power—to resist boredom.[20] Ugly suffering aesthetics centralizes the moment of violence, the indexicality of the photograph, which is neither simple, flat, nor obvious; it deserves analysis and exploration. Positioning the aesthetic of ugly suffering as a critical site of knowledge offers a language to understand the dimensions of poor quality, the medium of photograph, the documentary style in relation to the material reality of the content and to unpack their affective responses to racialized disabled bodies within a sociopolitical context. The trace of pain traveling through photographs offers infinite opportunities to witness. Azoulay defines photography as "an event" that may never end, for it is made up of a potentially "infinite series of encounters" (26). The maiming and dying act of the photographed subjects— real and material— is also performative, occurring again and again for each visitor. These photographs of maimed Vietnamese bodies alone do not have the power to undo the asymmetrical power between the privileged viewer and the photographic victim or US hegemonic power; however, they can function as partial evidence for alternative narratives particularly through their power to repulse and confront the viewers' stubborn indifference.

[20] In *Camera Lucida,* Roland Barthes remarks photographs of atrocity do not disrupt his reality, routine, or imagination: "In these images, no punctum: a certain shock—the liberal can traumatize—but no disturbance; the photograph can 'shout,' not wound. . . . I glance through them, I don't recall them; no detail . . . ever interrupts my reading" (41).

Beautiful Suffering

As I have previously explained in my discussion of the beautification of disability through the symbol of Kim Phuc, the beautiful suffering aesthetic reflects a Western construction of disability as inspirational and sympathetic. It is no surprise then that photographs of US veterans and their children harmed by Agent Orange would follow the aesthetic of beautiful suffering. This aesthetic has become mundane in US culture that regularly associates disability with charity (and charity with US self- image). One of the photographs in the exhibit is of John Ball, a national poster child for the March of Dimes. His congenital birth defects are thought to be a result of his father's exposure to dioxin during the war. He is pictured on crutches and wearing a onesie, looking and smiling directly at the camera. He is adorable, a paramount characteristic of innocence. The US Americans' faces are very visible in every photograph, and their captions offer short biographies. Like the majority of images of Vietnamese victims, they prominently feature children who have birth defects from their fathers' exposure to dioxin in Vietnam. One photograph that stands out is a family portrait that features a veteran holding his undressed toddler daughter, who is missing her right arm. She smiles and playfully holds onto a spoon, while her doting father wraps his arms tightly around her. Her mother looks at the pair with a light grin on her face. The close-up focus, the toddler's nakedness, and the setting in the couple's kitchen radiate intimacy and warmth. The caption, a direct quote from the unnamed photographer, also emphasizes that despite the daughter's birth defect "She's very beautiful." (Figure 12).

Figure 12: A family portrait of US veteran Dan Loney holding his toddler daughter, who is missing her right arm, at their kitchen table. Exhibit "Hau Qua Chat Doc Da Cam Trong Chien Trang Xam Loc Cua My O Vietnam: Agent Orange Aftermath in the US Aggressive War in Vietnam"

The content, narrative, style, and caption match the beautiful suffering representations of Vietnamese children victims. The beautification of disability seeks to promote relatability and intimacy among the photographer, the photographed subject, and the viewers. Throughout the museum, US Americans are depicted as aggressors, antiwar veterans, protestors, policymakers, and, in these images, victims. The use of beautiful suffering aesthetics in the display of US Americans, unlike the ugly suffering aesthetics of the Korean injuries, does more than promote a antiwar message. It suggests an intervention that the WRM seeks for Vietnamese people. One display includes an extensive quotation from Mrs. Nguyen Thi Binh, President of Dioxin Orange

Agent Victims Association, at the conference in support to Vietnam Orange Agent Victims held in 2004: "we think that the USA . . . should implement their responsibilities in spiritual and material aspects to Vietnamese victims in the same way as they have done to American veterans [sic] victims. . . . The aspirations and the requests of Vietnam are extremely legitimate, being in accordance with ethics and international laws." Mrs. Binh deliberately references international laws to claim a moral and legal authority that Vietnamese testifiers do not naturally have. The exhibit also substantiates Mrs. Binh's statement with quotes from the Chairman of World Peace Council Professor J. Bernal and the executive summary from The International Peoples' Tribunal of Conscience in support of the Vietnamese Victims of Agent Orange in 2009. The national Vietnamese testimony asks the museum goers to consider its people as equal to and deserving of the same rights, protection, and compensations allocated to US Americans.

Borrowing the hegemonic depiction of disability, the museum testimony depends on beautiful suffering aesthetics to inspire, to call on an international civic culture, and to embody a progressive national Vietnamese identity. That is, the deployment of this aesthetic reflects yet another example of testifying through the framework of the witness in order to gain legibility and protection. The disability aesthetic of beautiful suffering is that of a humanitarian rhetoric of international solidarity and friendship, as opposed to righteous anger. These photographs fall under what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson categorizes as the sentimental visual rhetoric of disability, which invokes pity, inspiration, and contribution by positioning the disabled subject in a diminished or childlike role (63). It arouses paternalistic responsibility and morality.

This aesthetic is not mobilized in the exhibit "Aggression War Crimes," but it dominates the exhibit "Hau Qua Chat Doc Da Cam Trong Chien Trang Xam Loc Cua My O Vietnam: Agent Orange Aftermath in the US Aggressive War in Vietnam." The room, painted bright

orange, offers a contemporary feel that contrasts with the rest of the museum. Deemphasizing brutality and the blunt reality of war, these photographs provide a subtle disruption, possible only after normalization between the US and Vietnam. The style, quality, and content of the disability aesthetics of beautiful suffering follow a linear narrative from war-torn to modernization. While disability in these representations is still mediated through war, injury signifies post-war progress. The representations of beautiful suffering show wholeness and the idealism of family, harmony, hope, and humanity despite the presence of disability. As a result, they allow the possibility for the beholder and the Vietnamese subject to merge. As Anne Cheng writes, "To be able to identify beauty (in the guise of judging it) is to have already experienced the self-identification and disidentification of beauty" ("Wounded" 209). The close-up photograph of Duyen and his mother sitting comfortably on a bed, for example, invokes a sense of pleasure, warmth, and beauty (Figure 13). The image depicts joy and maternal love. Duyen is brightly smiling, showing his teeth and dimples as he looks outward, but not directly at the camera. His mother's gaze is focused on him. She, too, is smiling as if his grin is infectious, spreading also to the viewer. Despite Duyen's disfigured head, eyes, and nose, what stands out is their radiating happiness. His contagious smile and bright eyes convey inner beauty and pureness that is universally valued. While his disfigurement is extraordinary, his face is rendered utterly familiar via the universal emotions that the photograph triggers. He is as cute and sweet as any other eight-year-old boy. If the image initially discomforts, it immediately heals and even inspires the viewer. Beautiful suffering aesthetics invites a process of identification. Here the familiar notions of a mother's unconditional love, the innocence of children, and hopefulness that permit a connection between the disabled subject and viewer. Duyen and the many other disabled youths captured in professional portraits in this exhibit room are symbols of joy and inspiration. The

beautiful suffering disability aesthetic draws on the portrait's ability to suggest intimacy, which domesticates the disabled person and encourages a relatability that many marginal people cannot readily access through testimony. These portraits could belong in a living room. They are all modern, crisp, and digitally edited. The high resolution, the professional framing, and overall quality of the images also contrasts with the aesthetics of ugly suffering.

The gravity of the content, however, blurs the distinction between beautiful and ugly, for example, a photograph of "deformed fetuses preserved in formaldehyde at the Tu Du Hospital" does not readily inspire viewers. The encounter with deformed fetuses marks an abject confrontation with a morbid death (Figure 14).[21] It is unclear how many fetuses appear in the photograph—I see one body, but two noses, possibly three mouths, and several eyes. There is strangeness, but also a gentleness to the image. Next to the photograph of the preserved fetuses, is a portrait of an unnamed disabled newborn who died the day after birth. The photograph is contained in an identical wood frame and stylized with sepia effects. These are professionally produced pictures. While the content—the ongoing deadly effects of US military invasion of Vietnam on the most innocent civilians born after the war—is just as tragic as other depictions of disability, these photographs do not assault the witness like ugly suffering representations. There is no shock; the edges are dulled into the sepia tones.

[21] The museum also includes a jar of preserved conjoined fetuses, which is simply captioned, "Thorxo abdermine Pagus" in Exhibit "Hau Qua Chat Doc Da Cam Trong Chien Trang Xam Loc Cua My O Vietnam: Agent Orange Aftermath in the US Aggressive War in Vietnam."

Figure 13: Large photograph of eight-year-old boy, Do Duc Duyen, sitting on a bed with his mother Huong. Exhibit "Hau Qua Chat Doc Da Cam Trong Chien Trang Xam Loc Cua My O Vietnam: Agent Orange Aftermath in the US Aggressive War in Vietnam"

Figure 14: Black and white photograph of the faces of mutated fetuses preserved in formaldehyde at the Tu Du Hospital. Exhibit “Hau Qua Chat Doc Da Cam Trong Chien Trang Xam Loc Cua My O Vietnam: Agent Orange Aftermath in the US Aggressive War in Vietnam”

The individualization of the beautiful suffering aesthetic is echoed by the caption, which names and describes the subject: “Eight year-old Do Duc Duyen jokes around after breakfast with his mother, Huong. Duyen’s instinct for living has enabled his parents to overcome their difficulties, and he continues to give them strength through his joy of life.” The caption highlights Duc’s playful side. It suggests that joy and love can overcome any difficulty; however, it does not name the actual adversities his family faces. The caption of a nearby portrait taken by the same photographer, Doan Duc Minh, echoes the message of innocent, contagious joy that disabled youths can give to non-disabled viewers about life: “Tung cannot speak, and can only eat and drink with the help of others. Yet the keenness in his eyes showed me that he is still shrewd and comprehending. It was extraordinary to see his eyes gleam with the thirst of life of a normal person. I felt there were important lessons to be learned about life from what could be seen in his eyes.” By equating a desire to live with being normal, the photographer implies that disabled people would rather die than be disabled. The effort to humanize Tung focuses on his

contribution to the society—namely, his ability to inspire—as if his pain and his dependency are in opposition to being human. The instrumentalization of maternal care, love, joy, and compassion through these "beautiful despite disabled" portraits relies on a universalism that upholds a human rights mentality. In these photographs and captions, the US War falls to the background. There is no clear enemy, only a collective suffering that all people of any nationality can help relieve. Rather than being aggressors, US Americans and all visitors can be benefactors.

The message of universality is amplified by the written words on the wall: "Let's come along with the victims of Agent Orange – or with the greatest pain that has ever been suffered by human beings. Their pain is also a common pain of the whole mankind" (Figure 15). The statement is in quotation marks; however, it is unclear who the speaker is, as if anyone and everyone could voice this sentiment. It depicts the harm of Agent Orange as an international atrocity—an assault on humanity—rather than solely an issue for the Vietnamese. The emphasis on "human beings" and "the whole mankind" connects visitors to Agent Orange victims, particularly through pain and the ability to alleviate pain. Disability functions as universal currency linked with humanitarianism and based on the premise that all disability is unquestionably tragic and must be eliminated. The photographs posted above this quotation differ from the many other photographs of individual disabled people in the Agent Orange exhibit in that they include other people interacting with the disabled subjects, implying that everyone has the responsibility and power to improve the lives of these children victims. It celebrates the communal effort to overcome the limitations of their poisoning. The message of solidarity—*Let's come along with the victims of Agent Orange*—calls on all museum goers, regardless of their national affiliations, to engage and identify with the disabled subjects in the

photographs. The acceptance the viewer willingly gives, however, tend to result in an easy reconciliation that does not involve accountability, a shift in understanding, and personal change. Beautiful suffering aesthetics appeals to a more general humanitarianism, in which the giver gains a sense of virtue from the act of giving, and thereby retains the hierarchal distance between the witness and victim. As Garland-Thomson explains, "Sentimentality makes of disabled people occasions for the viewers' own narratives of progress, improvement, or heroic deliverance and contains disability's threat in the sympathetic, helpless child for whom the viewer is empowered to act" (63). As a result, the aesthetic of beautiful suffering does not rupture or disorient the museum attendees and upholds the hierarchy between them and the disabled subjects. The nearby donation box makes it easy to immediately respond and relieve oneself of the intense emotions that images of disability can trigger. The relationship between disability and charity conveys disability's testimonial power to invoke predictable and immediate responses from the witness. Disability promotes interactions and community (even if it based on asymmetrical power) across different histories, war, and affiliations. As a result, disability operates as a paramount resource for nations like Vietnam to enter an international community that has rejected it.

Figure 15: A collage of photographs of disabled children interacting with people. Underneath the photographs lies a Vietnamese quotation with English translation: “Let’s come along with the victims of Agent Orange – or with the greatest pain that has ever been suffered by human beings. Their pain is also a common pain of the whole mankind.” Exhibit “Hau Qua Chat Doc Da Cam Trong Chien Trang Xam Loc Cua My O Vietnam: Agent Orange Aftermath in the US Aggressive War in Vietnam”

The WRM, like all testimonies, seeks to claim space in a community. It moves beyond producing imagined relations between museum visitors and the photographed disabled subjects to fostering tangible interactions between the visitors and disabled Vietnamese. At the gift shop in one of the two entrances, impossible to miss, disabled people make and sell beaded items (Figure 16). This type of evidentiary documentation, which rarely occurs in museums, resembles courtrooms eyewitness accounts. In my interview with Ba Van in March 2016, she explains that for five years the museum had integrated a “life exhibition” of disabled people as another way to convey the consequences of the war. In addition to their presence constructing and selling beaded objects, “On Saturdays and Sundays they come to perform their music, singing to the visitors. And sometimes, we also invite them to see the visitors, tell them their stories and play music for the visitors.” Ba Van adds,

> You know this is kind of . . . a life exhibition, so people can see them and talk to them, can hold them, love them, and share with them. Their life has changed so much after what came in the museum. They became . . . happy, more confidence. They married each other and now we have four children. . . . And they feel . . . helpful because when they talk to other people they can share with them the experience to overcome their difficulties in their life and people can learn from them.

Ba Van's description presents the museum as an important place for disabled people to make a living, find romantic connections, and promote change as teachers. They serve as hospitable and gracious Vietnamese ambassadors, entertaining and sharing stories with the visitors. As representatives of Vietnam, they perform the pedagogical work of advancing a narrative of Vietnam's innocence, pacifism, and victimhood. The labor must remain invisible in order to maximize the emotional power to make visitors feel a natural and warm affiliation with them. Instead, the visible labor is their craftmaking, which presents their work ethic as a defining characteristic of Vietnamese people (willing to do factory jobs outsourced by developed nations) and marks them as inspirational. Their willingness and desire to work conveys a determination "to overcome their difficulties," rather than a sense of indignation and resentment. Their roles as craft-makers and entertainers reinforce the notion that it is the role of disabled people to warm the hearts and open the minds of abled people, whose ability to appreciate disabled people serves as proof positive of their compassion and supreme moral compass. However, the need to help visitors imagine them as happy, in love, and raising families reveals the distance between them and the viewers, marking the very crisis of witnessing, in which the person in pain exists at the border of object/subject, victim/agent, and outsider/community member. Humanitarianism

reinscribes hierarchies between different individuals, societies, and nations, marking who has the resource to give and who needs the resource. Even as it supplies material needs, humanitarianism disempowers the beneficiary "by appropriating their otherness in Western discourses of identity and agency" without considering the social and historical contexts of disabilities and the meanings of enablement (Chouliaraki 113).

Figure 16: Life Exhibition of Disabled Vietnamese. A man making a beaded gift in a wheelchair and a woman arranging items at one of several gift shops in the War Remnants Museum.

The recent inclusion of curated people creates a witnessing experience that closely aligns with the museum program that connects US veterans from the Soldier's Hearts with former Vietnamese veterans and war prisoners. In December 2016 Ba Van recounts that the US veterans travel with Vietnamese veterans and stay in their homes: "they became friends. . . . I think my museum is kind of a bridge between former enemies—Vietnamese veterans, American veterans, Korean veterans, Australian veterans." US veterans shared with her that despite having

lived with PTSD for thirty years, after "3 days in Vietnam everything has changed so much, and they feel very happy, and they feel open, and they love Vietnamese people" (January 2017). The museum facilitates literal interactions between people to create space to present pain based on a higher level of intimacy than photography can achieve. The WRM, then, extracts emotions that tend to be available in a friendship, reducing physical, intellectual, and ethical distance to assert a claim to humanity that challenges the ideology of carnage.

The WRM routinizes disability in the historical context of foreign aggression to make the material wound into an ideology as it resignifies injury as a sign of national resilience. Representations of ugly and beautiful suffering, then, become part of guerrilla aesthetics. National testimony as a part of cultural diplomacy can flatten narratives of war and suffering and can enact violence against disabled people when the state controls the narratives they tell and the meaning of disability. Within the WRM testimony, debility is rampant and singularly produced by the US War, excluding disability produced by the state (during and after the war), accidents, and genetic diversity. It also ignores popular Vietnamese cultural association between disability and karma. Controlling how disability is read is a critical apparatus of the state to manage domestic and foreign policy. The exploitation of war-injured individuals is evident, as I have explained, in the revolutionary use of Phan Thi Kim Phuc, the person and the symbol. The presentation of disability creates an international community that ultimately excludes disabled people.

Heroic Suffering

Testimonies, as I have explained, reach out to various communities. The mobilization of disability works as cultural diplomacy to gain international humanitarian aid, demand reparations, shift the dominant narrative of the "Vietnam War" *and* to promote unity, legitimacy,

and nationalism at home. The museum uses inspirational disabled Vietnamese in order to motivate the postwar generations. Ba Van explains that the museum has “different messages” for different visitors. Through the museum, she explains,

> The young people who were born after the war can understand why their parents, their grandparents live very poor, in very poor condition and why they are very, how to say . . . hardened. And they can understand how Vietnam still very poor now. Very poor country and we have to face difficulties . . . many difficulties in our development. So, they can understand that so they themselves have to do something good for their country. (March 2016).

The museum wants to teach the consequences of the US War with the specific goal of inspiring and offering a sense of national urgency for youths who only know Vietnam during peacetime. It gives postwar youths a context to understand their postmemory, to borrow Mariane Hirsch’s term—to know the source of their parents’ and grandparents’ trauma that might have manifested in a distant or tense relationship. Rather than be ashamed of Vietnam’s poverty and lack of development, they can feel pride in their nation and know that they come from generations of resilient people. The WRM extracts the elevated moral position, adversity, and indication of determination from inspirational disability for the purpose of unifying power across generations. The logic, sentiments, and investment in the museum as an alternative narrative site as described by Ba Van is not uniquely Vietnamese. Holding onto and passing on an oppressed history to new generations reflect a minoritarian subjectivity. As Toni Morrison concludes her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved* about transgenerational impact of slavery, “This is not a story to pass on” (324). The events of oppression—the atrocities of the war, should never repeat and the living history should never be forgotten. I am explicitly and repeatedly pointing to the WRM as a

marginalized testimony because it has often been dismissed as propaganda (which it is). The pain of the war is real and continues to be so real that publicizing these stories feels like a matter of life and death for some Vietnamese people. Ba Van shares that she had to seek medical intervention for a "psychological disease" produced by her work of listening, seeing, and experiencing stories of the US War as the museum director (March 2016). The investment to narrate the story of pain through disability is personal, familial, and communal falls at and beyond national agendas.

To link the postwar generation to the history of the US War, the WRM again uses the disability aesthetics of beautiful suffering. Rather than sentimentalize in order to compel sympathy and charity, the photographs of revolutionary heroes uplift disability to elicit admiration to instill in the young Vietnamese visitors a mentality of "if they can do it, I can too." Beautiful suffering permits a progressive narrative of healing. After all, Vietnam has moved from a postwar country that endured food shortages, economic stagnation, and international isolation to a model for North Korea to emulate as it looked forward to hosting the US-North Korea summit in February 2019. The Agent Orange exhibition room shows numerous photographs of working disabled people, many of whom have college degrees, rather than only images of dead, dying, or dependent disabled people. The museum documents disabled people in action—teaching, knitting, reading, collecting hay to fuel the family fire, repairing electronics, and training students—in order to demonstrate their desire to work and contribute to their family and soceties despite of their disabilities (Figure 17). These common activities invite identification as they blend the ordinary with extraordinary. Situated among the collage, there is a television screen to show one of the disabled people working, as if still photographs alone cannot provide adequate proof. There are exceptional cases of a college student who writes with

his feet, a blind musician who has toured the world, the disabled director of SURI manufacturing company, and the first-prize winner at the National Sports Tournament for the Disabilities in 2013 (Figure 18). The museum also includes samples of their tools and final products. For example, in addition to documenting Le Hong Son performing woodwork with his deformed feet, the museum displays his carpenter tools and his handcrafted ornate wood headboard. The caption for his photograph reads,

> Le Hong Son, born in Phu Gia Commune, Huong Khe Ward, Ha Tinh Province, is a hand-crooked victim of Agent Orange. With great fortitude, he has overcome difficulties to own a carpenter's workshop employing 6 handicapped workers. Nowadays, he makes designs, processes, and has a stable income for his family life. (wife and a son)
>
> In 1994, he attended the Agent Orange Conference at Asia-Pacific; and was awarded Merit certificate of creative labor by the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union.
>
> On 1 Oct 1998, he received merit Letter from former President Tran Duc Luong.

Like the examples of disabled people working at the gift shop, the inclusion of Son narrates "great fortitude": his ability to "overcome difficulties" of war-produced disability, his dedication and responsibility, and his successful social integration through marriage and reproduction. Son is yet another example of an inspiring victim of the US War. His official awards stand out in the caption. The special recognition bestowed by Vietnamese officials (the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union, President Tran Duc Luong, and the WRM) honors Son as a role model for other Vietnamese people. By visibly and explicitly honoring Son, the government promotes a national identity of victimhood, virtue, resilience, and ultimately, triumph. The WRM inscribes Son, the

people from the "life exhibition," and the many other inspirational disabled people it commemorates, with a collective identity in response to rapid national development and globalization. In the contemporary period of peace and rapid economic growth, the museum wants to evoke a sense of social urgency—we are still injured— from the widening gap between war-time and postwar generations. Vietnam, in its quest for economic and political power through capitalist avenues, must depend on assertive cultural means to retain communist values. That is, the promotion of a national identity of wounded hero is a concerted response to a growing population increasingly more interested in chasing economic advancement than national identity.

Figure 17: Nine photographs of disabled people performing various actions, such as touching a flower, knitting, helping family members, training a student, and repairing electronics. In the left corner, there is a TV screen running a video loop of a disabled person working. Exhibit “Hau Qua Chat Doc Da Cam Trong Chien Trang Xam Loc Cua My O Vietnam: Agent Orange Aftermath in the US Aggressive War in Vietnam”

Figure 18: Collage of extraordinary disabled Vietnamese. Exhibit “Hau Qua Chat Doc Da Cam Trong Chien Trang Xam Loc Cua My O Vietnam: Agent Orange Aftermath in the US Aggressive War in Vietnam”

The national identity of postwar, postcolonial Vietnam as a disabled subject is magnified by the temporary exhibit “Nan Nhan Chien Tranh Vuot Kho Vuon Len: War Victims Overcome

to Challenges to Emerge." The mission of the exhibit is to "introduce the public to stories of war victims striving to go through pains living a life full of beliefs and strong will. Through such stories, the exhibition also aims at showing the visitors Vietnam as a country and its people during the period of post war recovery and building a new and beautiful nation." The disabled citizens it features, whose willpower overcomes the destruction of war, embody Vietnam as a nation. The exhibit honors two male and two female disabled Vietnamese: Nguyen Hong Loi, a swimmer, designer, and actor who was born disabled in 1987 and moved to Peace Village Tu Du Hospital; Nguyen Mau Tan, a self-taught painter and educator who lost both his legs and arms to a landmine in 1977; Do Thi Kim Hong, a Labor Hero and war veteran who was severely injured and paralyzed in 1967, but who, through "her strong will and significant efforts" returned to work as a nurse and eventually recovered remains of more than 300 deceased Vietnamese; and Huynh Thi Kieu Thu, a former political prisoner, staff at Ho Chi Minh City Youth Cultural House Library, and WRM volunteer, who died from cancer in 2012. Much like the showcase of Le Hong Son, the temporary exhibit includes photographs of their labors, tools, and the products of their crafts.

Because the WRM tokenizes disability into a visualization of national development, it denies the interior experiences of disability. By presenting these individuals as symbols of progress, the WRM attempts to socialize a singular response of awe in the young people reacting to these figures. Extensive quotations from young Vietnamese after having met Mrs. Kieu Thu sit underneath the large photographs (Figure 19). The quotations, typed in purple cursive font, are captured in an outline of an open book that seems to imitate the impressions books placed outside every exhibit room for visitors to write their reactions. The featured reactions show their

deep admiration of Mrs. Thu and newfound desire to succeed as a result of their encounter. For example, Pham Thi Phuong Dung, a student from Le Quy Don Secondary School writes,

> I could not believe in my own eyes seeing you, a one-handed lady suffering from cancer, traveling across Vietnam on a poorly-equipped bicycle. . . . In this moment I see for myself the will and determination of the revolutionary fighters. I promise you that I will do my best in class and taking your noble characteristics as my model.

Another woman, states,

> I will never forget you who is a disabled lady without disability traversing numerous roads and trails on her bicycle. I can see in your life story extraordinary determination, inner power, and a warm heart. Your will to rise above all difficulties and challenging situations to live a full life makes me humble and shameful for a young one like me has not contributed anything to the country and lived life to the fullest. I need to try so much more.

These reactions, which selectively highlight life-changing interactions with Mrs. Kieu, reflect a highly managed historical discourse as the museum, rather than simply narrating Mrs. Thu's biography, aims to teach young Vietnamese visitors how to engage with the museum content. It closes the events of war within a linear chronology of heroic sacrifices to development and ultimately forestalls analysis. Controlling the meaning of disability, the Vietnamese state urges the youth to remember the war, what it has cost the Vietnamese people and land, and what still needs to be done amid global capitalism and US leaders urging Vietnamese to forget—celebrating the youth. who are "far more interested in plugging into the world economy than being stuck in the past" (Kerry n.p). The WRM attempts to instill a national consciousness

among the postwar generation to invigorate a politicized identity—to study harder and contribute to "the period of post war recovery and building a new and beautiful nation" (Exhibit mission statement). That is, Ba Thu's disabled (read as revolutionary) body invokes a sense of national crisis as it bears a trace of war destruction.

Figure 19: A corner of the temporary exhibit "Nan Nhan Chien Tranh Vuot Kho Vuon Len: War Victims Overcome to Challenges to Emerge," displaying Huynh Thi Kieu Thu's bicycle, several photographs, and the reactions of four people after they meeting her.

The WRM connects poverty and illness to a historical context of foreign invasion to insistently raise questions about accountability. However, by enclosing the visuality of vulnerability as evidence of US war crimes, the museum simultaneously embraces and rejects hegemonic Western representations of disabled people from the Global South within humanitarian frameworks that naturalize the poverty of third-world nations and western nation's altruism. The construction of disability as evidence of foreign abuse, however, presents disability as having a singular source: war. Within the imperialist and military context, it is unimaginable for disability to be desired. Eunjung Kim presents the seemingly contradictory significations of disability between third world nations and developed worlds:

> Disability outside the developed world more easily represents something that has to be prevented and eradicated because of its association with injustice and

> suffering, whereas the emphasis on disability prevention and eradication is often resisted by disability activism in Western countries where disability can be reconfigured as difference and a source of pride and culture. When bodies are altered by violence and poverty, at what point do these consequential bodies become bodies of difference, worthy of respect, entitled to resources and participation beyond being symbols of injustice and violence? (Kim 2011, 101)

Disabled people, *because* they are symbols of injustice and violence, become worthy of respect within a testimony of national victimhood at the WRM. It is their injury that marks them as enduring survivors; their innocence (as civilians, as children, as people born after the war) gives them a morally superior status. This, of course, is a fetishized position. No victim can truly be dignified, especially when barriers to material resources force them to perform inspiration for privileged visitors.

The final exhibit of the linear historical narrative at WRM, "The Gioi Ung Ho Viet Nam Khang Chien: The World Supports Vietnam in its Resistance," features dozens of antiwar posters and photographs, donated uniforms and medals of US veterans, and colored photographs of Vietnamese and US diplomats working together from 1993 to 2016. Together these images and objects convey international collaboration, Vietnam's role as a pacifist and moral leader, and a linear progression towards normalization and US aid to remedy effects of toxic chemicals/dioxin in Vietnam. In addition to recording the progress of clean-up initiatives, the museum includes the US promise to continue to aid people with disabilities and remove toxins from land by quoting an excerpt from the Obama's 2016 address to the people of Vietnam in Hanoi: "Even as we continue to assist Vietnamese with disabilities, including children, we are also continuing to help remove Agent Orange/Dioxin so that Vietnam can reclaim more of your land. We're proud of

our work together in Danang, and we look forward to supporting your efforts in Bien Hoa." How will the discourse on disability change as the toxin is cleaned and landmines removed? Will disability retain its significance for Vietnamese identity as Vietnam deepens its relationship with the US and establishes a stronger economic, cultural, and political footing in the world? Dispersed throughout the museum are glossy color photographs of Vietnam's modern infrastructure that contrast with its wartime destruction in order to highlight Vietnam's progress, in which transnational peace and sutured alliance depends on medical recuperation and land clean-up. The juxtaposition of torture devices and photographs of beachfront resorts presents a teleology of national healing that can be visualized through the productivity of bodies, beginning with the disabled body to represent revolutionary sacrifices and ending with the abledbody standing in ao dais and suits.

In this national testimony, disability as a rhetorical tool makes healing into a metaphor within a linear narrative that dismisses the indexicality of suffering as it disappears disabled people who fall outside the state agenda. If disability singularly represents a negative legacy, there is no room to imagine a society that accommodates, includes, and embraces people with disability. Despite its elevated position at the WRM, disability in Vietnam, like everywhere else in the world, is primarily regarded as abject and in immediate need of cure. WhenVietnam no longer needs to deploy disability as a tool to call on international aid, will it follow in the steps of South Korea which, as Eunjung Kim shows in *Curative Violence*, depends on the imperative to cure to support the anticolonial desire to repair the nation? During my visit to Danang, Vietnam, in June 2014, a driver pointed out the absence of homeless and disabled people from public view. He explained that people get a reward if they call officials when they see a beggar. "Isn't it amazing how clean Danang is now?" he added. Hence, the removal of disabled people from

public view is associated with progress and cleanliness. The erasure of disability, then, falls under nation-building mandates that follow the globalized logic of modernism and capitalist imperatives. Even the honorific display of disabled people at the WRM as a source of pride and inspiration for (abled) youths marks disability as anterior to modernity and progress.

Conclusion

The WRM as a national testimony exposes differentials of power when it comes to representation and narrative in the global political economy. The possibility of unmoderated testimony is difficult; even the process of searching for a testimony creates a narrative that a testifier can or cannot fit into. I had originally planned another chapter to shift the focus to visual testimonies by disabled artists to provide insight in how artists affected by Agent Orange engage with the history of the US War, represent themselves, and consider their relation to tourists. I eagerly set out to find Nguyen Quoc Tri, whose painting was featured in the catalog of the Yelling Clinic, a disability arts collective that explores the intersections of art, war, and disability. In the catalog, disability studies scholar Susan Schweik writes, "we got to talk with [Tri] about his groundbreaking decision to move outside the usual realm of subjects of paintings done for tourists in Vietnam's various deaf arts workshops—landscapes, landmarks—and paint portraits of disabled people" (17). I was excited by his portrait of a disabled Vietnamese with the words "nan nhan nhiem chat doc da cam" (victim of Agent Orange) prominently written on the painting because it seems to challenge the narratives of romantic nostalgia and wholeness depicted by popular artwork of rural landscapes and women in traditional clothes. I wanted to interview Tri on his politics and aesthetics and how he resists the mainstreaming of gender and disability within development policies that aim to create autonomous and productive individuals. However, I quickly learned that Tri had painted the victim of Agent Orange simply because his

teacher asked him to, and he currently works at a factory where he recreates popular paintings, making about $7 a day. Tri is deaf and learned to paint at the Vocational Orientation Club for Disabled Youth (YMCA), which is where the members of the Yelling Clinic and I found Tri.

My multiple engagements with Tri alter my theorization of witnessing and the questions of who has the right to pain and who has the ability to "speak?" Our conversations demonstrate the instability of testimony that results from inconsistencies in an individual's testimony and the way people hear differently and respond to the testimony. Above all, they reveal the inaccessibility of testimony. During one formal interview, I hired a sign language translator and Tri invited two of his friends to help him understand and convey his ideas. Both of his friends are deaf and sign. However, it became obvious that Tri does not know sign language well, and the translator and his friends had difficulty communicating with him. At one point during the interview, one of his friends became visibly frustrated by Tri's inability to understand and began to speak for him. I ultimately stopped the interview because the process seemed to distress Tri. What is the language of pain?—visible disability? Vietnamese? Vietnamese translated into English? Sign language? Paintings? Tri's quiet shaking legs as no one is able to communicate fully and richly with him? On another encounter, we met up in a deaf-owned café as people were commiserating about the head of a disability service organization who had stolen their money and broken a bottle on one of the women's head. There is so much pain—hands shouting, hands crying, hands overlapping each other, hands opening the phone to video in others, hands hugging, hands tapping for attention. None of these experiences quite fit into my dissertation.

Testimony, despite its democratic roots, upholds the interpreter's language, frame of reference, and interests. While it is unclear how the narrative of autonomy and agency featured in the Yelling Clinic catalog formed, it very much reflects a linear progressive story of self-

determination celebrated in Western culture. We register Tri and his painting of the Agent Orange victim because of the US's ongoing interests in the Vietnam War, particularly the disabled youths whose impairment offers opportunities for humanitarian interventions to endorse the US American identity of benefactor. What does it mean that Tri's actual experiences (living with a disability *not* produced by the US War, painting anything people request, and copying paintings for low wages, his economic and social insecurity, and his loneliness) are never supposed to have registered?

2// “pain itself was a voice”: Witnessing Rejected Experiences in Le Ly Hayslip’s Memoirs

> They took me to a little house . . . and one American tried to rape me. I started screaming, and he took my hair, which was very long, and he dragged me and beat me. A Vietnamese interpreter came and said, “Why do you struggle against Americans? It won’t do any good.” And I said, “They arrested me, they tortured me and beat me, and now they want to rape me. How can I not cry and struggle?” The next night the American came back, when I was alone. I cried again, but he forced me to the floor and put a cloth in my mouth. He took off my pants. I couldn’t scream. I went faint, and he raped me, and I couldn’t do anything more. Later, the interpreter returned, he removed the cloth for my mouth. I was raped again, and I didn’t feel anything more. (Le Thi Dieu qtd. in Hess 151-152).

Imprisoned for four years, Le was repeatedly raped and tortured during the Vietnam-US War. She recalls that the US Americans “put electricity in my vagina, on my nipples, in my ears, in my nose, on my fingers” (151). The sexualized terrorism reveals the pleasure component of torture and killing, sanctioned in war. In the same collection of interviews in Martha Hess’s *Then the Americans Came: Voices from Vietnam* (1994), Huynh Phuong Anh reiterates the violence against civilians and the effort to silence women: “when we would pass through villages where [the Americans] had been, we would find only bodies —in the trees, on the ground, and women with cloth stuffed in their mouths “(119). In *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places,* Le Ly Hayslip documents her experiences of rape by Vietnamese communists during the war at age

fifteen. She remembers crying out loud “[l]ike an alarm,” but her first rapist covered her mouth to muffle any sound (92). When the second man raped her, she “just lay back and let [him] do what he had to do” (96). Prior to being raped, she expressed that “pain itself was a voice” when she hears sobs of many children in her village as soldiers looted and set their homes on fire (79). Yet no sound escaped her mouth despite the presence of pain. The absence of the scream during the second rape reflects a form of dying, as Le reflects, “I didn’t feel anything more.” Hayslip also witnesses silencing through murder when she finds a young woman stripped and mutilated in the trash of US bases. She reflects that the woman “was a hooker who had been ‘trashed’—used, abused, and dumped—by the servicemen” (226). These Vietnamese women’s experiences attest to the rampant, yet often unacknowledged and silenced culture of sexual violence during the Vietnam-US War.

Silence takes physical forms: stifling by cloth or hand and murder. The women’s screams of pain become possessed by the men who raped and/or murdered them. I am distinguishing between the unrepresentability of atrocity and the culture and act of silencing that permit violence. Violence always attempts to destroy its own trace. Gender, race, class, militarism, and culture overlap to permit the elision of these violent acts. Who can speak—who is alive to speak? Le testifies to being raped again; however, it is unclear if the Vietnamese interpreter or an US American raped her. This ambiguity raises questions about witnessing when the witness responds with violence or does not have the power to intervene. Does a failure to respond equate to a failure to witness? How does a witnessing encounter, in which the observer silences the speaker, alter their relationship or harm the individuals within the exchange? The immense power to silence, in its efforts to prevent witnessing, harms not only the raped victim but everyone in its path. The obstruction of witnessing is a tool of the individual perpetrator and

systems of power. How do we listen to a voice that has been forcefully and systematically denied? How do we process the pain of our enemy, or how do we understand pain when it is described in an unrecognizable lexicon? This chapter centers on the scream—its presence and naturalness (*How can I not cry?*), its absence (*I couldn't scream.*), and its relation to being and living (*I didn't feel anything more.*) by reading Le Ly Hayslip's memoirs *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, (1989, cowritten with Jay Wurts) and *Child of War, Woman of Peace* (1993, cowritten with James Hayslip). While I point to the mechanisms and consequences of silencing, I also explore how Le Ly Hayslip constructs her identity and memory of life under and after the militarized horror of the Vietnam-US War and what her memoirs can offer to the knowledge production of trauma associated with colonialism, war, rape, and dislocation. I label this trauma as transhistorical pain and call for reading her memoirs as an illness testimony to disrupt the multiple layers of erasure of Hayslip's experiences and Vietnamese women's war-related torture.

In *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* and *Child of War, Woman of Peace*, Hayslip recounts her immigration as a peasant girl from Vietnam who arrived in the US in 1970 as a war bride and her journey to heal, which culminates in her humanitarian efforts in Vietnam through her East Meets West Foundation. The memoirs depict militarized horror, sexual violence, poverty, and dislocation caused not only by the Vietnam-US War but also by Vietnam's long history as a Chinese and French colony. The first volume follows two distinct timelines that cross each other as they chronicle her life as a peasant during the Vietnam-US War and her return to Vietnam in 1986. The narrative of her pre-US life begins even before her birth, highlighting the importance of family history, continuity, and filial connection. The historical framework significantly reveals transgenerational pain and the compounding effects of

colonialism and war. The second volume follows her life chronologically in the US from 1972-1986 as she transform from a self-conscious immigrant to a healer of war pain in the US and Vietnam. Together the memoirs document and commemorate the overlooked sufferings of peasant Vietnamese during the Vietnam-US War by focusing on multi-generational poverty, her rape and exile that led to repeated encounters with sexual assaults, the many deaths of relatives, neighbors, friends, and most impactfully, her father, who died by suicide. She also tracks the violence and poverty that continues in the US.

By exposing the pain and death of Vietnamese women and peasants, Hayslip documents the gendered terrorism of war: soldiers and men of all sides "had finally found the perfect enemy: a terrified peasant girl who would endlessly and stupidly consent to be their victim as all Vietnam's peasants had consented to be victims, from creation to the end of time!" (*Heaven* 97). Hayslip's testimony resists the deliberate erasure from the regime of visibility that upholds state power and agendas. By expanding her testimony beyond her own pain, Hayslip registers these Vietnamese women into the history of the Vietnam-US War drawing attention to other forms of war-produced casualties. Hayslip's memoirs are also a memorial to these women. The publication of her memoirs represents a public articulation despite intimate and systematic silencing. By making visible the gendered terrorism of war, the testimony can reveal the long history of killing and erasure of brown women beyond the Vietnamese context. The deletion of women's pain still operates as a critical war strategy: reporting on casualties in Mosul, NPR reporter Jane Arraf shows the disparity between the actual deaths of women and children and what was reported. While she finds at least 5,000 civilians dead—many of whom are women and children—when she visits a morgue, the prime minister and commander in chief during the fighting, Haider al-Abadi indicates that the data documents eight women and children among

1,400 casualties (Arraf n.p). Silencing, as a military tactic, upholds the US liberal identity as protector of innocence, freedom, and democracy. Western societies for centuries have mobilized the salvation of brown women as a reason to colonize and wage war. Absent in the national commemorations and even family stories, these women endure a second death as their injuries and deaths are often overlooked within nationalist recovery efforts. Healing also centers Hayslip's memoirs. Testimonies rarely focus on the speaker's healing journey. And yet, anyone who lives after being assaulted knows that healing—the getting on—claims energy, time, and labor. My focus on her efforts to heal her war wounds acknowledges her body as an index of the Vietnam-US War and the gendered violence associated with it, her creativity, and her offering of her coping strategies to readers.

Transhistorical Pain

Hayslip never identifies as disabled, and few readers would considered her as sick. I recognize the danger of naming her memoirs as illness testimony within the context of institutionalization, misdiagnosis, and social erasure through the label "crazy" of women of color. I want to name the war-related pain that forever index on her body as illness in order to make visible the structures that protect the perpetrators through silencing the victims and helps us to think about the ways militarized violence maps onto individual bodies. The namelessness of her illness aptly depicts its normalization and pervasive impact on women war refugees, its various causes, and its multiple symptomatic locations. By naming the effect of colonialism and militarism on women's bodies, I claim political stakes on their wellness and resist the constitutive silencing that upholds the structures of debilitation. I call her illness—the embodied cumulative impact of colonialism, war, dislocation, and sexual assault— transhistorical pain. I am influenced by Nancy Van Stevendale's use of the term "trans/historical trauma" to describe

Native trauma as “[c]umulative, collective, intergenerational, and intersubjective” (203). I favor the term “pain” over “trauma,” as I explained in the introduction, because its vagueness and common use blurs the body and mind divide and operates inside and outside of medical, psychoanalytical, and social frameworks. Angela Davis, in discussing African American women’s health, insists that ‘‘while our health is undeniably assaulted by natural forces frequently beyond our control, all too often the enemies of our physical and emotional well-being are social and political” (19). Indeed, transhistorical pain disrupts the understanding of trauma as an event-based, finite crisis and understands sickness as the unceasing impact of the social and political oppression. As I have mentioned, one of the goals of this dissertation is to assert the ongoingness of war—its indexicality—in order to resist the hegemonic power of US exceptionalism, to attend to living with the debilitation, and to recognize the new violence that maims Vietnamese refugees in the US. While collective, transhistorical pain is also individual—the ripping and bleeding of the body, a chronic pain that demands new postures, a growing ulcer that takes roots in the stomach. It affects the psychic, physical, and spiritual of individuals across multiple generations. Mass debilitation produced by colonialism, genocide, and war destroys land, social order, kinship, and traditions. Transhistorical pain makes living itself toxic because of the poisoned land and destroyed healing structures. In order to emphasize the ongoing oppressive conditions that demand daily endurance, Hayslip reminds her addressee, “we peasants survived—and still survive today” (*Heaven* 366). Survival, however, is not wellness. Linking the experiences of Vietnamese women raped during the Vietnam-US War, Native trauma, and African American women’s health broadly acknowledges the effects of structural violence, which operates with new names and techniques, that continue to claim the health and life of current generations. By naming the illness transhistorical pain, I am also placing illness within a

karmic system of social relations. As a result, healing requires collective engagement rather than individual progression. Healing effort, in practice, rebuilds relations that the war ruptured and restores a denied history.

Illness Testimony

I define illness testimony as a site of knowledge constructed from an individual's personal experiences of illness with the intention of promoting legal or social change on an intimate or institutional level. Transhistorical pain as a type of debilitation carries veracity, indexicality, and authenticity that can testify to historical violence. It is a trace of colonial and military violence. While iconographies of the Vietnam-US War such as amputee veterans or the “napalm girl” emphasize physical disabilities, this chapter considers debility produced by rape, sex work, domestic violence, poverty, racism, and the loss of family and tradition. The hypervisibility of selective physical disability—particularly those who can readily convey universal suffering and mitigate responsibility—condemns some violence while condoning other forms of debilitations. Hayslip’s memoir rejects the appropriation of physical disability to place blame on one side of the conflict. The regime of visibility during the war also constructs Vietnamese women as hypersexual or evil, such as in *Full Metal Jacket,* where a female sniper annihilates a US squad. Vietnamese women, in both of these visual constructions, threaten the US heterosexual domesticity. These representations, I will show, normalize and authorize the daily violence of rape, poverty, and suicide. Their repetition defines Vietnamese female bodies in the US cultural imaginary. Hayslip, much like Phan Thi Kim Phuc, adopts another legible category of Vietnamese femininity: the figure of grace and forgiveness. As I have detailed in the previous chapter, the structure of witnessing demands the testifier speak in a recognizable language.

In addition the regime of visibility, the Vietnamese American community and Asian American scholars also ignore Hayslip's transhistorical pain. Many Vietnamese Americans criticize her memoirs as a challenge to the memory of Southern Vietnamese. While Hayslip's family members and villagers contributed to communist side, the majority of Vietnamese Americans are anti-communists, who experienced tremendous loss under the communist regime during and after the Vietnamese civil war. When the *Los Angeles Times* ran a condensed excerpt of *Heaven* and her family photographs in 1989, she received many death threats— "I'm going to kill you, damn Viet Cong bitch and Communist sympathizer!"—by American veterans and Vietnamese living in the US. Vietnamese newspapers in Little Saigon, California were "out for [her] blood" (*Heaven* 342). Many people of the Vietnamese diaspora still feel that "Le Ly betrayed us" (Chuyên Nguyễn qtd. in Duong 57).[22] They argue that Hayslip fails to memorialize the plight of southern Vietnamese and uphold the virtues of Vietnamese womanhood.

Hayslip's memoirs have garnered relatively little attention among Asian American literary critics[23] and tend to be viewed through the lens of betrayal/collaboration. There is great anxiety among Asian American scholars about the works' role in absolving US guilt and responsibility and justifying contemporary capitalist foreign intervention in Vietnam: "underlying the message of forgiveness . . . is validation of Western technology and a call for increased intervention" (Bow 125). Similarly, Viet Thanh Nguyen voices concern that "Her efforts lead her American readership to a sense of reconciliation with the traumatic past and

[22] In 2005, an award to be given to Hayslip for her humanitarian efforts in Vietnam was pulled because, according to the *San Diego Reader*, the Asian Pacific Islander Caucus changed its mind. Reporter Joe Deegan writes that Hayslip and others suspect California Assemblyman Trần Thái Văn blocked the award, a charge he denies.

[23] Leslie Bow's *Betrayal and Other Acts of Subversion* (2001), Viet Thanh Nguyen's *Race and Resistance* (2002) and *Nothing Ever Dies* (2019), and Lan Duong's *Treacherous Subjects* (2012) are exceptions that have focused on Hayslip's autobiographies. Duong hypothesizes that Asian American literary critics have dismissed her work because they "see the genre of autobiography and her relations with white men as problematic and complicated, if not ideologically suspect" (59).

enable the US economy to resume business as usual through its search for new markets and new labor, this time in Vietnam" (*Race* 28). These scholarly works broadly criticize what we might call a Vietnamese American literature of reconciliation, arguing that texts such as Hayslip's promote closure, bolster stereotypes, and enforce coherence in order to ultimately validate the US liberal empire. Asian Americanists like Bow and Nguyen importantly recognize the vexed conditions in which marginalized voices are called upon to speak, particularly in the context in which the victimization of ethnic women (even when the US produces their vulnerability) has been repeatedly mobilized by the US liberal regime to support its myth of rescue and justify wars. However, focusing too much on who granted Hayslip the right to speak, the purposes behind the request, and exploitations of her memoirs risks objectifying her subjectivity and dismissing her experiences. While these critiques importantly expose US imperialism and material and epistemic violence, they do not tend to the affective needs of diverse Asian American subjects who yearn for reconciliation as a coping strategy. They ultimately enforce another silencing act. The demand for angry, resistant, revolutionary ethnic narratives risks flattening complex marginalized experiences.[24] A narrow framework of resistances can work to silence victims of abuse and neglect their daily material needs.[25]

I recuperate Hayslip's memoirs—claiming its place in academia—because invisible debilitations as an index of the Vietnam-US War, the role of silence, and the healing practices of Vietnamese Americans should be included in scholarships on the Vietnam-US War, imperialism, witnessing, migration, and disability. I also rehabilitate her memoirs for a personal reason:

[24] Viet Thanh Nguyen states that minority writers "must call forth anger and rage, demand solidarity and revolution, critique whiteness, domination, power, and all the faces of the war machine" (*Nothing* 221)

[25] I should mention that outside of Asian American studies, Vietnam War scholars are generally not interested in Vietnamese perspectives. See Weaver's *Ideology of Forgetting* for her discussion of how academics and feminist activists working on war rape continue to ignore the well-documented crime of rape of Vietnamese women by American GIs.

Hayslip offers coping strategies that can heal what Ann Cvetkovich calls "political depression" (120). For most of my life, I dutifully carried rage. Rage was my mode of witnessing my family and community and my body's testimony to the injustice we experienced. The inequity of our poverty, barriers to medical care, (mis)education, and daily encounters with racial hate rises and rises but always disappear like steam. We were surviving—another paycheck, another A, monthly gift to care for relatives in Vietnam, a car, and a house. Our lives were not publically recognized. We did not talk about the cost of surviving to each other; we didn't have the language or time. It was my rage that meticulously marked each moment of my poor relatives in Vietnam, my parents' losses, my shaking and aching body, my sister's loneliness, and my brother's stumbling. I knew that rage hurt me through insomnia, chronic pain, anxiety, and depression; however, I wanted the weight of rage on my chest. Hurting felt like the only adequate index for the unacknowledged maiming, suffering, and dying I witnessed. At a peak of my unwellness, I began thinking about what health might look like for marginalized people. Hayslip provides alternative ways to honor community and heal oneself: writing, ancestor worship (which I have always participated in without internalizing how this ritual can heal), asserting pride in one's familial lineage, and willful forgiveness.

I consider Hayslip's transhistorical pain to simultaneously emphasize mass debilitation of a community across multiple generations and attend to the specific pain and the knowledge that the pain offers the individual. That is, I am returning to the war-produced debilitation as testimony. I insist on the possibility and, indeed ethical need, to consider historical trauma as both a political and a personal phenomenon. Rather than shying away from illness because it is often conceptualized as experienced by individual body rather than a politicized community, I consider the bodily testimony to have tremendous potential not only to critique oppressive

regimes but also to articulate the complexity and creativity of the testifier. I am pointing to the limits of concepts like war, migration, dislocation, racism, and ableism to represent victims. Group consideration is crucial for promoting collective change; however, it ultimately follows a majoritarian logic that alienates experiences that cannot readily advance a political agenda—there has been little room for a communist sex-worker within Asian American consciousness. As I make evident in my analysis of the WRM in the previous chapter, collective political goals can uphold oppressive systems because they ultimately favor narratives by their ability to expose the systematic inequalities most legible to the dominant population. As a result, the everyday experiences of Hayslip and other Asian war brides as they make a living and care for their families and the cumulative effects of this labor on their bodyminds often remain overlooked within discussions of systematic oppression of colonialism, war, migration, and race.

Locating the effects of systematic violence on actual bodies urgently points to material needs and care, acknowledging Hayslip and other Vietnamese individuals as subjects rather than the abstract Other. Attention to the mental illness and suicides of Vietnamese people produced by the Vietnam-US War shifts attention to unacknowledged war casualties not captured within discourse of bombings, shootings, herbicides, or even Posttraumatic stress disorder. Reparations and humanitarian initiatives have responded to physical disabilities and the land filled with dioxin and landmines. What does accountability to the mental health of raped victims and their family members look like? Justice for Lai Dai Han, a campaign group that calls for South Korea to acknowledge and apologize for the widespread rape and sexual violence against Vietnamese women by American-paid Korean soldiers during the Vietnam-US War, emphasizes the paramount importance of recognition of victimhood and atrocity to justice. My use of the term illness testimony aims to suggest an ethical mode of reading that underscores the necessity of

acknowledging pain where it has been denied, ignored, or hidden in intimate, medical, and social systems. Placing the texts into an intersubjective exchange of witnessing rejects erasure. Attention to transhistorical pain undoes the masking of social inequalities by the individualization of social problems that allows society to abandon ailments to the private responsibility of marginalized people. Reading these texts as an illness testimony acknowledges what people of color have always known: systemic oppression grinds on the minds, muscles, and bones of our families and ourselves, at times, swallowing us whole.

Exploring the relation between the voice and pain, I privilege Hayslip's narration by conceptualizing testimony as a gift— an invitation to experience history from a different perspective, to engage with new systems of knowledge and healing, to join an imagined community, and to participate in a creation of an alternative world. By using the term gift, I am drawing on Jacques Derrida's work on witnessing in "Poetics and Politics of Witnessing," in which he asserts that "bearing witness" relies on an "act of faith" (188). Derrida argues that testimony should not invite debate or question, but should instead connect the speaker and the addressee into a contract of a promise:

> No objection can be made, nothing can be proved either for or against such a testimony. To this act of language, to this "performative" of testimony and declaration, the only possible response, in the night of faith, is another "performative" consisting of the saying or testing out, sometimes without even saying it, of an "I believe you." (196).

I understand this act of faith as the experience of accepting a gift—to read with an openness to accept the content with gratitude. Dominant understandings of witnessing give the addressee the privileged role of interpreting testimony, placing the testifier in danger of a second erasure or a

reoccurrence of injustice. This "act of faith" permits an engagement with experiences that is not readily identifiable. Positioning Hayslip's memoirs as a testimony, then, becomes an initial step to hear the denied narratives— to trust that her pain is real, authentic, and meaningful. Conceptualizing Hayslip's illness testimony as a gift resists doubt and suspicion; it requires readers to check their assumptions, experiences, and systems of knowledge and to enter, even if only temporarily and in performance, the testifier's temporal and spatial plane. Reading Hayslip's memoirs as a testimonial gift responds to her emphasis on difference and unknowability and her simultaneous call for community.

More significantly, understanding testimony as a gift highlights the generosity and civility of Hayslip's texts in US culture that resists US's persistent demand of gratitude from refugees[26] and the exploitation of refugee successes as evidence of US benevolence and justification for new wars.[27] It considers Hayslip as a contributor rather than trapping her in a victim position where her transformation depends on US goodwill. The relation between the testifier and addressee is unequal. The testifier is vulnerable as she *offers* her knowledge; there is no guarantee of reciprocity, response, or even fleeting sympathy. Finally Hayslip's testimony functions as a gift because it deliberately offers healing strategies for war-related trauma. Hayslip's illness testimony, then, allows readers to re-experience the Vietnam-US War from the perspective of a peasant Vietnamese woman, to consider trauma as karma, and to participate in a transnational community united by anti-war sentiment by accepting Vietnamese people as capable of feeling pain, by working towards aiding post-war Vietnam through volunteer work,

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[26] See Mimi Nguyen's *The Gift of Freedom.*
[27] See Yen Le Espiritu's "The 'We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose' Syndrome: US Press Coverage of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the 'Fall of Saigon.'"

and/or by making a donation to her East Meets West Foundation.[28] Hayslip explicitly speaks to a white US audience (and, in the case of her first book co-written with Jay Wurts, she is also speaking with and through a white man); however, I am mobilizing Hayslip's texts as testimony in order to address the wellness of Asian Americans that is intricately linked to racialized transhistorical pain. Hayslip's illness testimony is also a self-healing endeavor and a fulfillment of filial obligations as her memoirs connect her to her deceased father and sons. As I repeatedly show throughout "The Right to Pain," testifiers are complex subjects who have multiple—at times, even contradictory—investments when they testify. I show testimony as a moving object that takes on different afterlives by suggesting the possible applications of Hayslip's healing methods among Asian American readers today.

In the rest of this chapter, I detail three key pedagogical gifts from Hayslip's illness testimony: (1) Her critical knowledge of the war injuries of peasant women during the Vietnam-US War, (2) Her lesson on witnessing across epistemological lacuna, (3) Her healing strategies that do not privilege Western medical conceptions of illness. I begin by examining the grinding violence under what I call the economy of gender under militarism. This system injures and kills women and their family members by physical force and by destroying their identity and relationships. Foregrounding the elided war violence against peasant women, Hayslip shows that in addition to the direct physical act of rape, assault, and murder, the system of war violence attempts to prevent witnessing, a moral crisis that shatters familial relationship and even kills the Vietnamese observer. I then move on to present testimony as a healing strategy, in which Hayslip attempts to rebuild a family and community that has been destroyed by war. In the act of writing, Hayslip provides another opportunity for the failed witnesses—her mother, her in-laws,

[28] The East Meets West Foundation, now called Thrive Networks, is a multi-million dollar international non-governmental organization operating in Asia and Africa.

publishers, and the people who have previously dismissed her violations—and readers to learn experiences that challenge their positionalities and identities. This presents an occasion to correct the failure to witness pain and establish connections across race and nationality rather than build the narrative around the reader/listener's ability to identify and relate with the speaker. Finally, I end by pointing to Hayslip's recovery strategies, particularly of forgiveness, ancestral worship, and humanitarianism as reconnecting with past generations and strengthening the new one.

The Economy of Gender under Militarism and Transhistorical Pain

Hayslip was born into the economy of gender under militarism. "SUFFOCATE HER" begins the first chapter of her first memoir. These were the words of the midwife, directing her mother to kill the newborn Hayslip. The suggestion reflects the squalid condition of their lives. From birth, poverty, patriarchy, militarism, and foreign occupation operate together to target her for rape, torture, and premature death. The sexual violence she endures is ordinary; her survival is exceptional. The war claimed the lives of so many people she knew that Hayslip often "wonder[s] why I was spared while so many of my playmates, neighbors, and relatives were not." She credits the "undependable . . . protector . . . luck" for her life (*Heaven* 15). Hayslip describes her birthplace, Ky La, as a battleground in central Vietnam in which "the Republicans were like elephants trampling our village, the Viet Cong were like snakes who came at us in the night" (69). Constantly under surveillance, she quickly oscillated from hero to traitor. Like many people in her village, Hayslip and her family had contributed to the communist cause since the time of French occupation. While the narrative takes place during the Vietnam-US War, it makes clear the seamless shift from the French War to the American War. The Vietnam-US War is a continuation of the French colonialism, in which the US financed eighty percent of France's effort to recapture Indochina during the Indochina War (McNamara 86). As Hayslip reflected,

"By the late 1960s, the Americans had indeed become . . . the French" (*Heaven* 222). Vietnamese peasants endured sustained oppression under European then US policies and methods, which included forced labor, the torture and killing of family members, and the raping of women (30). For the peasants, hunger, death, and rape are not new, but too common under foreign militarism.

Silence—the foreclosure of testimony—protects and upholds the prevalent gendered violence under civil war and foreign occupation. It is the secrecy of violations that forces Hayslip into exile, shapes her relationships, and determines several major decisions. By age fifteen, Hayslip had been arrested and tortured by the Republicans three times for information on communist activities. Her parents spent their savings to bribe the guards, and her brother-in-law lost his government job after he helped negotiate for her releases. Because Hayslip was able to leave My Thi, a "torture camp—the maximum security POW prison outside Danang," communist affiliates assumed that she was a Republican spy and sentenced her to death despite her loyalty to the communist side (*Heaven* 81). Rather than killing her, two men raped her and threatened to kill her and her family to ensure her silence. As Judith Herman aptly states, "Secrecy and silence are the perpetrator's first line of defense" (8). Their warnings were redundant because they knew that she would not tell anyone: "She's too ashamed. Aren't you, Ly Le?" one of them rhetorically asked (94). Hayslip laments being "dishonored," "ruined for any decent man," "soiled," and unfit for marriage (97). She recalls, "I revealed nothing of my double rape. Although this was mostly to safeguard my parents' lives . . . it was also due to shame" (104). She and her rapists know that the economy of gender protects the male perpetrator while diminishing her worth as woman, a fact confirmed by her mother: "despite her ignorance of my true condition [of being raped], my mother told me to be silent" (104-105). Voicing the

rape would publicize that she was unmarriageble and bring shame to her and her family. Her mother's silencing, intended to protect her, underlines the rape culture that so powerfully protects the perpetrator. While the war that blurs torture, rape, and death sanctions her rape, rape trauma is produced not only by rapists but also by the community and social system that silences the victim.

The double rape forced her into exile and influenced her decision to leave Vietnam as a war bride. Although Hayslip escaped Ky La after she was raped, she could not escape the violent conditions experienced by young, peasant women pervasive throughout the entire country. In Danang, Hayslip found work as a housekeeper, but she was fired by her employer's wife after he sexually assaulted her. When she told her mother about the abuse, her mother commanded her to never speak of it again: "'What do you want people to think,' she asked, looking at me as if everything had been my fault, 'that you are a husband tease and a tattler? No. Never anger the people who feed you. We'll go see Uncle Nhu. Maybe he can keep you under control" (*Heaven* 107). Living in the gender economy under militarism, the people who feed can also assault and rape, exercising power over one's life. Her mother predicts that people would perceive Hayslip as a husband tease, tattler, and out of control—as a perpetrator. The normalization of sexual violence constructs the women as victimizers of their abusers. Her mother's reprimand and apparent apathy reveal the prevalence of sexual harassment and the social and material cost of speaking out. Her mother's silencing also reflects a stern desire to teach a daughter how to survive. In lieu of fairytales, her mother has recounted the rampant raping as a part of everyday life in their village to her daughter since she was a child. For example, she told young Hayslip about the rape and butchering of a neighbor woman by French Legionnaires and taught her to mix "red vegetable dye with water and [stain] the crotches of [her] pants" when soldiers were in

their village to discourage rape. Rape "was every girl's risk in Ky La" (10). In response to the prevalence of sexual terrorism, they adopted and passed down survival strategies.

Hayslip cannot escape sexual terrorism. Because of her social and economic status as a communist exile, she has limited job opportunities. She continues to work as a housekeeper for one wealthy employer after another despite repeated sexual harassmen. At age sixteen she becomes pregnant by Anh, another wealthy employer. Anh exerts his power to objectify Hayslip, exploiting her role as domestic worker to also include sex work. Indeed as Hayslip's mother has suggested, the people who feed can also assault. Worried that her daughter would lose her job and a place to live, Hayslip's mother takes her to an herbalist for herbs to end her pregnancy. Anh's wife evictes Hayslip after the abortion fails and demands that she leave Saigon. Her multiple encounters with sexual harassment, the fact that she escapes rape by what seems to be mere luck (a helicopter startles a group of boys off as they attempt to gang rape her or someone returns home just in time to halt the act), and her mother's callousness beg the question: which woman has not been sexually assaulted in this impoverished war environment? As a result, the deep pain, fear, and shame that Hayslip and other Vietnamese women experience remain trapped within themselves. Laura S. Brown writes, "the daily threat of private violence and constant exposure to traumatic situations that women and oppressed peoples face are not" considered "agreed-upon traumas" (107). She reveals that discussion of trauma as outside normal experience perpetuates a "mythical norm of human experience" and affirms a form of trauma in which members of the dominant culture "participate [only] as a victim rather than as the perpetrator or etiologist of the trauma" (111, 102). I name the trauma of sexual violence as transhistorical pain—as a war-produced injury— in order to show a mass debilitation of Vietnamese women during the Vietnam-US War to raise questions about accountability and more importantly, care.

A body is hurting. What if we think about rape not as trauma but as blood? A ripping? A scream for help?—there's an urgency that the term trauma does not capture. Trauma assumes that the violation is in the past when, in reality, many women who endured sexual violence live in ongoing danger. The normalization of sexual violence not only permits assault to occur, it also cuts the victim from her community.

Silence upholds the conditions that promote rape, making the war, the community, and the family members all complicit. The economy of gender under militarism silences through physical means, threats, culture of shame, and intimate relationships. The silencing produces and exacerbates transhistorical pain. The mother's unspoken silencing of Hayslip after her rape forestalls testimony. Her mother's verbal silencing that places the blame on Hayslip marks not a failure to witness, but rather a violent break in the possibility of witnessing that both produces and results from transhistorical pain of the gendered economy under militarism. That is, the economy of gender under militarism bars individuals from expressing their moral codes. Hayslip testifies to her mother as a plea for help. The refusal to return Hayslip's gaze results not from a lack of knowledge or empathy, but reflects a deep hopelessness and personal pain. The curt response reflects the same desperation as the Vietnamese men quoted in the introduction, answering a child's plea to intervene in the butterfly's cries, "What does crying mean . . .? . . . nothing comes of it . . . nothing"—a lesson to a child that her pain, your pain, and the community's pain do not matter. (le 27). What can guardians offer to a child when they know they cannot mitigate their pain? How do you parent when you have no power and feel no worth in the world? Oppressive systems maintain power by taking away people's ability to witness. While collective pain has often been successfully politicized to form community and promote change, pain also pulls apart a community by its roots. It is in this failed witnessing that the

violence of the rape and sexual assault seep into their ordinary lives, forever altering their mother/daughter relationship. After future experiences with sexual assault and sex work, and in her decision to leave Vietnam through marriage to an American serviceman, Hayslip no longer confides in her mother. At the moment of failed witnessing, the betrayal codes into their daily exchanges. In its disruption of a loving relationship, war also destroys Hayslip's coping mechanism and established network, which might have helped her process the violation of rape and numerous sexual assaults.

Hayslip defines the economy of gender under militarism by equating rapists with the war: "The war— these men— had finally ground me down to oneness with the soil, from which I could no longer be distinguished" (*Heaven 97*). That is, beyond naming her individual perpetrators, she also names the structures that promote the abuse. Colonialism and the war destroyed Vietnamese families' food resources. Livestock were stolen and farms were bombed, producing an epidemic of poverty and ruptured family structures across the country. Houses were "bulldozed to provide a better fire zone for the Americans" or burned down by soldiers of both sides. As Hayslip poignantly reflects, "For every soldier who went to battle, a hundred civilians moved ahead of him—to get out of the way; or behind him—following in his wake the way leaves are pulled along in a cyclone, hoping to live off his garbage, his money, and when all else failed, his mercy" (*Heaven* 198). By equating garbage, money, and mercy, Hayslip points to the immense power soldiers wield over civilians' lives. While war narratives almost always center on soldiers, especially in the US, Hayslip focuses on the daily domestic experiences of civilians: the displaced young and old farmers, who worked for wealthy officers and "war profiteers" in the city or on American bases (221, 199). It was typical for an unmarried farm girl to move to the city to "work as a housekeeper, nanny, hostess, or prostitute and send back money

to the family who no longer wanted her" (198). In this gender economy, the woman is always indebted to her family even as she painfully acknowledges her burdened status. Her ability to labor and eligibility for marriage define her worth.

The American military presence provided new roles for poor Vietnamese women as war destroyed their previous means of survival. When Hayslip returned to Danang after being evicted from the Saigon house, she began to work as a black marketer, selling Vietnamese souvenirs and marijuana to Americans and cigarettes, liquor, soap, and gum to Vietnamese on the black market. The dangerous job placed her under constant threat of arrest by Vietnamese officials and of harassment and rape on American bases. On one occasion, a US sergeant asked her to sell her body to two soldiers. She repeatedly refused, but he continued to increase the price: $20, $100, $200, $400. She finally accepted four hundred dollars, which would support herself, her mother, and her son for over a year. The double rape influenced her decision to accept the offer, thinking that "What could they do to me that had already been done?" (*Heaven* 258). She describes the sexual exchange in language similar to that of the rape, noting with the "urge to scream" and "feel[ing] like [she] was suffocating—buried alive!" (260). The sergeant's bartering despite her refusals articulates the dominant American personnel's view of Vietnamese women as commodities for American male consumption, conflating Hayslip with marijuana or a jade bracelet. This commodification reflects a broader military system that empowers US servicemen to use women however they desire. In fact, military bases strategically hired local Vietnamese women. Cynthia Enloe writes, "Military bases and prostitution have been assumed to 'go together.' But it has taken calculated policies to sustain that fit: policies shape men's sexuality, to ensure battle readiness, to determine the location of businesses, to structure women's economic opportunities, to affect wives, entertainment and public health" (*Bananas* 81). The

economic disparity between Americans and Vietnamese and systems of militarized and racialized heterosexuality support American men's masculinity and power and reveal that the mechanism of monetization also controls the human economy, defining the boundary of human and nonhuman. As Jean-Luc Nancy argues, money installs a powerful capitalist regime of general equivalence that not only temporarily converts subjects into commodities but produces a lasting effect in that it "virtually absorbs, well beyond the monetary or financial sphere but thanks to it and with regard to it, all the spheres of existence of humans" (After 5). Money conveys a willing exchange that obscures the obliteration of a way of life, and therefore, further normalizes sexual terrorism. As a result, Hayslip explains, the human trafficking industry that targets young peasant girls thrived during the war (224). These girls were ideal targets not only because their precarious living conditions made them easy to exploit, but also because many "made little fuss about being raped and brutalized by their masters," and therefore, entered a system of silence that erased the trace of their abuse (224). Their injuries, rapes, trafficking, and deaths go unregistered. Their pain and deaths are not calculated as losses of war. Hayslip documents seeing boyfriends, brothers and husbands act as pimps within this flesh economy. She, once again, points to the ways the war demands betrayal and engagement with violence among family members within these desperate acts on the name of survival. When can we call these acts war-produced injuries? (*Heaven* 226).

The death of Hayslip's father exemplifies the ways in which the Vietnam-US War maims and eventually kills by creating unlivable conditions and inducing distrust among community members. Hayslip's father committed suicide while living alone in his ancestral home, guarding it while his wife and children were away on the battlefield or working in the city. As I note, transhistorical pain is cumulative and intergenerational. Transhistorical pain intimately links

Hayslip's life to her father's death. Her father attempted to kill himself twice during the war. His first (failed) suicide attempt occurred after he watched Lan (Hayslip's sister) take an American serviceman to bed. The lonely father had taken a bus to Danang to see Lan; however, he was greeted by the US GI who cursed him and shoved him out. The father waited for hours in the communal basin, where strangers "relived themselves, showered, or cleaned fish." However, when Lan finally returned home, she felt obligated to take the GI to the makeshift bedroom while her father sat on the couch and cried. The father returned to the village after Lan did not come out for an hour—it is unclear if she was unable to come or if she could not bear to return her father's gaze (*Heaven* 170). Hayslip describes sobbing for her father, Lan, her mother, herself, and her child when she heard this story (171). The sex industry during war affects the entire family. The father's helpless witnessing of Lan's work loudly presents a power structure—whose witnessing matters? Whose crying matters? When the shattered father returned to the village, some neighbors were waiting inside his house and accused him of going to the city "to consort with Americans" (170). The paranoia and distrust among the villagers collapse their previously established support network among each other.

The second, successful suicide attempt occurred after a Vietnamese communist presented the father with a letter that demands Hayslip sneak explosives onto an US base. The communist side wanted to exploit Hayslip's female innocence and sexuality for its military agenda. Believing that the communists would use him as leverage to force Hayslip to submit, the father turned to rat poison to protect his daughter from becoming part of the war's killing machine. His death, he believed, would prevent Hayslip from having to choose between her father and the murdering American soldiers. These two suicide attempts, occurring when his daughters are in compromising positions, display the often overlooked working of war that destroys self-

identities, family relations, and community formations. In Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge,* the narrator's mother Thanh also commits suicide. As with Hayslip's father, Thanh's suicide is presented as a final expression of parental love: "I can only hope that my act of sacrifice will give you the new beginning that you deserve" (Cao 253). In her suicide letter to her daughter, Thanh writes, "I'm already a dying person," marking death as an event that had occurred long before the suicide (Cao 253). Thanh describes her moment of death as when she faced family betrayal and failed to fulfill her filial obligation, which forever disrupts her sense of reality and distorts her self-identity. The war produces a moral crisis, in which civilians cannot witness anymore. As Thanh explains to her daughter, war is "not just the war outside . . . between the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong on one side and the Americans and the [Saigon] government on the other, but also the war inside, the war that still eats, like savage locusts, shred by shred, the very tissue and flesh of my heart" (Cao 237). The battlefield is the bodies of mothers, fathers, daughters, and sisters.

Rather than an immediate response to violence, the suicides of Thanh and Hayslip's father reveals the ongoingness and metastatic nature of self-alienation produced by the war's ability to rupture the core of humanity. As Jasbir Puar, writing on queer suicide, aptly asks, "what kinds of slow deaths have been ongoing that a suicide might represent an escape from" (11). Hayslip's testimony names the enduring effects of poverty, perpetual violence and death, separation of family, the loss of community, and a lack of agency as some of the slow deaths that led to her father's suicide. Despite surviving forced to labor under French occupation and torture, her father cannot bear to watch its effects on his children. War kills through many mechanisms. The father's death, an assertive act of protection, reveals the killing impact of war beyond the battlefield. The two suicides render his death a "slow death," because his death "occupies the

temporalities of the endemic" (Berlant 756). Military encounters do not follow discrete time frames of traumatic events. War follows the time scale of a crisis *and* in "a zone of temporality . . . of ongoingness, getting by, living on, where the structural inequalities are dispersed, the pacing of their experience intermittent" (759). The boundary between living and dying under these conditions overlaps. As Berlant writes, "While death is usually deemed an event in contrast to life's 'extensivity,' in this domain dying and the ordinary reproduction of life are coextensive" (759). The father's death reflects the ongoingness of the oppressive conditions—the wearing down of the father's bodymind. Despite the effort of Hayslip's father to break the karmic system of colonial and war violence, it continues to claim his children: his sons are forced to participate in the army and his daughters to labor in life-threatening occupations.

Transhistorical pain, a direct encounter with historical violence, differs from intergenerational trauma,[29] the inheritance of a parent's grief. Hayslip experiences from her father's death not only the effects of his psychic pain and his loss, but also the enduring material conditions of destitution and perpetual violence that forced her to enter into the gendered, racial military economy. The debilitating effects of militarism span decades as governing power shifts even after military actions cease. The place of Thanh's suicide, Virginia, highlights the life-long ongoingness of her war-produced injury. That is, as the suicide of Hayslip's father demonstrates the continuation of war-produced injury across time (and generations), Thanh's suicide in the US reveals the persistence across locations. While entry into the US has rhetorically been equated with safety, cure, and wealth, Thanh describes the US soil as "poisonous to [her] soul as the poison that once turned [her] village into dead earth" (253). The parallel between the poison of

[29] Within Holocaust studies, Marianne Hirsch calls intergenerational trauma "postmemory." See Hirsch's *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust.*

US soil and the poison used by US troops during the Vietnam-US War presents a continuation rather than an end to the war.

The father's suicide is not only an escape from the various slow deaths, but also an articulation of last resort agency and love. Within a witnessing system that demands inaction and silence, the suicide is a bold action. Through his suicide, her father affirms the importance of caring for one's ancestors and protects her roles as a "woman warrior," which he defines as "to bring forth and nourish life, and to defend it with a warrior's strength" rather than to kill (*Heaven* 70). His suicide expresses illness and wellness within the language of land, spirit, love, and family. Considering the father's suicide as a sacrifice and expression of optimism does not romanticize death; it acknowledges what love looks like under terrorism: a complicated hopefulness with deep investments to the future. Hayslip's entry into the U.S. is motivated by a need to escape the effects of transhistorical pain that have claimed the lives of so many people she knew. The decision to escape Vietnam at a moment of crisis immediately after her father's death more closely reflects exile than immigration. Hayslip compares her father's death to the sacrifice of Jesus and believes that it was "his way of giving me eternal peace" (215). Following his funeral ceremonies, she speaks of a sense of freedom and peace –"I had finally learned how to live" (215). The descriptions of the perilous conditions of country refugees in the city, particularly peasant girls and women, that follow this discussion of hope and opportunity from her father's death depict the perversity of his death as agency and love. One after another, Hayslip details the trafficking of Vietnamese girls into prostitution, the risks of venereal diseases, and the brutality of GIs. She describes her encounter with a woman's mutilated corpse as "a practice" as if such inhumanity were a common, ritualistic occurrence (226). Hayslip's decision to leave Vietnam is propelled by an understanding that she could be next. Hope, among

peasant women during the war, is far from a thing of beauty. Hope looks like "a god that demands human sacrifice"—of "conscience, honor, and money" (221, 256).

Hayslip calculates that, based on her economic status and lack of connections, her only option to escape her precarious living condition was to marry the US enemy, which would come with immense sacrifice of "conscience, honor, and money" (*Heaven* 256). In addition to wanting to leave the condition of war, poverty, and constant death, she believes that as a rape victim, unwed mother, black marketer, and Viet Cong fugitive, she is unfit for a suitable young Vietnamese man. Once again, the rape at age fifteen influences her actions and what she believes she deserves. The language of sacrifice and criteria for marriage reveal the psychological, cultural, military, sexual, and economic factors that impel Hayslip's decision. The persistent effect of rape reveals its unrelenting and everlasting nature. Sex and marriage fall within the framework of need and survival, rather than love, intimacy, and choice. Hayslip dates several American servicemen with the hope of marriage and an opportunity to leave Vietnam. The American servicemen's power is evident in her rhetoric of "last resort" powerlessness. Recognizing her vulnerable circumstance, the servicemen offer money and security in exchange for masculine affirmation and domestic and sexual service. Throughout her relationships with US American men, she repeatedly reminds herself of the importance of sacrifice, and they remind her of her financial need and filial piety—"You'll make more money than your mama-san can spend" (283). One civilian contractor, Jim, exploits her precarious living conditions during their very first meeting when he offers, "if you come and live with me, I'll take care of you. You'll have a nice place to live and plenty of money for your family. You'll never have to work in a craphouse like this again. All you have to do is be my woman for as long as I'm here" (297). She only reluctantly accepts his offer because she routinely experiences sexual harassment

at her current job as a waitress. Her juxtaposition of moving in with a stranger and her vulnerable job stresses the limited employment available to peasant women in the city, as well as the constant threat of physical and sexual abuse. Through his economic power over Hayslip, Jim exercises what Puar calls the right to maim, part of "the racializing biopolitical logic of security . . . mobilized to make power visible on the body" (x). During their relationship, Jim fires his gun in their home and chokes her until she becomes unconscious. Whether in her village or in the city, Hayslip lives constantly under the threat of rape and death. Her entry into the US is a choice between life and death as she negotiates the peril of her racialized female body. Once again, the people that feed can also injure and kill within the gendered economy under militarism.

In 1969 at age nineteen, Hayslip married a middle-aged American construction engineer named Ed Munro, a decision she describes through the same language of exchange: in return for being "a good oriental wife who knows how to take care of her man," Ed "would see to it that I would never have to work again; that my little boy, Jimmy,[30] will be raised in a nice neighborhood and go to an American school; and that neither of us would have to face the dangers and travails of war again" (*Heaven* 333, 343). The reality of life in the US actually entails deep loneliness, discrimination, and economic difficulty, as Ed struggles to find work after returning from Vietnam. While Ed worked as a supervisor in Vietnam, in the US he was "a low man on the totem pole" (*Child* 38). Their marital exchange reflects the racial and gendered economic disparity that permits a narrative of rescue and opportunity. Rather than understanding the marriage as "conceive[d] of mere survival as a motive, with gratitude," Ed's family members consider Hayslip a gold digger motivated by greed (26). Hayslip's gender, ethnicity, and age determine how her entrance to the US and her experiences are read. Labeling a woman a "gold

[30] Jimmy is the nickname that Hayslip uses for her eldest son, James Hayslip.

digger" or "prostitute" aims to undermine her authority and position as a legitimate person. The construction of Hayslip as a gold digger positions Ed as a generous and kind victim and Hayslip as conniving, completely missing her experiences of rape, discrimination, and alienation.

The conception of her decision to leave Vietnam under the banner of economic opportunity reveals a patriarchal and racial form of silencing that ignores the US creation of the precarious conditions. The pathway to leave Vietnam through marriage can be life-threatening for the war bride and her entire family. Vietnamese harassed and berated Hayslip's family after she left because of her relationship with the enemy. Hayslip married Ed with the fear of being disowned by her family and nation. Lan, Hayslip's sister, who has two Amerasian sons, was abandoned by her American boyfriends to be imprisoned, tortured, discriminated against, or killed after US troops left Vietnam in 1975 for her visible affiliation with the enemy. The gendered economy under militarism does not end when Hayslip leaves Vietnam; it determines how she is valued in the US and included as a citizen. Migration as a war bride mandates normatively gendered and sexual performances to uphold the construction of the white, male savior, and by extension, American exceptionalism. The bartered exchange between Ed and Hayslip silences her from complaining because it presents the migration as an illusion of choice, which successfully hides immense violence and ultimately denies her right to pain. The binary between the Vietnamese woman and American man places her in a debt-bound relationship as she had to remind herself, "who was I to complain? I settled down . . . to become the best housewife I could be" (*Child* 46). Her marriageability is determined by her youth, apparent health, beauty, and readiness to obey Ed's demand of "his husband's rights," even though she describes their sexual interactions as "miserable" (18, 35). In other words, Hayslip's immigration under the system of racialized and feminized labor propelled by the US military depends on her

physical ability to perform domestic and sexual labor while the third-world/first-world binary compels the war bride to be uncomplaining and grateful.

"Compulsory able-bodiedness" drives this economy as it demands health under violent working conditions and, as a result, produces disability (McRuer). Ultimately, it requires her to perform hyper-ableness as it demands the silencing of her pain. Her torture, rape, poverty, and the deaths of many family and friends are all normalized in order to uphold US presence in Vietnam as benevolent. Immigration is often presented as a product of third-world poverty and violence without naming U.S military intervention as its source. Beyond performing physical labor, refugees are also expected to do cultural work to uphold US paternalistic identity. Often, the host nation withholds resources until the refugee narrate a specific narrative, as evident by the desperate conditions that compelled Kim Phuc to sell her story against her desire. Hayslip's pain, if it is even acknowledged, is relegated to the past by the teleology of her immigration into the US As a result, the Munro family and the US as a whole are absolved of any responsibility and accountability. In addition to the precondition of entry, refugees may be disposed of by the state if they fail to meet the demands of compulsory able-bodiedness. The police killing of Bich Cau Thi Tran, which I discussed in the introduction, demonstrates the deadly consequence of falling short of expected productivity.

Witnessing Incompatibility

In the previous section, I detailed the various and unacknowledged ways the gendered economy under militarism injured Hayslip and Vietnamese peasants. While body counts and weapons tend to define military might, I focus on the pervasive power of the war through its ability to sever family ties as it places loved ones in hopeless circumstances in which the witness responds to injury by silencing or suicide. That is, by rupturing the system of witnessing—the

ability to intervene in the testifier's pain—the war annihilates the world of the witness and the testifier. Transhistorical pain, as Hayslip presents it, offers an understanding of illness that differs from debilitation, disability, trauma, and PTSD or other mental illness. Rather than a focus on symptoms such as anxiety, fear, numbing, and flashbacks, she discusses the negative consequences of the war in terms of the damage it inflicts on social relationships. The war ruptures familial connection through the destruction of the land. After years of living in exile in Saigon and Danang, Hayslip returns to Ky La to discover that the village she knew has been remade into a more effective American "killing zone" with bunkers, trenches, radio antennas, and tents. The forests have been defoliated by chemicals, and homes and the school have been destroyed. She is most devastated by the destruction of the temples and shrines: "the death of our culture" (*Heaven* 195). The destruction of land is the demolition of an ancestral site that represents a Vietnamese's soul and filial duty to Hayslip and other Vietnamese. She explains that the loss of connection to ancestors means "Families would lose records of their lineage and with them the umbilicals to the very root of our society" (195). Transhistorical pain is both an individual and collective illness of splitting from a family and community—and thus, from a self. As a result, healing requires mending social network and kinship groups. In order to re-establish their mother/daughter relationship, for example, Hayslip writes a letter to her mother when she arrives to the US. Hayslip explains that she wrote the letter, "to tell—honestly and completely—about my rape by the two Viet Cong guards who had been sent to kill me. Until that letter, my mother never knew the truth." The letter offers her mother another opportunity to witness the rape. The occasion to know and respond to the rape, however, serves not only to renew their relationship, it aims "to prepare better karma for [her son] Jimmy" (*Child* 37).That is, the chance

to witness reaches towards a rebuilding of a family and community—presenting a knowledge (as a gift) for a better future.

Through the publication of her memoirs, Hayslip speaks about being raped, against her mother's warning, and offers US readers another opportunity to know her experiences of the Vietnam-US War. In her memoirs, Hayslip documents the resistance to her testimony, revealing the limits of witnessing. The inability of the Munro family and the US public to witness differs greatly from the Vietnamese helpless witnessing, which is not based on indifference or disbelief, but the inability to intervene despite hearing and seeing pain. The elision of Vietnamese women's war-related pain reflects the difficulty of incorporating experiences that differ from or challenge the addressee's identity, affiliations, and own experiences. She recalls crying when her agent called to announce that her book proposal had been accepted in 1986. The publication exceeds literary or professional achievement: "The silent echoes of all the suffering people—not just me and my family, but Vietnamese peasants everywhere—would finally be given a voice" (*Heaven* 304). She describes the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington as an "enormous family headstone" and compares it to a Buddhist shrine, placing the memorial wall in the context of Vietnamese commemoration culture (266). She believes that the memorial wall would be an effective antiwar monument if it included *all* the war victims. The enormity of the wall would reveal war as nothing more than a killing machine (266). Written in the eighties, her manuscript was rejected by many publishers, who commented that the American audience was neither ready for nor interested in her story. One wrote, "It would be hard for our readers to accept because the subject matter is based on the viewpoint of enemies who killed our people in the war" (214). The rejection of her manuscripts, like the absence of the Vietnamese names from the memorial wall, is a form of silencing and a denial of pain motivated by a logic that honoring one's own depends

on excluding and disremembering people on the opposing side—what Viet Nguyen calls "remember one's own" (*Nothing* 23). It marks a failure to witness. The dismissal of Hayslip's memoirs as "the viewpoint of enemies" denies Hayslip from belonging to the American collective "our people."

Because she testifies from the subject position of a peasant Vietnamese woman who has worked for the communist side and as a prostitute and black marketer, Hayslip's experiences cannot readily be incorporated by a general American audience, Asian Americans, nor Vietnamese Americans. The personal disclosure of a marginalized subject in conditions of economic, political, and social inequality carries suspicion and contention, highlighting differences in experiences and power positions between the testifier and addressee. Testimony asks for a recognition that is always already forestalled. It is this distance between the testifier and addressee that requires accepting testimony as a gift. As long as Vietnamese women's experiences of sexual assault are silenced, there is an ethical imperative to read Hayslip's texts as testimony—to say "I believe." Reading Hayslip's memoirs together as a testimony presents witnessing that is situated on difference and incompatibility and rejects witnessing that depends on relatability and recognition, which are often the props of white supremacy, patriarchy, and ableism.

Inaccessibility, invisibility, and opacity are barriers to recognizing the pain of others. Incomprehensibility is a defining characteristic of trauma within psychoanalysis and literary studies. In *The Body in Pain,* Elaine Scarry demonstrates that pain's resistance to language prevents it from being observed by others. The emphasis on incomprehensibility, however, reflects the privileged positionality of the observer whose security permits ignorance. The enormous disparity demands an engagement across epistemological lacunae of spatial, temporal,

and evidentiary gaps. The type of witnessing that Hayslip calls on is an interpretive practice that promotes responsible engagements with pain that depends on a knowledge rooted in historical specificity, affect, and imagination. This knowledge transference requires a listening and a believing rather than complete comprehensibility or even imaginability. Invoking testimonial address, she engages readers through the use of second person at the beginning and end of the memoirs and directly asks them to respond to her call to action:

> In this book, I have tried to show how we peasants survived—and still survive today—as both makers and victims of our war. . . . Most of you who read this book have not lived my kind of life. By the grace of your destiny or luck or God, you do not know how hard it is to survive; although you now have some idea. Do not fell [sic] sorry for me—I made it; I am okay. Right now, though, there are millions of other poor people around the world. . . . I ask only that you open your heart and mind to them, as you have opened it to me by reading this book, and do not think that our story is over. (*Heaven* 365-366)

Hayslip recognizes the impossibility of knowing through testimony—*you do not know* . . . *although you now have some idea.* Hayslip's call to action, to alleviate the pain of others, emphasizes an engagement with pain even if readers cannot fully access it. The assertion that the addressees *do not know* after the presentation of testimony reserves authority for herself as the testifier, survivor, creator, and victim. By using her experiences to call attention to the ongoing struggles of others, Hayslip takes a leadership position in demonstrating empathy and humanitarianism. The authority of knowing more than the addressee rejects the conflation between the testifier and witness popularized in trauma studies:

> The specific task of literary testimony is, in other words, to open up in that belated witness, which the reader now historically becomes, the imaginative capacity of perceiving history—what is happening to others—*in one's own body*, with the power of sight (of insight) usually afforded only by one's own immediate physical involvement. (Felman and Laub 108, emphasis in text)

Hayslip's assertion that the readers do not know deemphasizes the romantic notion of (literary) witnessing that equates hearing/seeing with knowing, knowing with becoming, and knowledge with compassion and action. She instead draws attention to the reality that the majority of middle-class US readers live in security while millions of people live through war, poverty, and rape. Rather than proximity, she acknowledges the distance between the two groups of people.

Hayslip's comparison of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial to a family headstone reflects her enunciation of the different frame of reference between her and her imagined American readers. She opens her memoirs in a small Vietnamese village that readers have not heard of and cannot pronounce: Ky La. She mythicizes the setting by establishing a temporality of a "long time ago, before the world knew better" (*Child* 1). As Hayslip explains in the prologue of *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, "What for you was normal—a life of peace and plenty—was for us a hazy dream known only in our legends" (xiv). While the first volume demonstrates life as a peasant in Ky La and introduces readers to ancestor worship, the culture of sacrifice endemic to colonial/postcolonial culture, agrarian life, and her commitment to communism, the second volume emphasizes her alienation and struggle to assimilate in the US In other words, the first volume highlights the foreignness of her home to the readers and the second volume details the strangeness of the readers' way of life to her, emphasizing the gulf between the testifier and her addressees. At times, her descriptions of learning American culture and way of life feels

performative, comedic, and exaggerated, revealing her effort to create distance with her audience. For example, she describes her first Halloween by using Vietnamese words, expressing exaggerated fear of a holiday most readers cherish and contextualizing the holiday through her practice of ancestor worship. She cannot distinguish between decorations and a real coffin or children in costumes and real devils/monsters. Additionally, her shouting and aggressive actions—demanding information, throwing candy in children's faces, slamming the door—mark her as threatening (*Child* 48). The rest of the chapter "Jaws of the Tiger" follows similar performances of disorientation during Thanksgiving and Christmas. The title of the chapter presents the US as exotic and dangerous. By repeatedly referring herself as "a displaced Oriental," "ignorant little farm girl," and "country girl," she creates a relationship with readers based on unrelatability and unknowability in the very act of naming herself (47, 169, 277). These are only a few examples of the markers of difference that set up a new frame of reference to engage with experiences that are more ideologically difficult to accept, such as her connection to Communism, her prostitution, her secret love affair that also jeopardized her children's safety, and her traumatic encounters with rape, war, and dislocation.

These articulations of difference through the humbleness of a farm girl with a third-grade education permit a gentle chastisement of her addressees as she critiques US consumerism, capitalism, racism, masculinity, and militarism. By prioritizing engagement based on difference and distance, Hayslip places the audience at the margins. The texts not only mark the triumph of self-inscription or even collective minority identity, but also an effort to connect with enemies, to establish relations across difference. Acknowledging the pain of someone whose experiences and identity are relatable is easy, while processing the pain of the enemy is laborious. That is, the witnessing experience has largely been predetermined before the encounter. Hayslip was struck

by the disparity of her in-laws' reactions to Vietnamese suffering versus American suffering when she watched the evening news with the Munro family:

> When the news changed to a story about a little girl who fell into a well, however, the whole room filled with compassion. In the Vietnam newsreel, children and women and old people had been blown to bits and everyone just yawned, because they were *the enemy*—bad guys on a real-life "cops and robbers" show. Now that one little girl-in-the-well made my in-laws weep bitter tears: because she was *one of them.* I wanted to tell these kind, well-meaning, but ignorant people the truth about my war, their war—*our* war—that my brothers and sisters and that trapped little girl were really all one family. (*Child of War* 27-28; emphasis in text)

The news footage provides an opportunity to see Vietnamese pain, yet the Munros' boredom suggests an inability to feel—a failure to witness. Like the publishers who rejected her manuscript because of its "viewpoint of enemies," the Munro members draw a definitive border of belonging as they decide whose pain matters (214). The withholding of recognition not only excludes Vietnamese people from a community, but from life itself.

This mundane encounter of watching television with her husband's family reveals that support and ideology of war, mass killing, raping of third-world women form within the living room space of American homes. Focusing on domestic, mundane, and intimate encounters raises questions about the role of affect in witnessing. While the knowledge gap makes witnessing the pain of others difficult, it is the subjective—and routinely, unquestioned— realm of emotions that uphold the witnessing habit that sanctions poor and racialized people to death. In *Proust and Signs,* Gilles Deleuze coins the term "encountered sign" to describe the sign that is felt rather than recognized through cognition. For Deleuze, affect is superior to explicit statement

and an effective trigger for profound thoughts, involuntarily prompting critical inquiry: "More important than thought there is 'what leads to thought' . . . Impressions which force us to look, encounters which force as to interpret, expressions which force us to think" (163). Sensations *allow* the registration of different experiences, making representations intelligible. There is tremendous power of emotions to compel thought and action. The moral challenge occurs, however, when splattered bodies only yield boredom. Some bodies elicit apathy and disgust. Neither knowledge nor affect captures the testimony—the pain of the speaker. The claim of potential for a representation of pain (in any medium) to shape cultural negotiation and move pain from the private realm into the public through its ability to activate affect places the responsibility on the artists and art to elicit emotions. This is evident in the War Remnants Museum's adoption of the visual rhetoric of disability to garner concern. This line of thought has yielded much debate about the superiority of some genres and forms to represent trauma in comparison to realism's exploitation of sentimentalism, which leaves an ephemeral impact. Ultimately, this leads to the demand that people speak about their pain in a particular language without holding the addressee accountable to their witnessing practices.

Rather than creating a dichotomy between knowledge and feelings, Hayslip invests in the potential of new knowledge to provoke emotions—the simultaneous "open[ing] of heart and mind" when encountering someone across epistemological lacuna (*Heaven* 366). The recognition of self in the place of others, to the point of complete dismissal of the subjects, is evident in Roland Barthes's discussion of the studium of the photograph. Remarking on the easily accessible studium, he writes, "The *studium* is clear" (43; emphasis in text). The assertion of the simplicity of the studium, then, reflects a dismissive viewing habit. By delineating affect from knowledge through the construction of punctum and studium, Barthes promotes a seeing

encounter that never allows the addressee to move beyond his/her frame of reference and emotions. In fact, Barthes alerts us that "Ultimately—or at the limit—in order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes" (53). This logic of seeing comes dangerously close to the refusal to see others. Hayslip's reminder to the addressee— "you do not know" at the end of the first volume averts the possibility of appropriation, reduction, and simple and singular interpretation by the addressee, whose privileged position usually grants interpretive power. The emphasis on difference in the witnessing exchange, then, does not encourage identification and does not mobilize affect; instead, it leverages moral authority. Hayslip identifies the Munros' (and the American public's) indifference to the violent deaths of Vietnamese civilians as "ignorance." Her in-laws, like the many other Americans she meets, are victims of ignorance who do not recognize their complicity in the violence nor the production of bad karma and injury. By choosing to address their indifference as ignorance rather than prejudice or racism, Hayslip redirects her "racial anger," which is marked by feeling out of control like "cornered rats" (24). She claims control by shifting her position from receiver of discrimination to teacher of compassion. Hayslip's interpretation of their apathy as ignorance complicates common understandings of victimhood and the distinction between enemy/family, and thereby, allows her to claim the role of analyst.

Hayslip records a habitual incident of watching the news to reveal the exclusion from the right to pain is a form of dehumanization, and its repetition ruptures the victim's sense of belonging, worth, and security. Maria Root labels cumulative degradation as "insidious trauma." Laura Brown defines insidious trauma as "the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit" (107). Trauma, however, does not adequately capture the effects

of the violence of withholding recognition. The indifference towards Vietnamese death not only slowly and violently works inside Hayslip; it also supports the mass killing of Vietnamese people (*Child* 24). The detachment supports US exceptionalism and racism because it reinforces the ideology that the US did not maim or kill anyone worthy of living. The demarcation of who is worthy of compassion tolerates and promotes the further debilitation and killing of marginalized people. As Judith Butler explains, the "differential distribution of precarity is at once a material and a *perceptual issue*, since those whose lives are not 'regarded' as potentially grievable, and hence valuable, are made to bear the burden of starvation, underemployment, legal disenfranchisement, and differential exposure to violence and death" (25, my emphasis). In this context, Americans tolerate the maiming and killing of Vietnamese people as "bad guys"—which is not different from dismissing Hayslip's memoirs as the deserving experiences of a gold digger, the enemy, or "Viet Cong bitch" (*Heaven 342).*

In the exchange with the Munro family members, Hayslip *wants* to speak and challenge them but does not. The publication of her memoirs, then, is the materialization of an alternative outcome, in which she does speak. As a result, Hayslip's published memoirs represent a reimagining of history and, thus, have transformative power even if the witness fails to believe or response. Her books fulfill the labor of adding Vietnamese people to a public American memorial by describing their pain in English through in accessible form. As a testimony, these texts are a public and social space rather than simply textual or aural objects. Testimony, as I have shown in the previous chapter, always involves new community formation and change, even if that changed is belated. That is, despite the failure of publishers to recognize Hayslip's experiences and accept her into an American community, the written testimony presents infinite opportunities for recognition and transformation with each reading.

By pointing out the problem of the Munros' viewing habits, Hayslip holds a mirror up to the dehumanization and prejudice against of Vietnamese people and presents readers an opportunity to correct the failure to witness suffering and to recognize connections across race and nationality. In its focus on the intimate engagement in the domestic space, Hayslip's testimony shifts attention beyond professional care, resource allocation, and the securing of legal rights to calling for change on the level of daily interactions. In "The Difficulty of Imagining Other People," Elaine Scarry argues that people simply do not have the capacity to imagine other people, and therefore we should focus on legal and structural changes. However, legislative changes also have limitations. Adrienne Asch cogently explains such limits, "The ADA may prevent a local health club or public pool from turning me away if I go to exercise or swim, but it will do nothing to help me persuade a group of new friends that I could join them for carefree afternoon at the lake" (n.p.). Jasbir Puar has also raised concerns about disability rights-based discourse for its failure to capture the forms of racialization that slate populations for debilitation and/or death. Puar calls for the need to address "injury and bodily exclusion that are endemic rather than epidemic or exceptional" and "for rethinking overarching structures of working, schooling, and living rather than relying on rights frames to provide accommodationist solutions (Xvii). People need nourishing encounters that affirm their dignity, not just the right of entry into a country or public space. Because of its mundane nature, this example of watching the news with the Munros suggests a way to engage rather than to dismiss the deaths of Vietnamese, and dark-skinned people in general, as a distant and abstract foreign issue beyond civilian reach. If we consider Hayslip's memoirs as a testimony—an encounter with her readers— we can pick up the task of registering the pain that the Munros dismissed and refuse to perpetuate an ideology that tolerates militarized violence against Vietnamese people and the "millions of others" under

military threats (*Heaven* 366). The way one watches the news, how to read a memoir, how to include a disabled friend in social activities express practices of accountability. As Hayslip makes clear in her critique of US viewing habits, who to maim or kill is decided on upon in the living room. Accountability depends on altering cultural and affective structures.

Her testimony, then, is an invitation that moves memory from the boundary of a single body to the public—an insistence on public knowledge and change. It opens up the possibility for readers to shift the way we think, behave, and interpret the world based on a moral demand. Engaging with the past from the testifier's perspective allows for discovery of moments of resistance and for change in the present and the future. If witnessing is successful, it destabilizes natural affinities to people who look like us and promotes new attachments—to form deliberate and conscious identification with others. Identification, according to Diana Fuss, "names the entry of history and culture into the subject, a subject that must bear the traces of each and every encounter with the external world. Identification is, from the beginning, a question of *relation*, of self to other, subject to object, inside to outside" (3, emphasis in text). I take from Fuss's definition the malleability of identification that shifts with new encounters as individuals negotiate new knowledge of history and relation to others. As a process of reinterpreting what we know as facts, resisting the use our emotional response as a litmus test for actions, questioning our relationship to truth, and reorienting our relation to our community and to the testifier, witnessing, then, necessarily changes the listener's identification to self and other.

Hayslip's call to feel compassion towards all people as "one family" beyond nationalities exceeds sympathizing with Vietnamese people. She describes her experiences as "the story of anyone—Oriental, European, African, Pacific Island, Middle Eastern, American—who ever found herself dispossessed, abandoned, and swallowed up by the world only to be spat out: a

stranger in a strange new place" (*Child* 28, 4). Additionally, Hayslip states, "Right now, though, there are millions of other poor people around the world. . . . I ask only that you open your heart and mind to them, as you have opened it to me by reading this book, and do not think that our story is over" (*Heaven* 366). The connection between the reading of her memoirs and engaging with disenfranchised people highlights the continuing value of a testimony. In the process of accepting the veracity of her experiences and the pain of those violations on her bodymind, the reader not only grants her recognition, but learns a witnessing habit across difference that might shift interactions with all people. Accountability, then, means to apply Hayslip's illness testimony to understand contemporary debilitation—to consider, for instance, the deep pain of asylum-seeking parents as their children are separated from them, sexually abused in US detention centers, or killed in US custody and the transhistorical pain that these children experience and will continue to experience for the rest of their lives.

Illness Testimony and Healing Strategies

Reading Hayslip's memoirs as an illness testimony preserves her authority and disrupts the testifier/addressee dichotomy that positions the addressee as interpreter and potential savior. The legal system, in which the jury determines the veracity of the testimony, and psychology, in which the therapist analyzes the patient's experiences, affirm the unequal power relation between the testifier and addressee— the testifier does not have the authority of the expert; she is vulnerable to the interpretation and will of the addressee. Hayslip understands all events, including traumatic encounters, through her interpretation of Buddhism: "The 'traffic signs' I obeyed . . . were chiseled in my heart as *Dao lam nguoi*: natural law, universal law, the law of karma and life and death" (*Child of War* 3). Hayslip deliberately resists the medicalization of psychic pain because the Western conceptualization conflicts with her definition of wellness. In

her analysis of Hayslip's memoirs, Maureen Fielding diagnoses Hayslip with PTSD even after Hayslip rejects the possibility in their personal interview.[31] Placing Hayslip's experiences within a psychoanalytic framework ignores diverse expressions of mental health and undermines her authority as someone capable of claiming her own wellness. In *Crazy Like Us: The Globalization of the American Psyche,* Ethan Watters documents the problematic replacement of local expressions of mental health with Western symptom repertoire and treatment: "By isolating trauma as a malfunction of the mind that can be connected to discrete symptoms and targeted by new and specialized treatments, we have removed the experience of trauma from other cultural narratives and beliefs that might otherwise give meaning to suffering" (121). Watters explains, for example, that after the 2004 tsunami hit Sri Lanka, the US sent trauma experts to treat and educate the local population about PTSD. These experts emphasize individual symptoms while Sri Lankans consider the damage of social relations, such as the loss off community and inability to fulfil a role in the family). Similarly, Derek Summerfield criticizes humanitarian interventions to provide psychological assistance in international conflict situations, calling the dissemination of Western mental health knowledge "psychiatric universalism" (238).[32] The claim of authority to pathologize others gives analytical power to the addressee while rendering the testifier passive and ignorant. It is an imperialistic habit to value Western knowledge over other systems of knowledge.

[31] In "Le Ly Hayslip's 'Child of War, Woman of Peace': An Engaged Buddhist Response to Trauma," Fielding writes, "In *Child of War* Hayslip employs the language of the battlefield to describe her post-war experiences, and she depicts herself as having symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), while she herself insists that she is not traumatized (personal interview)" (58).

[32] See also *Rethinking the Trauma of War,* edited Patrick J. Bracken and Celia Petty.

The act of diagnosing her with PTSD fails to value Hayslip's voice, knowledge and accept her testimony as a gift that has the methods that might heal her readers. It is a missed opportunity. Hayslip explicitly rejects the objectivity and teleology of PTSD:

> One thing I discovered was that many troubled vets, with a history of PTSD or not, already had problems, or were disposed to have problems, that their war experience only made worse. Some of these involved drugs or alcohol, or spouse or child abuse, but some simply had the same troubles with money and marriage that other people suffer. I truly believe their main problem was with their karma, not the service. (*Child* 329).

Hayslip locates veterans' ailments within a spiritual understanding of karma, a complex intersubjective network of action and reaction across life cycles. She explains, "As a Buddhist, I only know the laws of cause and effect: *Soi giay oan cuu, nghiep chuong mang me.* You have made very bad karma and your soul debt will come due, if not in this life, then another" (292). Psychoanalysis understands trauma as produced by an event fixed in the past, while the traumatic encounter, through the framework of karma, crosses generations and has no closure. This formulation considers psychic pain as innate to living rather than as pathology.

She challenges the authority given to medical discourses and places herself in the position of expert by choosing to focus on the daily experiences that haunted the troubled veterans *before* they went to Vietnam. Within the dominant American discourse of the Vietnam-US War, pain is experienced by veterans, their families, and the American nation. The history of PTSD, in particular, is dependent on the disappearance of Southeast Asians. The formal diagnosis of PTSD in 1980, sometimes referred to as "Vietnam Syndrome," enables the condemnation of specific events of the unpopular war, rather than the condemnation of American

veterans or the US government. James William Gibson shows that discussions of PTSD and dioxin poisoning of veterans in the early 1980s permitted the Vietnam War to disappear "as a topic of study and political consideration and instead [become] dispersed and institutionalized in the complex of medical, psychiatric, and legal discourse" (3-4). The Vietnam-US War could be dismissed, and problems related to it could be solved within trusted legal and medical institutions. The national effort to recuperate US veterans in a way that re-established US exceptionalism discursively and culturally silences Vietnamese/Vietnamese American experiences.[33] Reading Hayslip's memoirs as an illness testimony, then, intervenes with Western-centric understandings of mental wellness by accepting an alternative language, cultural practice, and knowledge of transhistorical pain.

Beyond revealing the epidemic and endemic conditions of debility, reading Hayslip's memoirs as illness testimony expands understandings of psychic pain and how medical professionals conceptualize symptoms of physical pain. Because the pain of sexual assault is unnamed and the blame is placed on her, Hayslip does not seek help to alleviate her pain until it takes physical form and becomes too extreme to work. When Hayslip was exiled to Saigon, as one example, she described stomach pains so severe that she could not stand up or eat. She eventually went to a free public hospital and learned she "had a small sore in my stomach—an ulcer—a hole where my little body was eating itself out of homesickness, anger, and despair" (*Heaven* 120). By naming "homesickness, anger, and despair," as the actual causes of her ulcer, Hayslip connects emotional and psychological distress to physical impairment. Hayslip's experiences of a physical wound to the body resist the mind-body split of Western

[33] See Gina Weaver's *Ideologies of Forgetting* for an analysis of how acts of silencing rape in the Vietnam-US War recuperate the veteran as a hero to unify a divisive US.

conceptualization. Furthermore, debilitation is woven into the daily fabric of Hayslip's life. The cost of not working or seeking treatment is too high for her as a peasant and only addressed when it hinders her ability to make a living. As a result, illness related to, caused by or exacerbated by poverty goes underdiagnosed.

Even after she migrated to California, Hayslip continues to document psychological stress through physical symptoms. In 1975 as she watches the collapse of South Vietnam on television, she reluctantly agrees to marry another Vietnam-US War veteran Dennis Hayslip. He proposes that if Hayslip marries him, he would fly to Vietnam to bring his sister Lan and her Amerasian sons to the US. Knowing that Lan and her sons were under execution threats, Hayslip reaches out but fails to convince Lan's US boyfriend to save them. Despite telling him several times that she doesn't love him, Hayslip accepts Dennis's proposal by pragmatically stating, "That is a fair price to pay" (*Child* 127). Hayslip once again enters a barter economy through marriage to protect her family even after securing economic and social stability in the US. The acceptance of the exchange as "fair" is a form of normalizing or agreeing to a violent living arrangement. The pain that the marriage caused cannot be named or treated until it takes physical form as excruciating stomach pain and she is hospitalized (128). This example represents many incidents in which Asian immigrants tend to name physical symptoms rather than psychological symptoms, and therefore, seek medical attention instead of mental health services. As a result, the actual disabling causes are never registered within medical systems. The reoccurrence of symptoms of transhistorical pain reveals bodily memory, rejecting the notion of cure. Furthermore, the choice between marriage or letting her sister and nephews die reflects the continued destabilization of the family and flesh economy under militarism in the US.

Because Hayslip understands her illness as a private and collective manifestation of the compounding effects of social and environmental conditions, she approaches healing both in and outside of the medical networks. She credits her father's words from a letter that he sent to her when she was first hospitalized in Saigon for healing her: "my father's letter did more to heal my wounded stomach than all the doctor's medicine" (*Heaven* 120). In the letter, her father shows understanding of her psychic suffering and reminds her of her connection to the brave Phung Thi lineage "You are a brave Phung Thi woman and must choose life no matter what" (120). Her father passes away before she came to America; however, he continues to heal her as if he were still alive. During her 1975 hospitalization in California, Hayslip describes consulting with her father's ghost. Once again, he reminds her of her heroic Phung Thi lineage and "confirmed for me my role in life—at least as I understood it. It gave me, perhaps, one last chance to show the power of love over hate" (*Child* 129). Because transhistorical pain is an individually felt experience within national, cultural, and familial history, its remedy depends on intimate relations and recognition. These two encounters with her father during moments of health crisis offer her a network when she faces violence in isolation and bonds her to a familial and national community. Hayslip connects with her father through the medium of his letter and his ghost rather than face-to-face because the experiences under the economy of gender under militarism demand silence. This quiet acknowledgement, instead of the naming the actual violence, represents a returned gaze of understanding and sympathy made possible through shared oppression. The father's acknowledgement of pain and reaching out to his daughter reflect an active expression of love and resistance against the war's power to destroy witnessing systems. What would the American medical staff members think if she told them that she has consulted with the ghost of her father? Since American psychoanalysis favors a teleology of healing-based

attachment to new objects and rejects stagnation associated with the pathological melancholia, Hayslip's relation to the dead might be considered as an unhealthy attachment to the lost object.[34] In this regard, the western teleology of mourning mirrors assimilationist logic. Would medical workers roll their eyes at her inability to leave behind her superstitious culture—or worse, mark her as unfit to mother and care for herself—and commit her to the psychiatric ward?[35] Consideration of Hayslip's texts as an illness narrative acknowledges and places value on *her* interpretation of healing. Understanding Hayslip's narratives as an illness testimony allows the texts to operate as a case study or discursive evidence and identifies the need to modify both assessment procedures and established treatments to make them effective for Vietnamese Americans.

In the same manner that he healed her stomach ulcers, her father's spirit guides her through daily conflicts. She hears his lesson about the importance of saving life when she debates whether to marry Dennis to protect her sister and nephews. When she does not have enough money to pay bills, she comforts herself with a story he told her when she was a child. His spirit tells her how to respond when veterans seek her out to berate her. He calms her when "racial anger," the overwhelming rage produced from the helplessness of being hated and discriminated against because of her race, takes over (24). He quells the guilt and reservations about her risky decision to return to Vietnam in 1989 before the US lifted its embargo. Together these incidents emphasize the father's repeated lesson to choose life and love. Seemingly a mundane lesson, the call to choose life under chronic oppressive condition, demands constant

[34] See Sigmund Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia."

[35] In Maxine Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, the narrator's aunt, Moon Orchid, who is unable to assimilate into American society, is committed and dies in a California state mental asylum, demonstrating that the conflation of perceived mental wellness and inability to assimilate is especially life-threatening for older first-generation immigrants. This example reflects how American institutions can read cultural difference as mental instability.

practice and the strength of a warrior. The everyday work of repair requires an active engagement of doing little things. It is a call to "surrender," an adamant refusal to be "choked by a consciousness in persistent conflict with the world and its expectations" (Quashie 35). In Kevin Quashie's thoughtful *The Sovereignty of Quiet,* he focuses on personal inwardness and intimacy as alternative forms of sovereignty to resistance in black culture. Quashie argues that surrender can be "expressive and active" and "as sustaining as any act of protest" (28, 34). Through the juxtaposition of tremendous gender violence experienced by peasant young women in the city and hope, Hayslip performs surrender. She articulates resilience through her willful decision "to find life and color" even as the earth is poisoned by toxins and bombs (*Child* 219).

The repetition of the father's lesson throughout the memoirs underlines the labor required to deliberately redirect attention to positive moments, no matter how small they may be. While rage can be a powerful affect for political change among many activists, it can be consuming and trigger chronic stress and pain on the bodymind. More simply, activists cultivate different motivations and articulations of resistance. Hayslip acknowledges her own anger and trauma and the tremendous effort it takes to cultivate civility through her father's advice:

> Turn enemies into friends and your hate will yield joy. Forgive yourself, forget the sins of others, and get on with your life. It was easy to say but very difficult to show. . . . Beneath the spiritual serenity I tried to project was a cornered little animal who, fangs bared, was ready to fight for her life. (227).

The simple, declarative commands—turn enemies into friends, forgive yourself, forget the sins of others, and get on—sound like mantras to repeat. Following her father's lesson is a form of cognitive resistance necessary to absorb and respond to grief and conflict when faced with chronic traumas of sexual and domestic violence, war, racism, and dislocation. Forgiveness, a

kind of antidote to some of the illness that plagues her, acts as a refusal to place power and agency anywhere but within herself. Asserting forgiveness functions as a way for Hayslip to claim moral authority over her perpetrators. She does not absolve them of their crimes but strips them of any power to continue to control her. She not only liberates herself from the domination and oppression produced by racism, sexism, militarism, and colonialism, but through the act of publicly promoting forgiveness through her memoirs, she also creates a space of generosity and potential change. She not only preaches forgiveness as a mode of self-healing, but she also chooses love and desire to create new affiliations through the deliberate effort to create alliances across race and former enemy lines.

Because Hayslip conceptualizes her sufferings and joys through karma, "the laws of cause and effect" of past and present, she tends to pain across lifetime (*Child of War* 292). Vietnamese belief in ghosts, like karma, reflects a conception of time that emphasizes continuity. As Lan Cao writes, "the verbs in our [Vietnamese] language are not conjugated, because our sense of time is tenseless, indivisible and knows no end" (252). Within a temporality in which the past intersects with the present, the dead co-exist with the living in a codependent relationship: the living trust the spirits for guidance, and the dead rely on the living to continue their existence. Ghosts are not metaphors; they continue to feel pain after death. In Vietnamese agrarian culture, there are two types of death: *chet nha*, a natural death at home surrounded by family, and *chet duong*, an unnatural, tragic death. The notion of chet duong names social and physical violence that claims life. Hayslip explains that "the manner of death influences each person's life among the spirits" and unnatural death makes it difficult for the dead to pass into the spirit world (*Heaven* 15). The Indochina Wars rendered ghosts unable to pass peacefully into the next world. As a result, Hayslip describes growing up with many ghosts who haunt the

village: “We found ourselves praying more often, trying to calm the outraged spirits of all the slain people around us. . . . . Slain soldiers used to parade around the cemetery too (15). Through ancestral worship rituals, civilians can intervene in the profound effect of wars and reclaim the lives wars took. Hayslip describes being trained to see spirits and to care for the dead as a child. She recalls the evening routine of sitting around the fire and hearing stories about the dead. The stories follow a single order that “must always specify how the victim died, usually in great detail” then “must recount what the dead person was like before he or she died” (16). The detailing of a violent killing resists the demand for silence or inaction. Through storytelling—a ritual of bearing witness—the villagers shift silence into voice and pass on history and communal responsibility. As I have argued, the war not only disables and kills, it also erases in its refusal to register these civilians within history and narratives about the war. Mourning, an integral part to healing, acknowledges what was denied.

In the Vietnamese tradition of kinship commemoration practice, the living and the dead can communicate through a medium and signs. Just as her father’s ghost continues to help her cope with her psychic pain, Hayslip cares for her father’s needs, offering food and votive objects, such as a bed, clothing, and money to secure his afterlife. She provides a detailed description of his funeral rites to demonstrate that she and her family offered him an appropriate ritual for his tragic death to allow his soul to dwell “comfortably in our spirit house” (*Heaven* 214). Many years after his death, Hayslip continues to comfort his spirit with a feast and ceremony at the temple and an altar to him in her home (*Child* 207). The funeral rituals and ancestor worship traditions not only remembers, but also reclaim and heals the dead. While the Vietnam-US War led her father’s tragic death, the rituals return his spirit home to the domestic sphere, in which he is a leader, teacher, husband, and father. When Hayslip’s eldest sister takes over the family house

after his death, she still must consult him “frequently on matters of our family’s welfare, for – dead or alive . . .—he would still be head of the house” (*Heaven* 214). Through these commemorations, Hayslip and her family reclaim some agency despite oppressive conditions. Ancestral worship traditions, then, are important healing practices for civilians of war. They promote belonging and connection to respond to transhistorical pain that affects an entire family and community.

Testifying to not only her pain, but also her family’s and that of other peasant Vietnamese during the war, Hayslip’s memoirs mark a fulfillment of her filial obligations—what she calls “my father’s business” (*Child* 305). She repeatedly explains that writing materializes a promise to father: “I have promised my father’s spirit that I will tell everything I have learned to my family, my people, and the world” (*Heaven* 60). When the young Hayslip announces to her father that “I must become a woman warrior,” her father explains that it meant, “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 the shrine of our ancestors. Do these things well, Bay Ly, and you will be worth more than any soldier who ever took up a sword” (32-33). This interaction with her father marks storytelling as more important than the labor of soldiers. His description of her life’s purpose to live, give life, honor her ancestors, and tell stories culminates through the publication of her memoirs. Giving voice to her father through a public form, then, is another form of ancestor worship that enhances the family’s karma: an investment in future generations. Ancestral worship rituals are particularly effective for engaging with transhistorical pain because they acknowledge familial connections and the oppression experienced by multiple generations. These memoirs acknowledge the father beyond another passive civilian of the “Vietnam War;” he is described with tremendous respect and affection.

Thinking about *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* and *Child of War, Woman of Peace* as an illness testimony recognizes their healing value. While testimony as a public address always involves an exchange between the testifier and addressee, it also has other dimensions. Testimonies, as I have shown in my discussion of the War Remnants Museum, have multiple audiences and intentions. Hayslip also has private investments in her testimony: healing herself and her family. Her testimony is a personal endeavor to enhance relationships with her father and sons, which have been ruptured by the Vietnam-US War, migration, and generational trauma. Hayslip's memoirs are part of what she believes is her destiny as told to her by Swami Paul and other gurus in Harmony Grove: "I was to lead a crowd in a long, hard climb. I was to practice the healing arts but not as a doctor, medicine man, or nun. . . . I must find life and color where before there had only been flint and darkness" (219). Swami Paul affirms the lessons of her father. By placing her books with a spiritual level of divine purpose, Hayslip once again claims a role as moral leader that is often relegated to the witness as a judge and benefactor. Writing the memoirs, and seeing herself as a healer and teacher, becomes a critical coping mechanism. Hayslip compares her relationship with Swami Paul as that of a psychiatrist and patient, asserting an alternative path to attending to what might be labelled as mental illness (216). It is not a coincidence that she began writing her memoirs during her tumultuous marriage to Dennis. She could not stop Dennis's excessive drinking, the growth of his gun collection, his violent outbursts, his paranoia that Hayslip and other Vietnamese Americans were plotting against him, and his daily routine of hiding her keys and stealing her cash, which prevented her from maintaining a job. The many war imageries to characterize her domestic life show the ongoing material effect of her status as a war bride. For example, after learning that Dennis has sent their son to his mother in Ohio, she writes, "It was as if a giant artillery shell had landed on my house,

wounding me and blowing everyone else to kingdom-come. Only Dennis—the man with the guns, with the big black bomber—was unscathed. In fact, he acted as if he had won the battle" (*Child* 165). Even though Dennis threatens that authorities will take her children away if she writes about the "VC and the Commies over there," Hayslip secretly continues writing in Vietnamese on yellow pads so it would look like a letter if he ever discovered her writing. Writing is a healing project for Hayslip as her life becomes more chaotic: "It became a lifeline to my past and, I also realized, to my future as well. Even if nothing came of it, the project kept my head above water whenever Dennis tried to push me under" (163). Writing allows her to connect to experiences outside of her daily routine and the people she left behind in Vietnam. It serves as a traveling medium and permits Hayslip to imagine herself as a creator. By reconnecting with her family and community in Vietnam, Hayslip remembers a proud lineage and refuses to see herself in the image reflected back at her in the eyes of her discriminators. Contrary to popular work on witnessing that argues that subjectivity results from being acknowledged, self-knowledge and self-value are a priori testimony,: "The lesson of this limit experience is that without an addressee, without a witness, I cannot exist. I am by virtue of response-ability" (Oliver 91). This is why Le Thi Dieu screams and protests against the Americans raping her even though she knows it won't help her. Her subjectivity, like her body, exists regardless of the perpetrators' action or the witness's ability/willingness to help her. Hayslip knows herself and her experiences, even when her reality is dismissed, her existence excluded from a community, and her pain denied. Hayslip continues to speak, seek help, and find alternative language that might make her narrative easier for listeners to accept. Her repeated assertive claim as a healer and teacher (whether this is performative, pedagogical, or how she actually sees herself all the time) rejects the double consciousness produced by epistemic violence.

Beyond healing herself, writing "to tell—honestly and completely" allows her "to prepare better karma for [her son] Jimmy" and mitigate the karmic cycle of the role mobilized by US military policies and sexual violence by teaching reconciliation (*Child* 37). The framing of writing as promoting better karma for her child echoes her father's suicide to free her from the karmic system of colonial and war violence. Hayslip's memoirs transmit her father's philosophy of forgiveness, life, and sacrifice to her children and the public. The decision to collaborate with Jimmy rather than co-write again with Jay Wurts (or another literary professional), suggests a deliberate decision to keep the memoir in the family. The writing of her memoirs becomes a family affair and a crucial medium through which her three sons receive their family history. Hayslip recalls that sometimes Tommy prepared meals and snacks while she wrote with Jimmy and that Allen supplied tissues when they broke down in tears at difficult passages. The collaborative writing provided a way for her children to know the Vietnam-US War outside the conversations in their classroom or in the neighborhood, and thus, a possible beginning for healing from the internalized alienation and daily experiences with racism. Their collaboration echoes a school assignment of Jimmy's, in which he wrote an autobiographical essay after interviewing his mom. When he shared his completed paper with her, Hayslip gleamed with pride and happiness. She cried to hear how their stories weaved together only to later learn during parent's night that Jimmy never turned in his finished assignment. Despite being a conscientious student, Jimmy preferred to take an incomplete (135). Hayslip understands this as one example in which her sons cope with their daily experiences with racism. They responded to name calling and being beaten up by performing different identities: "Eventually, all the boys took steps to hide their true heritage: that they were of the 'enemy' race their friends' fathers and older brothers had fought against" (135). Despite their interactions at home, Jimmy cannot align

himself with his mother in public. Assimilation demands that he renounce his connection with his Vietnamese war-bride mother. Writing together allows her children to know their mother more completely and intimately as they no longer need to depend on US history books, popular war films, and the opinions of their teachers and peers for knowledge of Vietnam and their history. The publication of the memoir co-written with Jimmy, then, represents an alternative reality of the school assignment that he could not turn in. This engagement with her sons is another example of attending to her transhistorical pain because it allows her to negotiate the pain of knowing that her children seek to hide any resemblance of her, a "weird old lady chanting by a smoky shrine" (197). In contrast to her routine attempts to hide aspects of herself "so their school friends wouldn't think their mother was too weird," Hayslip presents herself to her sons as an accomplished survivor (205).

The Vietnam-US War not only breaks her family in Vietnam, it also creates a divide between Hayslip and her sons in the US as they seek to hide their connection to her in order to assimilate. Because of its material and historical nature, transhistorical pain affects an entire family rather than only maps on an individual psyche. As such, healing transhistorical pain depends on caring for every member of the family. By collaborating with her sons, she introduces them to their relatives in Vietnam, her childhood, and the joys of life that give her purpose. A particularly significant relative to whom she introduces her sons is their maternal grandfather. By asking her sons to collaborate and know their grandfather's power, Hayslip passes down the coping mechanisms he offered to her. Testimony has private and familial ramifications, changing how testifiers consider themselves and how their loved ones see them. The emphasis on the past (the need for narratives) not only arises from an interest in remaining "Vietnamese" or embracing a lost object/ideal, but also roots in a concern for the present to

allow her children to cope with their current struggles related to immigration and the development of positive self-identities. Cross-generational counternarrative is a critical healing approach against intergenerational trauma as it presents the past as no longer an unspeakable question. Intergenerational trauma can be explored, interpreted, and transformed into healing and as an anchor for self-identity. The resentment or embarrassment her sons feel towards their mother can be replaced by admiration and sympathy. For marginalized communities that have a contentious relationship with the US, stories transform a history they are ashamed of into a representation of surviving— something to be proud of, to pass down.

Testimony as a Gift

While testimony is an intersubjective engagement between the testifier and addressee, it has many investments beyond this relationship and alternative afterlives that might fall outside the intentions of the testifier. Considering testimony outside the relationship between the testifier and witness ultimately de-emphasizes the addressee's authority and role as savior and, by extension, circumvents the denial of the testifier's pain. Opening up multiple purposes and audiences of testimony shows the various ways in which Hayslip cares for herself, recuperates her father's death, and offers her sons a positive identity. I have previously addressed Asian American scholars' skepticism about narratives of reconciliation and their concerns about Hayslip's desire for reconciliation. The promise of liberation has not worked as a blueprint for the future. The despair, fatigue, and disenchantment within Asian America that result from ongoing systematic oppression, a history of colonialism, militarism, and exile, and the perpetual wars that produce more refugees must be acknowledged. I recuperate Hayslip's texts and the power from her assertion of forgiveness and grace at this contemporary moment to acknowledge diverse expressions of resistance. I also suggest Hayslip's activist approaches and the alternative

healing strategies as productive for engaging with the Asian American mental health outside normative, Western psychological and psychiatric interventions, which might not be affordable or capable of registering cultural diversity and historical specificity. How might Asian American studies mobilize positive concepts such as forgiveness, love, and our own definitions and acts of humanitarianism to critique US culture and politics? Hayslip's desire for reconciliation as a philosophy of being might be useful for the organization and longevity of activist projects. Both individually and as a community, Asian Americans can take seriously healing approaches that attend to individual and communal pain with a focus on renewing familial roots through traditional ceremonies, returning to Vietnam, and telling and listening to family stories as effective and beneficial as talk-therapy with specialists or medication. Hayslip's memoirs are particularly crucial to the Southeast Asian American literary canon because they offer a first-generation perspective among many 1.5- and second-generation narratives. As result, they might function as an entry for Southeast Asian American youths to engage with a past that their own parents might not want to or cannot discuss.

In the next chapter, I move to an analysis of Monique Truong's *Bitter in Mouth.* Truong is a 1.5 generation Vietnamese, who graduated from Yale University and Columbia University School of Law. The juxtaposition of these two testimonies not only reveals the role of language and genre in testimonial construction, but it also presents the ongoing debilitation of the Vietnam-US War despite the generational, linguistic, and economic divide between the two testifiers. Like Hayslip, the Vietnamese adoptee of *Bitter* also endures sexual terrorism produced by the gender economy under militarism—she too experiences transhistorical pain—but she lacks the history and Vietnamese family and community to access the cause of her pain and the geopolitical circumstance of being orphaned.

3// The Disabled Structure of Testimony in Monique Truong's *Bitter in the Mouth*

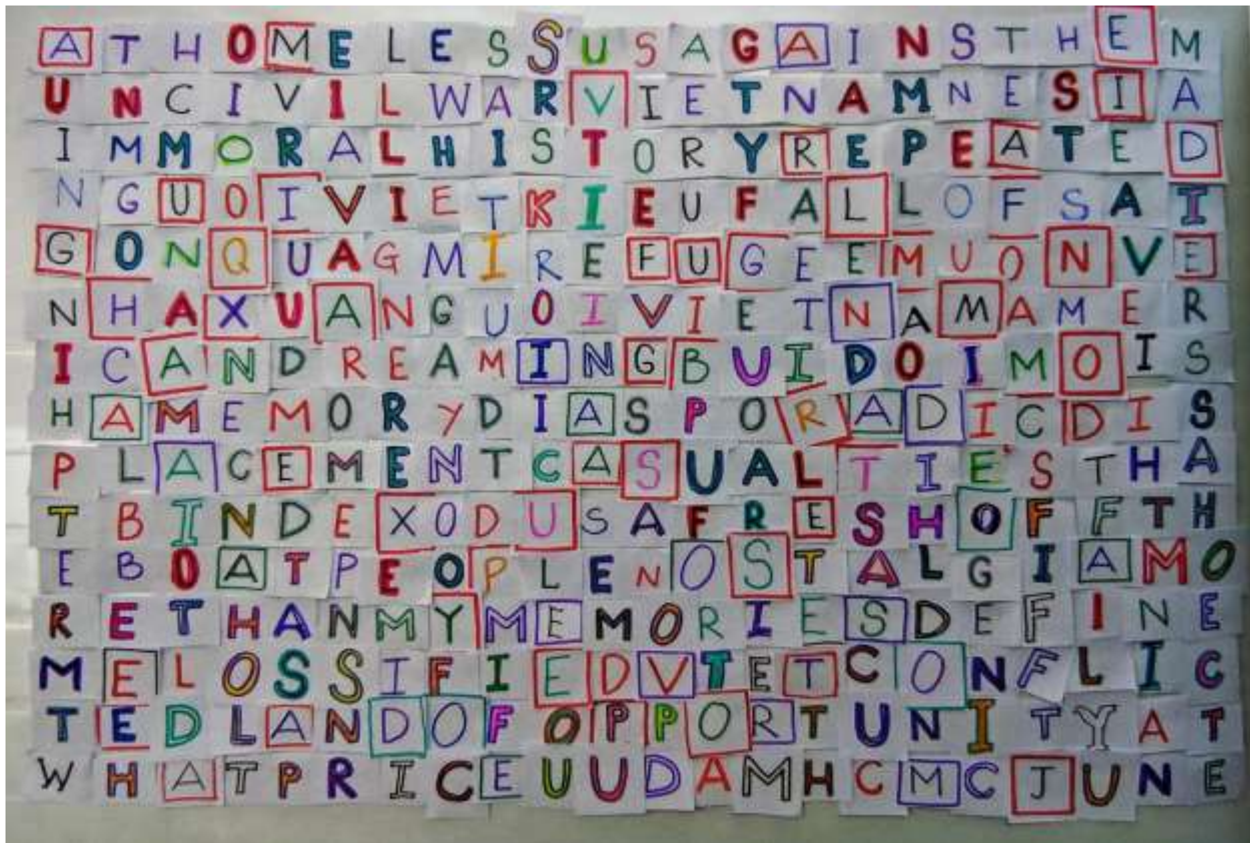

Figure 20: Crossword puzzle with handwritten letters from Truong, Monique and Uudam Nguyen. "MORETHANMYMEMORIESDEFINEME" The Asian American Literary Review 6:2 (Fall 2015): 124.

This image of the "Word Search" from "MORETHANMYMEMORIESDEFINEME" by Monique Truong and UuDam Nguyen is intentionally difficult to read to obscure meaning and invite multiple interpretations. Preceding the image, Truong and Nguyen write, "*The first ten words that you see are what you desire most in your Present, Future, and Past,*" to center the viewer/reader's active role in meaning making (123, emphasis in text). By drawing attention on the reader's desire, they emphasize the reader's construction of the content beyond the artists'

control. As a result, this piece highlights the artists' vulnerability within this knowledge exchange and calls on the reader's accountability in the act of interpretation by making visible the readers' power. This exchange is particularly vexed for minority writers who are urged to write about their histories (but through the framework of a general, white American audience). They are called to be cultural tour guides, presenting digestible sights that the audience is ready to see. This piece reacts to the demand for unchallenging multiculturalism. It is a visual articulation of what Nam Le has said about "Love and Honor": "One of the chief ambitions of the story was to play with that idea of what we consider to be authentic, how much autobiography is implied or assumed, how we read something differently if we think it's been drawn from the author's life" (n.p). Le, Truong, and Nguyen are voicing the pressure of containment. Showing that more than half of the reviews of Truong's first novel *The Book of Salt* reiterate the author's biography, even though the novel is about a gay male Vietnamese chef working for Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas in France, Catherine Fung asks, "Is it only as a Vietnamese refugee that Truong can be made visible as an American writer, regardless of the subject she writes?" (94-95). Nguyen and Fung point to the problem of minority writers as predominantly legible by their race within American literature--the authors' skin color regulates the content of their works.

"MORETHANMYMEMORIESDEFINEME," however, speaks beyond the relation between art and audience. It addresses the aberrant body as text; it is about the (im)possibility of connection and community. The insistent demand to speak about one's relationship to the US falls on all Asian-marked individuals through the too familiar question "Where are you from?" The follow-up "No, where are you *really* from?" rejects the asserted belonging and reveals a listening practice in which the questioner refuses to accept a narrative that falls outside of

expectations. In an essay for *Time* entitled "Into Thin Air," Truong writes that despite living the majority of her life in the US and her inability to carry on a conversation in Vietnamese, the "S-curve stretch of land" is a tattoo that sits on her "forehead, an invitation for anyone to come along and comment on that country's evolving role on the world stage." Truong is "dragged" conversationally to Vietnam against her will "by people who barely know [her]" (n.p). According to Lan Cao, Vietnam has indeed "truly passed beyond reclamation" for Vietnamese people living in the US (128). People process the answer—"I am from Vietnam"—with an established "Vietnam War" narrative upheld by films, textbooks, and their family's and friends' experiences and, more recently, their vacation experiences in a country where "everything was so cheap" ("Into Thin Air" 1). The crossword puzzle suggests that memories of the artists do not define them because their recollections are filtered through the receiver's experiences and knowledge. The text-image questions the distinction between what is said and what is heard when Vietnamese subjects testify to experiences that exceed their overdetermined racial and ethnic appearance. The assertion "more than my memories define me" rejects the relegation of refugees and immigrants to the realm of the past. The entry into the US represents a rebirth. The host country simultaneously demands them to be experts of the trauma that dislocated them and also to forget the role of the US had in their need to escape Vietnam. That is, the declaration "more than my memories define me," as a response to epistemological violence, points to the present as a claim of existence and the ongoingness of US sanctioned violence.

In Truong's *Bitter in the Mouth,* the racially marked narrator Linda Hammerick, a Vietnamese adoptee, is "often asked by complete strangers what it was to grow up being Asian in the South." This question is a variation of the "where are you from" question, as both imply "you don't belong here." Linda tells readers that she responds with "the southern accent that

revealed to them the particulars of my biography," "You mean what it like was to grow up *looking* Asian in the South" (169). By emphasizing her accent, she attempts to adopt the voice of the questioner. Linda claims a belonging that challenges strangers' assumptions about her life based on her physical appearance: I am from the South; I am Southern; I am American. The power to question, often invisible and seemingly innocuous, draws boundaries between the two parties. The question, the strangers' own declaration of belonging, reveals a power structure in which some people do not have a right to privacy—their legal and social belonging depends on their willingness to narrate a painful but also acceptable journey. As I have shown in my discussion of the desperate conditions that compel Kim Phuc to sell her story against her wishes, the demand to speak collapses the potential to witnessing. The withholding of resources, (such as a green card, access to food, medical care, and job opportunities) until victims give answer and narrate a specific narrative mirrors the logic of torture. The question by "complete strangers" suggests entitlement: strangers feel they have the right to Linda's experiences and knowledge. It objectifies and demands performance. This entitlement is an insidious exercise of power even as it has been made natural and acceptable. In asking the racialized refugee or immigrant to recite the narrative of rescue and liberation, the examiner evokes their power to save (and more subtly, to abandon, evict, harm, and kill).

I consider *Bitter*, Linda's "family narrative," as her answer to "where are you from?" While I demonstrate the attempts to claim voice against the various silencing structures in the previous chapter, I focus on the conditional and partial offer to listen in this chapter. Both silencing and the command to speak indicate a failure to witness, as they declare an exclusion from community, which, I hope I have made clear by now, sanctions atrocities. Linda explains up front, "I'll tell you the easy things first" (4). While the question of belonging creates distance

between the questioner and the racialized Linda, its answer also tells the history of the US interrogator, whose nation invaded and destroyed the livelihood of Vietnamese people and whose questions demonstrate a complicit or even explicit production of ongoing violence on the bodies of the US-produced refugee. As Lisa Lowe notes, "Asian Americans are determined by the history of US involvement in Asia *and* the historical racialization of Asians in the United States" (16). Linda testifies to being orphaned, raped, and abandoned by her best friend, fiancé, and adoptive family members as she discloses her identity and experiences related to race, war, and disability. Linda's race, which she does not disclose until midway through the text, permits her harming and the denial of her injury. The answer to being from Vietnam—to looking Asian in the American South—exceeds the comfort and listening ability of the questioners. Linda assembles a narrative by constructing intimacy with her audience, withholding information, and appropriating the narratives of famous Southern figures as strategic tools to mitigate resistance to her experiences and to cope with alienation from the only family and community she knows. Linda's testimony, much like the other testimonies in this dissertation, offers *another* opportunity to witness—to renew relationships.

Linda's Asian body forms a painful and gendered archive that testifies to a history beyond her own experience. Subjected to the dominant gaze, she performs and narrates according to conflicting interpellations. She has to constantly negotiate between the narrative that people expect and her own experiences. The conflicting interpellations often lead to a splitting of the psyche as the subject feels disconnection from all affiliations. Analyzing how Linda tells her story to the reader, this chapter explores her strategies used to construct a testimony and the burden on the racial minority to testify—to be an ethnic tour guide, ambassador, and translator—regardless of actual knowledge, experiences, comfort, and desires.

While the previous chapter articulates the importance of being given a space to testify and the gift of that marginal voice, this chapter reveals the vexed conditions of the demand of a testimony and the intentionally distorted voice adopted to subvert the overdetermined narrative of the Asian-marked body. I consider the conditions of testimony within this fictive work as a hermeneutic space for an intersubjective engagement that I call a *re-witnessing*, which foregrounds embodied knowledge, recognizes the unreliability of storytellers and the constructed nature of testimony, and incorporates the historical and social context of imperialism, war, and race. Re-witnessing looks at the often unacknowledged power to ask questions, to demand a particular language and frame of reference, and to judge the value and meaning of a testimony. Re-witnessing calls for accountability. The burden to remember and articulate injustice should not only fall on the victims. All testimonies attempt to establish communities—to claim status in a society that has excluded and permitted atrocity against the testifiers. While Le Ly Hayslip's testimony and the visual testimonies of disabled war victims featured in the War Remnants Museum call on a general human community, Linda's testimony reveals her exclusion from specific communities—family, friendship, marriage, Boiling Springs, and school and work affiliations. Linda's testimony seeks intimate belonging rather than criminalization and reparations. The type of accountability Linda seeks is beyond reluctant or resentful accommodation or charity. Accountability to Linda's testimony means acceptance, acknowledgement, and understanding. Accountability looks like mutual listening, care, receptiveness to emerging needs and hopes, and constructive thinking about differences. A successful re-witnessing of Linda's answer to where she is from would result in an epistemological shift to promote an affective change rather specific actions or material contributions.

Embodied Testimony

When the racialized subject testifies, her body also speaks—at times affirming her narrative and at other times contradicting what she *wants* to tell. Pain has its own language. Written and packaged as a "coming-of-age- tale," Monique Truong's *Bitter in the Mouth* is a memoir and bildungsroman of Linda Hammerick, a Vietnamese adoptee of an elite white family living in Boiling Springs, North Carolina (Book Cover). Linda attends Yale then Columbia Law School, and becomes a lawyer, following in the footsteps of her adoptive father Thomas. Abandoned by her fiancé Leo and fired from her law firm after a diagnosis of ovarian cancer, Linda returns to her Boiling Springs childhood home and reconnects with her estranged adoptive mother, DeAnne, and her best friend, Kelly. Linda narrates her story in first-person voice as she reflects on her childhood in the American South during the 1970s and 1980s. She discloses her synesthesia, a neurological experience in which the stimulation of one sensory or cognitive pathway promotes automatic, involuntary experiences in a different sensory or cognitive pathway. Specifically, Linda has auditory-gustatory synesthesia: She tastes words. Linda describes the taste reception of words as "incomings" (23). For example, her name evokes the taste of mint and the word "literature" stimulates the taste of roast beef (21,158). Her synesthesia is a secret that she shares only with DeAnne, and Kelly, and the reader. In addition to revealing her neurological condition, she discloses many things early in the novel: her fraught relationship with her grandmother and mother, her first love, Wade, being raped at age eleven, Kelly's secret pregnancy, her father's salacious death caused by a heart attack during intercourse with his secretary, her great-uncle Baby Harper's transgender identification, and her family's slavery-owning history (55). Introducing herself as "Linda Hammerick," daughter of Thomas and DeAnne Hammerick, she presents herself as white and a part of an elite family whose socio-

economic privilege descends from the systematic racial inequalities of slavery (4). Linda seemingly shares everything with us. However, it is not until halfway through the novel, we discover that she has hidden what everyone knows: her race and ethnicity. Born Linh-Dao Nguyen, she was adopted in 1975 at age seven (158). Linda remembers nothing of her life before arriving at the Hammerick's blue and gray ranch house.

The disclosure of her adoption splits the narrative in two: the first half "Confession / … August 3, 1998" and the second "Revelation /August 4, 1998 . . .". The formal separation divides the text into invisible difference produced by synesthesia in the first half and visible difference produced by race in the second, leading many critics to consider synesthesia as a metaphor for racial difference.[36] Throughout the novel, she often translates her synesthetic language for the reader: you: *canned green beans*; no: *grape jelly*; selfish: *corn on the cob*; new: *peanut butter*; home: *pepsi.* The translated list of foods in the novel claims an All-American identification, as Vietnamese foods (and any food that might suggest an ethnic affiliation) are conspicuously absent. Vietnamese words are also missing from the novel, with the exception of four Vietnamese names (her own, called out during graduation, Vietnamese president Nguyen Van Thieu's, and those of her parents, Mai-Dao Nguyen and Khanh Nguyen) that appear in its latter half. Significantly, the Vietnamese names are never uttered by Linda. Instead, they are slowly revealed as threatening secrets, rupturing Linda's sense of self and belonging. Linda's distancing from an ethnic background highlights her vexed and complicated affiliation with Vietnamese heritage. While her amnesia might be read as the more obvious medium of erasure, synesthesia regulates our interaction with Linda and our understanding of her narrative. Synesthesia, then,

[36] See for example Jennifer Brandt's "Taste as Emotion: The Synesthetic Body in Monique Truong's *Bitter in the Mouth*" and Denise Cruz's "Monique Truong's Literary South and the Regional Forms of Asian America." Brandt writes, "Truong's use of synesthesia as a metaphor for 'Otherness' and the physical subjectivity of individual experience (41).

operates as a medium for erasing her Vietnamese history and the history of the Vietnam-US War. Because her race is hidden, readers are led to assume that her alienation at school and home results from synesthesia, especially since she is regularly punished for it. At school, her teachers repeatedly complain about her "unwillingness to pay attention in class" because the flood of tastes often makes concentration difficult (21). At home, her mother tells her "I won't have it in my family" when she tells her mother that she tastes words (107). The rejection of Linda's synesthesia exposes the compulsory able-bodiedness that demands that immigrants be healthy and productive, while upholding the US's image as an altruistic benefactor, as I showed in my discussion on of Kim Phuc Thi Tran, Bich Cau Thi Tran, and Le Ly Hayslip. Only after the disclosure of her adoption history and a reassessment of the novel's first half does it become obvious that her race controls how people understand the symptoms of her synesthesia.

I read Linda's synesthesia as an embodied testimony of the Vietnam War, being orphaned, trans-racial adoption, and ontological difference. Linda describes her synesthesia as "an inborn mnemonic device" for the curse of memory (115). While I consider disability to carry different meanings in *Bitter in the Mouth,* Linda's synesthesia should not be read as an example of what David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder have named "narrative prosthesis," the utilization of disability as a plot device that reiterates disability as a problem to overcome. Violence produces disability—that is, Linda's synesthesia is not a metaphor for the Vietnam-US War or her race, but that the war and her race negatively impact her health and her access to appropriate accommodations. Disability, as Stephanie L. Kerschbaum, Rebecca Sanchez, Melanie Yergeau, and I define it, is "a political category much as we are asserting that disability is an interbodily experiential that is constituted by its relations and ruptures with other embodiments and other oppressions" (Ho 133). Many Southeast Asian immigrants have

disabilities, embodying and indexing historical violence. In 1989, doctors and specialists found dozens of Cambodian refugees with functional blindness despite having perfect, 20/20 eyesight. Their blindness is a trace of—not a metaphor— for trauma, war, genocide, exile, and poverty. Asians, against racist belief, are highly diverse in history, experience, and biology. The refusal to see illness on Asian American bodies reflects an epistemological habit in which the visual field of race explains every factor of Asian American experiences, which I will detail further in my discussion of how people around Linda read the physical symptoms of her synesthesia. As I established in the introduction, the exclusion of Asian Americans and other racialized bodies from disability studies marks a denial of their ontological significance of living with impairment.

Linda experiences synesthesia not as a "neurological condition that caused the involuntary mixing of the senses," but as something that is inherent to her being (Truong 218). It offers her sustenance, satisfaction, and fulfillment. For example, she explains that she "sometimes would crave a word" (102). Unable to enjoy her adoptive mother's cooking, Linda begins to savor words. While her family eats dinner, Linda escapes to the bathroom to repeat the word "again" to taste pancakes without syrup (75). She explains that this act of private feeding produces pleasure and guilt, particularly when she repeats words like "matricide" for the taste of peach cobbler out of "gluttony or homesickness" (102, 103). Here, synesthesia functions as a coping mechanism. The incomings, what she calls the gustatory sensation when she speaks words aloud, do not correspond with the word's meaning, reflecting the nature of synesthesia as a neurological condition but also echoing the various disjunctions of experiences, meaning, and knowledge throughout the novel. Because her body follows a different system of perception, society does not accommodate her disability. Linda's synesthesia makes it difficult to concentrate both in class and during daily conversations. At times the incomings become so

overwhelming that Linda shakes and needs to escape to a dark, quiet room. Because synesthesia is invisible, her inability to respond timely, her shakes, and her winces when words are "literally distasteful" are observed as deviance, depression, or signs of drug abuse (77).

Linda's testimony accounts for the pleasure and material consequences of living with synesthesia and its relation to the Vietnam-US War and her orphan status, revealing the limits of thinking about debility through a materialist framework that does not include discussion of the beauty, creativity, and joy of the disabled people. As synesthesia masks markers of race, war, and being orphaned, it also exposes them, producing what Michele Janette calls "identity as palimpsest" (155). Linda's amnesia makes it unclear if she has had synesthesia since birth or since the fire that orphaned her in 1975. Despite the ambiguity, her disability is associated with the Fall of Saigon, her parents' death, fire, the taste of bitter, and her adoption. Although not apparent until after she discloses her Vietnamese identity, Linda's synesthesia represents a trace of the Vietnam-US War. Her disability testifies to ongoing pain produced by the war even while her memory and age mean that she does not have direct knowledge of the US War in Vietnam. Acknowledging the postwar generation's pain highlights a temporality of the Vietnam-US War that spans across generations. As an orphan, Linda lives with the effect of her parents' death daily like chronic pain. Discussing synesthesia as her mnemonic device, Linda explains,

> When I was seven, I heard a word that made me taste an unidentifiable bitter, and I never forgot flames cutting through the seams of a trailer home, the sound of footsteps on gravel, then darkness. Not of nighttime, which it must have been, but of closed eyelids or a hand held tight over them. (116).

Linda explains that she has no memory of her life before being adopted besides the "taste of bitter," flames, the sound of footsteps, and darkness (117). The chaotic and vague description intentionally hides her relation to the war.

The description of her synesthesia, the embodied present manifestation of her history, represents another construction of otherness to disorient the general reader. While the phrase "taste of bitter" sounds clumsy in English, it is recognizable to readers familiar with Vietnamese, in which many abstract ideas are understood through taste. For example, "dang cay," a common expression for suffering, translates to "spicy bitter." Thus, the "taste of bitter," like the memories of flames, the sound of footsteps, and physical darkness, is familiar to Vietnamese refugees. Truong writes in her first novel, *The Book of Salt* (2003), the "unmistakable, *bitter in the mouth* . . . that any Vietnamese could identify with his eyes closed" is the taste of watercress, a staple in Vietnamese meals (97, my emphasis). Through withholding information and opacity, Truong privileges the particular knowledge of Vietnamese diasporic communities. Testimonies, contrary to the dominant construction of testifier/analyst model, have multiple audiences. While the book seeks a general audience[37] this moment represents one of the spaces of narrative privacy, in which, to borrow Ocean Vuong's words, "one yellow body speaks to another yellow body, so that for anyone to read it they had to eavesdrop" (n.p). Invoking the taste of watercress, then, is an act of recognition and love for the Vietnamese diaspora. This example of reaching out to a minority community while speaking to a broader audience places Linda's private experience of synesthesia within a collective experience of the Vietnamese diaspora formed from a shared journey marked by war and displacement. It also blurs distinctions between congenital disability and disability produced by war and systems of oppression. While her experience of living with a

[37] The Reader's Guide at the end of the book and the complimentary 1-year subscription of *Ladies Home Journal*, in particular, reflect the book's popular appeal.

diverse neurological condition is marked by a violence that produced the disability, that history does not encapsulate Linda's experiences with synesthesia—her unique incomings, her coping strategies, and her relationship to synesthesia. *Bitter's* ability to present Linda's disability as a diverse perception within the context of the Vietnam-US War creates a space for disability empowerment while interrogating and accounting for the disablement as a process of racial and military violence. As I showed in the earlier chapter on the War Remanants Museum, a sole focus on debility that fails to recognize the colors and layers of living with war-produced disability runs the risk of objectifying the disabled subjects.

Linda's synesthesia and her withholding of privileged knowledge reveal that testimony is often not immediately accessible to listeners/viewers because of various barriers, including language, race, ideology and politics, culture, nationality, economic class, history of war, and illness. The process of disorienting the reader destabilizes the established power structure of interpretive power between reader and narrator, the listener and the witness, and the general public and the refugee. Linda explains that even if she were able to translate her incomings of the taste of "an unidentifiable bitter," naming it "would only allow me the illusion of communication and you the illusion of understanding" (15). Synesthesia's conflation between auditory and gustatory sensoria reflects the logic of the Vietnamese language, and its function as an alternative system of perception is a materialization of the legacy of the war and the trials of forced migration. The newness of synesthesia to many readers also provokes linguistic defamiliarization through the use of "US English to speak in many other languages" (Miller 20). The process of making language and narrative unstable and self-reflexive opens possibilities of new relationships and meanings. Synesthesia places readers into a hermeneutic position that compounds the deconstruction of race. Linda answers the question of belonging with a shared

language that also forces the interlocutor into an exercise that defamiliarizes race and, by extension, reaches beyond conventionalism and the overdetermined narrative. Linda's allegiance to English and US foods and her transgressions of the normative framework of the English communication system demonstrate the quiet nature of subversion in *Bitter*, which demands diligent and active rearrangement and composition of details by readers. Linda identifies an impossibility of knowing through testimony that echoes Hayslip's assertion at the end of her memoir "you do not know . . . although you now have some idea" (*Heaven* 365). They point to the danger of claiming understanding and reserve authority for the testifier, who is the survivor, creator, and victim. By naming "the illusion of understanding," they anticipate the interruptions that almost always follow the question of belonging, in which the interrogators inject their own knowledge and experiences. Rather than a definitive translation of experiences, Linda and Hayslip prioritize an affective transmission that permits building relationships across difference and incongruity.

The aesthetic dimension of disability does not take away from ontological value or the ethical potential of the disability representation. Disability has sociopolitical dimensions, cultural meanings, and narrative power. Rather than shying away from the thinking of disability as metaphor, we might consider how the human body expresses itself in metaphors, analogies, and in multiple locations. For example, the body might articulate social oppression and psychological stress as chronic pain, heart disease, and blindness. As another example, I have shown the importance of conceptualizing the relationship between psychic and physical pain by pointing out that war-related trauma manifests as ulcers for Le Ly Hayslip. More specific to synesthesia, Stuart Hoffman et. al have found an association between PTSD among veterans and synesthesia, leading them to suspect that the PTSD-synesthesia association is specific not only to combat

trauma but also to noncombat trauma (914-915). I use the term *embodied testimony* to emphasize the expressions of what the body experiences and remembers despite amnesia or denial by self and others. In *The Wounded Storyteller,* Arthur Frank describes illness stories as a form of "embodied witnessing," in which disabled people give testament to their experiences and call on witnesses to share testimonies with others (142). Frank argues that wounds confer narrative power and wounded bodies reveal truths about the human condition of physical and psychological vulnerability (xi-xiii). My thinking of disability and illness as an embodied testimony considers the body as a witness to violence, foregrounding the body as a speaking agent. As I have developed in the introduction, thinking of the body as a witness to the debilitating violence done to some bodies powerfully resists denial and erasure. The body speaks its own language, mapping and narrating history. At times, the body speaks beyond the will and knowledge of the individual—disclosing an identity that an individual does not readily identify with or remembering what the individual wants to forget. Re-witnessing Linda's testimony as a disabled Vietnamese adoptee and rape survivor depends on focusing on what Linda's body knows and expresses as a way to engage with her amnesia and withholding of information.

Embodied testimony values bodily memory and bodily responses to trauma as critical epistemological sites. Acknowledging the body in pain as an epistemological system, and as an agent of conception, is crucial if we are to destabilize the political forces acting on the marked body because that acknowledgment shifts understanding of the "body as text" or as "object of interpretation" to body as an autonomous site of knowledge, responding to various pressures.[38] The body has always been gazed at, interpreted, and co-opted by outsiders. Thus, the emphasis

[38] By acknowledging the problems of "reading" bodies, I am also drawing attention to the limitations of literary analysis. Reading is always subject to the instability of language and the limitations of the interpreter. Truth is a moving target.

on the body as an epistemological system resists the dominant regime of looking as knowing that assigns racialized, disabled, gendered bodies as objects. As Linda explains, there is a "difference between 'being' and 'looking'" (169). In a seminal scene in *Bitter in the Mouth,* Linda describes a childhood game in which she imagines her body in fragments: "To pass my hours in the dark, I taught myself a game. I imagined not having different parts of my body. Left leg, right eye, both ears, a big toe." She explains that the "game" is "a cartoon version of dismemberment. There was no blood or pain, and I could reattach the part again with a snap of my fingers" (162). Her insistence that this insomniac ritual is a painless game disavows suffering. The censoring of pain is mandated by her family and the US society since the presence of pain in the host country would challenge the myth of US exceptionalism. The example of the dismemberment game is one of the many examples of the denial pain, and by extension, of the erasing history in *Bitter.* Despite Linda's denial of pain, the feeling of disintegration characterizes, as I will detail, many of her experiences. Even without memory, photographs, or blood—in other words, evidence—her body knows absence. Beyond the mutilation game, she also describes, her "chest was heaving the plastic, irregular rhythm of grief" (163). When her doctor explains that the removal of her ovaries to treat her ovarian cancer would result "in a trauma that the body could recover from, but afterward the body would continue to grieve for what had been taken from it," Linda thinks about her "bod[y] grieving" of "the void," which she explains as "the person, place, or thing that was never there in the first place" (211-212; 161). In addition to the loss of her organs, she describes her body longing to belong—the possibility of being (163). Linda presents loneliness, in addition to synesthesia and cancer, as illness. Re-witnessing, or giving attention to the embodied testimony, takes seriously the grieving body as a critical site to know history as well as its ontological value.

Linda's "second birth" demands bodily, cultural, and linguistic alterations (Truong 216). The language of dis-membering and re-membering essential to her nightly game of imagining herself as an amputee aptly describes the rupturing of Linda's world and the construction of a new body to acclimate to a new world. Her relocation seems to have inspired her condition: when she arrives at the Hammericks' home in Boiling Springs, Linda begins to play the "cartoon version of dismemberment" in order to cope with insomnia (163). The game, common among disabled people, is one in which the player imagines what it would be like to be missing different body parts—to imagine which condition is worse.[39] Part of the logic of the dismemberment game is "it could be worse;" "I should feel lucky." It is, in other words, a mental exercise in which the individual learns to accept and be grateful for his or her living condition. In a disability framework, this logic is precipitated by the pervasive psychoanalytical and cultural association between narcissism and disabled people.[40] Like the disabled, refugees (and debilitated refugees) are socially and culturally disciplined to be grateful to be in their new surroundings because it is generally presumed that their living conditions are significantly worse outside the host country and that being an adoptee is certainly better than being an orphan, as if these categories are separate from each other. Within this mindset, their suffering is conceived as normal and ceases at the moment of their entry into the host family/country. Their pain, void of any urgency, falls outside the purview of communal and state protection. This indifference, the demand to be grateful, and Linda's deep desire to be incorporated into an exclusive system, as well as her

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[39] See, for example, Jim Ferris's "The Worst" in *The Hospital Poems.*

[40] In *Disability Theory*, Tobin Siebers details how psychoanalysis understands disabled people as narcissists, singularly focused on their wounds. As he explains, "when people with disabilities attempt to communicate their pain, advocate for assistance, or struggle against their oppression, they face the charge of being not only hopelessly trapped in their self-absorbed individuality, but also fully responsible for the responses that ensue" (34-35). In *The Body in Pain,* Scarry also articulates this pervasive misconception: "As the body breaks down, it becomes increasingly the object of attention, usurping the place of all other objects, so that finally, in very very old and sick people, the world may exist only in a circle two feet out from themselves" (32-33).

resistance towards these factors, control her narrative unfolding. Despite the cultural and sociopolitical imperative to be grateful and silent, the body remains faithful to its own impulses. Even as Linda cannot remember how or why she came to the Hammericks' home and denies pain during the dismemberment game, the game itself draws attention to disturbance that marks a violent history. The dismemberment game is an example of bodily memory of an experience that exceeds knowledge and materiality, even for the subject.

Constructing Intimacy

Linda constructs disorientation through language defamiliarization, withholding information, and rearranging the order of facts rather than presenting contentious history. The majority of her withholding of information promotes a commonality with a general (white) readership. Like "MORETHANMYMEMORIESDEFINEME," *Bitter* is about the (im)possibility of community. What spaces are available for a synesthete, an amnesiac, a rape survivor, an orphan, and a cross-racial adoptee to call home? In order to be incorporated into the surrounding community and the public imagination through commonality, Linda self-censors and deliberately misrepresents her actual experiences.[41] It is the use of the Southern accent to answer the loaded question "where are you from?" It is an effort to disclose "the easy things first" (4). In an interview with Andrew Lam, Truong reveals that there are some elements, such as the cumbersome translation of Linda's synesthesia, that make reading the novel difficult. As a result, she limits the amount of dialogue that is difficult to read because of the formal translation of Linda's incomings and masks Linda's racial and adoptive history because she knows that

[41] There is particular urgency that exceeds the affective economy of desire for Vietnamese refugees/immigrants to assimilate during the mid-1970s. Because of anti-Vietnamese sentiment, their survival depends on assimilation and surrendering their status as Vietnamese. Isabelle Thuy Pelaud's *This Is All I Choose to Tell* documents the anti-Vietnamese sentiment and physical aggressions that pervaded the US at the end of the Vietnam War. Nonetheless, we cannot overstate the deep desire to assimilate, especially for adoptees.

readers need to become invested in Linda before they will make the effort to experience her unique perception (Interview with Lam). Strategically withholding difficult information and various forms of appropriation and substitution promote an emotional attachment between Linda and readers, to encourage a readiness to read across different experiences, making difficult information digestible.

It is an important detail that Linda—Linh-Dao Nguyen—is born in Vietnam in 1968 even though she was already in the US when the Hammerick adopts her. This detail places the adoption within the transnational context of colonialism and war. That is, the Vietnam-US War and the death of her birth parents Mai-Dao Nguyen and Khanh Nguyen permit the adoption. Even when her Vietnamese identity is revealed, the name is spelled without diacritic marks and with the added hyphen to connect the two-word first name (a common Vietnamese tradition) into the recognizable single-word first name. The Americanized name reflects the layers of mechanisms employed to reduce confusion. To speak about where she is *really* from is to speak about the death, sexual violence, and erosion of American liberal identity that accompany the Vietnam-US War, placing her on the opposing side of the only family and community she knows. Rather than discussing her personal past or the Vietnam-US War, Linda's narration focuses obsessively on the history of North Carolina, the Hammericks, and Yale University by beginning many chapters with narratives of historic Southern figures, such as Virginia Dare, the Wright Brothers, and George Moses Horton. These "histories" seemingly uphold a performance of whiteness when, in fact, they are Linda's selective and witty rewriting of North Carolina historic figures, which further serve to mask her ethnic identity. The re-imagining asserts her belonging to the South, her resistance to the objectivity of history, and her ignorance of another history and culture.

These efforts to reduce the distance and difference between Linda and her readers simultaneously create a narrative impasse. As Linda explains, facts are like playing cards: when they are thrown down, there "are bound to be distorting overlaps" and "[t]he only way to sort out the truth is to pick up the cards again, slowly, examining each one" (4, 5). Thus, *Bitter* requires the reader to question and to reconstruct the narrative that Linda presents and then to reflect on the reader's own reconstruction. This process invites readers to participate in the narrative construction of an individual whose identity is marked by war, race, disability, being orphaned, forced migration, and events that we may not have experienced. The novel uses first-person voice and the direct invocation of readers to establish the contact point between the aesthetic and real. For example, early on the novel, Linda says: "I'll tell *you* the easy things first" (4; emphasis added). The appeal to readers by the second page of the novel creates an sense of verisimilitude that binds the reader to Linda. The direct invocation of readers into Linda's bildungsroman inspires readers to consider carefully our relationship to her and, by extension, our role in community formation. The paperback edition of the book includes "A Reader's Guide" (which can also be found on Oprah Winfred's website) of thirteen discussion questions to facilitate identification with Linda. The majority of the questions focus on relatability: the commonalities between Linda and Kelly, how the readers "relat[e]" to Linda's synesthesia despite its rareness, if the readers use their "own life experiences" to construct Linda's story, and how awareness of Linda's race affects the readers' "own identification with Linda" (296-297). These questions push the reader to acknowledge being wrong and an "unreliable reader" even as they simultaneously reach towards commonality (296). The final question— "Is Linda Hammerick a Southerner? . . . . Why or why not?" explicitly addresses the (im)possibility of belonging and community in that it asks if the reader can accept a Vietnamese adoptee as a Southerner and as

an US American. The guide encourages a reflective mode of engagement by questioning the origin of the reader's assumptions.

Linda's imagined connections with Southern fictional characters and historical figures model the contact point between the aesthetic and the real that parallels the fictional Linda and the readers of *Bitter*. For example, just as Linda speaks to her implied audience, she addresses Virginia Dare directly: "I prayed to you, Virginia Dare, because you too were an orphan" (202). Virginia Dare, the first child of English parents born in the New World, is a central figure in US history mythmaking. Without access to an ancestral lineage, Linda adopts an affective lineage from historical and literary sources available to her. The discussion about Dare, then, represents another moment of claiming a Southern identity and US identity. However, asserting knowledge beyond average citizens only further marks her outsider status. Linda learned about Virginia Dare from *North Carolina Parade: Stories of History and People*, a children's history book given to her by her father to "foster a sense of security and belonging" (52). While "different . . . from what he had intended," she does develop a sense of security and belonging, specifically through her reconstruction of the presented narratives of North Carolina history. Linda reconstructs the narratives of Dare and other figures based on her desire to find commonality but also on the understanding that "[h]istory always had a point of view," freeing them from historical overdeterminations. She recognizes the masked violence within celebrated history: "As with all fairy tales, a crime was committed" (52). In other words, Linda's affective need for community *and* effort to subvert the one-sidedness of historical accounts produces this engagement at the boundaries of fiction and reality and of readers and characters. Linda's in-depth discussion of her reading practice has a pedagogical function like the Reader's Guide. The request for readers to return to the facts of Linda's narratives plays acknowledges the gap

between the potential and limitations of witnessing through reading. The direct declaration of the narrative distortion, the interpellation of readers, the "Reader's Guide," and Linda's own reading habits all gesture toward a system of perception based on communal construction of knowledge rather than on the dependency and fetishization of marginalized subjects as representative spokespeople for a minority history. The inclusion of a larger public audience inserts marginalized knowledge into the general community.

Even as communal labor is required and community is desired, the possibility of community materializes under unfair conditions for Linda. Linda's vexed relationships depend on self-erasure and secrecy, revealing the complicity of even her loved ones in systems of denial and the erasure of her suffering. Pointing out the intimacies between Linda and her best friend Kelly and Linda's closeness to her transgender great-uncle Baby Harper, Denise Cruz concludes "Although a family of choice does not represent ultimate salvation for any of the characters in the novel, the queer family nevertheless promises to heal the body torn apart by the horrors of the global South" (733). However, I caution against easy celebrations of queer possibilities in *Bitter.* As I will detail, these intimacies are also marked by alienation and violation because Linda has to hide parts of her identity (her synesthesia, her ethnicity, being a rape survivor). At best, they demonstrate partial witnessing that relies on the denial of some experiences. At the end of the novel, Linda returns to Boiling Springs after a diagnosis of ovarian cancer, which led to the loss of her job and fiancé Leo. Leo abruptly breaks off their engagement because she was unable to give him "biological children" (168). During a tenuous period of her life, Linda renews her relationships with Kelly and DeAnne, both of which depend on Linda's forgiveness: of Kelly for sleeping with Wade and of DeAnne for not believing in Linda's synesthesia and permitting her to be raped in their home. Acknowledging the importance of forgiveness recognizes Linda's

agency, civility, needs, and the various forms of violence Linda experiences. Forgiveness, as I have argued, is central to Vietnamese and Vietnamese American testimony of long-lasting suffering from the Vietnam-US War and racial exclusion. Witnessing, rooted in the hope of healing, change, and new attachments, depends on forgiveness, especially when the marginal testifier is addressing people responsible for acts of violence. For Linda, a Vietnamese adoptee, forgiveness is a critical aspect of negotiating belonging and intimacy in the US because the history of the Vietnam-US War indicates how people know and interact with her.

Adopting Narrative

Bitter in the Mouth seemingly depoliticizes the history and conditions that initially made the narrator homeless and in need of asylum ("A Reader's Guide" 296). *Bitter* appears to sustain the myth of "rescue and liberation" and folds the horror of the Vietnam-US War and the refugee exodus into a love story starring an white man whose wealth and status results directly from his family's slave-owning history and a Vietnamese woman. In the last chapter of the novel, Linda finally learns of her adoption story from DeAnne: an epic love story between Thomas Hammerick, a law student at Columbia, and Mai-Dao Nguyen, a Vietnamese international student at Barnard College, that began in 1955 on the steps of Low Memorial Library. The romance between Linda's adoptive father and birthmother could be read as a reconstruction of the romantic plot of Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boublil's *Miss Saigon,* in which an American man abandons a devoted Vietnamese woman and their child and marries an American woman after the war. *Miss Saigon,* based on Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly,* fetishizes the sexuality, helplessness, and desperation of Asian women. *Miss Saigon,* too, has an adoption narrative, in which the Vietnamese heroine Kim shoots herself in order to secure her son's passage to the US with his American father and his American wife. In contrast, Linda's origin

story highlights Thomas's intense love and loyalty even after Mai-Dao returns to Vietnam. Returning to Vietnam, Mai-Dao marries a Vietnamese man and gives birth to Linh-Dao while Thomas, "like a teenage girl," writes to her for several years, even on his wedding day (268). Mai-Dao finally writes to Thomas on May 1, 1975 (one day after the Fall of Saigon), to ask for his assistance in finding her family members left behind in Vietnam and to inform him that she has been living in Chapel Hill with her daughter and husband. Thomas eagerly offers to visit her, send her money, and contact a congressman to help find her family members. When Thomas receives a phone call late at night from a Chapel Hill police officer about the death of Mai-Dao and her husband in a fire, he drives 191 miles in his pajamas and "instinctual[ly]" adopts Linh-Dao (280). Thomas's persistent expressions of love over twenty years highlight his sincerity and commitment. This story of devotion, emphasizing private and affective registries, depoliticizes the context of 1975 and the military, political, and economic relationship between the US and Vietnam. While Vietnam became synonymous with war in the US, the narrative refers to it as "Mai-Dao's country" and "her hometown" (268, 269). In fact, it seems like a mere coincidence that she is from Vietnam: "he was from the South" and "she was from the South too" (268). The pun on their birthplaces shrinks the distance between the two locations and highlights their similarities, placating their violent intersection. The construction of Thomas, who died in his fifties from a heart attack, as a "lovesick" man "with a weak heart," is another example of the erasure of history and the negation of Linda's pain and her parents' death (128).[42] Thomas's heart attack might be another example of embodied testimony within the story that speaks to the loss of Mai-Dao, whose name he promised DeAnne he would not mention as a "precondition to

[42] This summary reflects the information that Linda, Baby Harper, and DeAnne tell and re-tell about Thomas. However, the novel subtly undermines the veracity of the depiction of the father as a hero. See Michele Jannet's "'Distorting Overlaps': Identity as Palimpsest in *Bitter in the Mouth*."

[Linda's]adoption" (281).While this love story places into the US imagination an upper-class, educated Vietnamese woman who is irreplaceable and worthy of a white man's affection against the saturated representation of the abandoned Vietnamese sex worker of *Miss Saigon* and "Vietnam War" blockbusters, it also elides Linda's adoption experience of loss, alienation, rejection, and racial and sexual violence.

After the confession of her ethnic identity and adoption in the second part "Revelation," Linda continues to present a romantic narrative of her adoption that demonstrates her affection for Thomas. She states that her story is "the story of [her] birth to Thomas, and to a lesser extent, DeAnne" (163). She adds, "Like Athena, I was born to my father, Thomas, fully formed. I had no writhing snakes but a ponytail of long black hair. Athena was born clad in full armor. I was born with the English language already in my mouth and a sixth sense but with no memory of my first six years of life" (163). By comparing her adoption to a birth and Athena's fully formed emergence, she effaces the history that orphaned her and suppresses her parents' deaths and the violence of rape, neglect, and racism she experienced in the Hammericks' home and in Boiling Springs. This adoption narrative presents English and synesthesia, "a sixth sense," as armor, protecting her for life in Boiling Springs. Linda's use of the Greek mythology is one of the many examples of Linda adopting the stories of other people (fictional and real) to meet her private needs of building a community and filling in the empty spaces of her memories. The comparison to Athena is also a reference to Virginia Dare, whom Linda has previously described as having "reemerged after her disappearance . . . fully formed, Athena-like" (68). The parallel between Linda and Dare asks readers to understand Linda's own effaced history as "about the crime of kidnapping or mass murder," just as she has recognized the erased pain of Dare's narrative. (52). The unexplained cause of the fire that killed her parents and the fact that she was found with her

"passport and the first letter that Thomas had sent to Mai-Dao in Chapel Hill," as if her adoptable condition had been carefully manufactured (280). The ambiguity around Linda's adoption echoes the mystery around Virginia Dare: "Why and how [Dare] became an orphan was never addressed" (68-69). Even if readers might not know the specific experience of war, displacement, and being orphaned, they can grasp an affective transmission of loss, and by extension, develop empathy for Linda as they continue to engage with her narrative.

Linda's appropriation of stories and the jumbled narrative structure reject teleological nostalgia and accounts for the reality of forgetting. The performance of forgetting and the disappearance of immigrant culture and history is very real, especially among adoptees and second-generation Vietnamese Americans. The structure of withholding information, then, also reflects Linda's own inability to access information about her Vietnamese heritage. At age fourteen she finally discovers that she is neither of the derogatory terms that people have called her, neither "Chink" nor "Jap," when she recognizes "the unpronounceable part" of her own name in her history textbook: "*Nguyen* Van Thieu, the president of South Vietnam" (216, my emphasis). For seven years of living with the Hammericks, Linda did not know her ethnicity. She explains her experience of discovering her Vietnamese identity and connection to the Vietnam War in two brief paragraphs on a single page (216). Linda does not have the knowledge to answer repeated questions about her Asian appearance. The narrative demand of the "where are you from" question from strangers forces Linda to fill in the unknown histories of a country of which she has no memory. The question about her heritage, then, becomes a direct reminder that she is neither Vietnamese nor Southern. Despite her new knowledge, Linda only knows what is like "looking Asian" since she has not experienced the Vietnamese country, history, culture, or even food (169). Because their presence in the US is yoked to the US military involvement in

Southeast Asia, Vietnamese adoptees' personal attachments to their new communities are inevitably vexed. When Linda finally learns in history class that she is Vietnamese, she has access only to the construction of Vietnam as a war: "All that I learned about Vietnam had to do with war and death and dying" (216). Unlike the proud and celebratory history of *North Carolina Parade: Stories of History and People*, the narratives related to Vietnam are shameful. Linda's assertive identification with North Carolinian figures and culture in answering where she is from uses the only history to which she has access, while strategically distancing her from an overdetermined abject history.

Linda's encounter with her Vietnamese heritage mirrors the experiences of Vietnamese adoptees like Indigo Willing, who has remarked, "As the only knowledge I had about Viet Nam was built from images and stories of war and its devastation, I grew to fear my past. I imagined Viet Nam only as a land of hardships" (260). With only these negative associations, Willing fears an inescapable part of her identity. This fear, Willing explains, leads to feelings of inferiority, embarrassment, and self-hate, ultimately shattering the sense of self. These feelings provide context for Linda's nightly ritual of disembodiment. After Linda discovers her Vietnamese origin and her adoption narrative, she remarks that "the years of my life with them [her birth parents], the life before *this* life, had been erased or, rather, my memories of them had been erased by my benevolent brain" (279). The distant pronoun "them" to signify her birth parents and her reference of pre-adoption life as only a marker of the post-adoption life articulate detachment from and apathy towards her past. "[T]he life before *this* life" sets up a teleology that places the adoptee in a temporality anterior to time. Linda's belief that forgetting her pre-adoption life is a blessing from "benevolent brain" assumes her past as negative and painful. This logic supports the rhetoric of rescue common in transnational adoption and refugee narratives, in

which the origin is rendered primitive, poor, and corrupt.[43] This framework presents adoption as gift—a magical rebirth. Willing and Linda's idea of Vietnam derived from history class and media demonstrates how the regime of visibility silences their pain and compels them to translate that pain (and longing) to gratitude.

Re-Witnessing

Linda's adoption by Thomas and DeAnne, like other adoption stories, depends on romantic rhetoric that links love, salvation, and altruism to innocent, vulnerable children. Linda's romantic construction of her adoption reflects displaced information about her life; we need to reorganize the playing cards, as Linda has suggested, of her experiences of living in Boiling Springs along with the history of Vietnam-US War's production of deaths and orphans. Although Linda's birth parents' socioeconomic status and their residence in the US makes Linda's adoption different from the other adoptions from Vietnam, but still one that is intimately connected to the US military, economic, and political intervention in Southeast Asia. Laura Briggs and Diana Marre explains, "the idea of U.S. Americans adopting children overseas was part of the 'middlebrow imagination' that provided grassroots support for the political transformation of the United States into a world power" (5). They demonstrate the manner by which the US has pushed its political agendas into the intimate sphere. Transnational adoption allows US citizens to assume "paternalistic responsibility for the rest of the world," and thus actively participate in national political power abroad (5). Linda's adoption in 1975 parallels the highly publicized Operation Babylift, the movement of approximately 3,000 Vietnamese children to the US and its allied countries. The campaign's name suggests a military operation. Jodi Kim draws connections between the overt Operation Babylift and covert CIA-supported

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[43] See Laura Briggs's *Somebody's Children: The Politics of Transracial and Transnational Adoption* and Dana Sachs's *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam*.

Operation Peter Pan, “a clandestine scheme through which 14,000 unaccompanied Cuban children were brought to Miami between 1960-1962” (870). The connection between Operation Babylift and Operation Peter Pan demonstrates the US history of exploiting children as a way to promote anti-communism. President Gerald Ford described the military operation as “[o]ur mission of mercy” (qtd. in Sachs 88). At the time, Babylift was embraced by liberals and conservatives as “an opportunity to salvage something from the horror of the war” (Briggs and Marre 7). An editorial in the *San Francisco Chronicle* stated that Operation Babylift reflected “the President’s obvious intent to spare no expense or trouble where the welfare of these helpless victims of war are concerned, and the nation will applaud him for it” (Sachs 89). The editorial highlights President Ford’s benevolence and generosity towards the children of war. The verbalization that “the nation will applaud him for it” suggests that despite strong opposing stances on the war at the time, the operation would create a sense of unity in the domestic front.

Another point of view—and as Linda tells us, “History always had a point of view”—might present the transnational adoption of Vietnamese children in 1975 as “the crime of kidnapping or mass murder,” as Linda describes Dare’s history (52). My Loc, a member of Union of Vietnamese in the US, points out the hypocrisy of the efforts to bring Vietnamese orphans to the United States: “I cannot accept the US government on the one hand secretly sending over weapons to continue the war and create more refugees, and on the other hand [bringing] orphans over here.” Other scholars and people directly involved with Vietnamese orphans explains the Vietnamese logic in placing their children in orphanages. Nurse Judy Spelman explains that “[it] almost amounts to a kidnapping to take children out of their country,” citing the Vietnamese tradition of placing children in orphanages with the intention of reclaiming them later. Robert McAfee Brown argues that taking these children out of Vietnam meant

“breaking into and destroy a family pattern that has been established for centuries” (Sachs 103). Regardless of the motivations of Babylift—to relieve guilt, to promote humanitarianism, to gain additional war funding, or simply to pursue one’s personal desire for a child—Vietnamese children were pulled into various narratives with opposing motivations. Lucien Pye, a political scientist at MIT, describes Babylift as a “psychological phenomenon” in order to mask US guilt: “The guilt feeling is very deep. . . . We want to know we’re still good, we’re still decent. . . . Who is the orphan? . . . . The children, or Vietnam” (Sachs 89-90). Pye’s question “who is the orphan?” suggests that the orphan is a symbol of Vietnam, picked up as a strategy to heal the US during the war in Southeast Asia. Vietnamese children’s vulnerability is exploited, and thus their bodies are commodified within the market of gendered and racialized war victims in similar ways as many of their mothers. Recognizing this history allows us to better understand Linda’s loneliness, her daily struggles in Boiling Springs, and her disinterest in her Vietnamese background. Moreover, this history helps explain the imperative for Linda to present her adoption as a gift that erases militarized violence and pain.

The descriptions of when she first discovered her Vietnamese roots are devoid of any emotion or reflection, she simply supplies the facts and flatly adds, “At the time, *I had no body*, which meant that I was impervious and had no use for such information” (216; my emphasis). The claim that she has no body echoes the game of imagining herself with missing limbs—a sense of her body falling apart and alienation with her own body. Despite its power to mask violence, the magical imagery of birth also *articulates* violence because it depends on Linh-Dao’s death. Linda’s rhetoric of birth and loss of memory highlight the legal and social construction of the orphan. Jodi Kim labels the construction of the legal orphan as “social death” because the process “renders her the barest of social identities and strips her of her social

personhood" (857). Hypothetically, adoption would promote a new formal attachment of kinship and restoration of personhood and identity. This logic is dependent on the child's full assimilation into her new environment and family. A successful "social rebirth" demands that adopted children "negotiate among different forms of regulation" and attain new values and cultural codes (Ong xvii). Because "[t]here were no photographs and no history, official or anecdotal," she doubts if her previous life existed at all (117). Remembering nothing, Linda is an ideal orphan. She invests fully to identify and affiliate with her new family and nation, laboriously asserting an identity that her appearance will never fully allow. Even when she is alone, Linda creates a private asylum under her blanket and "drew out the 'Ham,' lingered on the 'me,' and softened the clip of the 'rick.' [She] repeated the word [Hammerick]" (14). The exercise of repeating her adoptive last name reflects both her desire to claim the name and her sense of alienation from her adoptive family. She has learned, at an early age, that to be accepted into the Hammerick family, she must hide different aspects of herself: "*If you want to be one of us, Linda, you hush your mouth"* (108; emphasis in text). Linda asserts the familial affiliation several times in the first chapter—"My name is Linda Hammerick"— and claims to be a "representative of the family" as the fourth generation of Hammericks to attend Yale (4, 13). She repeats this lineage when her father passes away: "I was a Hammerick. We went to Yale" (131). The repeated claims reveal the labor of adopting a new identity. As evidenced by Linda's amnesia and daily effort to claim familial space, adoption narratives uniquely demonstrate tensions of affiliations, alliances, and identification, often short-circuiting the history and politics of war, poverty, and violence. The cost of deviating from assimilatory demands is too high.

Connecting Linda's experiences to Operation Babylift and the broader Vietnamese refugee experiences, such as those of Indigo Willing, shapes the reading of the novel, especially

at moments where the reading ruptures the imagined community that Linda meticulously constructs. In an interview, Truong notes that she hints at Linda's Vietnamese heritage before the fact is revealed but these signs only have meaning retrospectively. Truong explains that although the nickname "little canary" may be a term of endearment, "once . . . you understand more of Linda's history you understand that 'little canary' has a potentially awful meaning" (Interview with Lam). We can only attest to the hostility of Linda's domestic space through re-witnessing. Even her relationship with Baby Harper, her closest confidante, is not void of racial tension and Cold War politics. Throughout the novel, he calls her "Linda Vista" and "Vista Girl." The narrative is self-reflective but does not directly disclose information on these nicknames:

> Why he called me Linda Vista wasn't as easy to explain. Every time I asked him, he gave me a different answer. Because names are like socks—they should be changed now and then. Because without you, there would be no other vistas in Cleveland County. Because, on its own, "Linda" is a name for a forty-year-old woman who smokes a pack a day. Because no one calls you Linda Vista but me. (42)

Baby Harper's playful answers obviously do not satisfy Linda as she repeats the same question on different occasions. For many Vietnamese refugees, the Linda Vista area of San Diego was their first stop in the US because it is near Camp Pendleton, a major refugee resettlement center after the Vietnam War. Thus, the reference to Linda Vista has profound meaning among Vietnamese Americans and promotes immediate association between Linda's story and the broader Vietnamese diaspora in the U.S. It is difficult to read the passage as callous because of Linda's affection for Baby Harper and the playfulness of his response, especially since the

“Linda Vista” passage appears before the disclosure of her ethnicity. By withholding historical information about Linda Vista, Truong again privileges Vietnamese American knowledge, leaving the general reader in the dark. The opacity marks Truong’s resistance against the demand to be a spokesperson for Vietnamese American experiences, history, and culture. Truong, like other Vietnamese American writers, experiences the enormous pressure of being associated with the war, as their creative works are consumed by an audience seeking resolution and ethnic authenticity. Reserving certain knowledge for oneself or, simply, not explaining something is an inevitable aspect of testimony.

Unintelligibility is, in fact, a normal part of experience and daily conversations. That readers might pass over this example without a second thought speaks to the multiple sites of unknowing that are present in every narrative. These moments of opacity in *Bitter* and testimonies in general, which I detail in my analysis of Le Ly Hayslip’s memoirs, reveal the authority of the writer to know more than the witness. These examples—usually witty, humorous, and/or exclusive—are spaces for marginal people to claim agency and authority. Entering a witnessing space with this in mind decenters the normative power structure and opens more possibilities for the witness to engage with new and difficult experiences. While “Linda Vista” does not carry the same malice as “little canary” and Linda describes her relationship with Baby Harper as “each other’s ideal companion,” the passage, in retrospect, demonstrates that Linda’s skin carries a narrative known to the people of Boiling Springs, but unknown to herself (42). Linda’s repeated question about her nickname, though, requires not a specific answer or history. Even if Truong provides this history, the facts cannot convey the depths of Linda’s experiences and thus, only lead to “the illusion of understanding” (15). The distinction between the naming of a specific experience or history (“the illusion of communication”) and “the illusion

of understanding" reflects the gulf between the knowledge of the maiming and the understanding of the layers of suffering, love, adversity, resentment, forgiveness, and humor associated with living with such debilitation. *What is the taste of bitter? How long does that flavor linger on the tongue after it is swallowed? What memories are attached to that taste?* Within a novel that emphasizes what is left unsaid or distorted, the opacity transmits an affective sense of *something* hidden. This obscurity marks a buried trauma of living a birth marked by death, loss, and exile. The fact that this unanswered question occurs between Linda and her closest companion speaks to the way alienation vibrates throughout Linda's life. It highlights an incomplete sense of belonging.

Like her readers, Linda understands her history retrospectively. As an adult, she wonders if the people of Boiling Springs refused to see her in order to protect themselves. Linda's declaration "I had no body," actually suggests the hypervisibility of her body that announces a history and a narrative that do not match her memory, knowledge, and desire. Hypervisibility, like invisibility, denies full personhood. Since she "gr[e]w up *looking* Asian in the South," Linda acts an excessive sign that invites interpretations that exceed her own knowledge and sense of being (169, emphasis in text). This is the demand to testify—*where are you from?*—never to truly testify but to affirm certain narratives attached to the gendered and racialized body. This is also the demand to be silent—to not affirm what the observer wants to forget. Linda's body is an overdetermined entity that compromises the possibility of privacy and community. Her body invokes ambiguity, anxiety, and even moral panic:

> If they saw my unformed breasts, the twigs that were my arms and legs, the hands and feet small enough to fit inside their mouths, how many of the men would remember the young female bodies that they bought by the half hour while

> wearing their country's uniform in the Philippines, Thailand, South Korea, or South Vietnam? Complicit, because they would rather not know the answer to that question, the mothers and sisters and wives of these men looked right through me as well. Instead of invisibility, Boiling Springs made an open secret of me. (171)

Linda's body is hypervisible precisely because it tells a denied history. The awareness and isolation of her body parts—breasts, arms, legs, hands, feet—is an experience of rupture that shifts the disembodiment game she plays alone in her bedroom to an external moment of negation and rejection. This passage, showing how Linda's body serves as a mnemonic of Asian military sex workers, attests that the transnational adoptee represents "the repressed other of the military prostitute, war bride, and mail-order bride" (Eng 54). Popular war films like *The Deer Hunter, Platoon,* and *Apocalypse Now* establish what film theorist Fred Pfeil describes as "the Vietnam trope," which depicts Vietnam as "both a place where white guys learned to practice a lot of especially mean and violent techniques—to 'go wild' . . . and where they suffered horrible physical and psychological trauma" (148-149). In the process of saving the helpless Vietnamese people from themselves, the brave Americans sacrifice and lose their morality. Linda's presence in the US challenges this binary separation of Vietnam and the US and of past and present. Linda's existence, then, is a threat to the US familial and national stability. Julia Chang indicates in *Inhuman Citizenship* that the United States' imperial history in Asia, its history of racial exclusion, and its relationship to its national fantasy construct Asian American domesticity. Linda's and Hayslip's experiences expand Chang's analysis to the white family. The war lingers within the most intimate spaces among family members: the people of Boiling Springs hate Linda for what their sons, brothers, and husbands might have done in Vietnam. Linked to a

history of the subjection of Asian women into militarized commodity, Linda carries the secret of transgression of traditional family values, Cold War imperialism, and racial and sexual violence. For Linda, this recognition of her body marks expulsion from her adoptive community because of the disparity between how she knows herself and how other people know her racialized and gendered body. Linda *has no body* because her body parts are pulled apart to represent the nameless and faceless Asian women. As a result, she remarks that she never knew what it is like to *be* Asian: "I knew what it was like being *hated* in the South," not what it was "like *being* Asian in the South" (173). The parallel between the construction of these two phrases equates being Asian to being hated. Furthermore, it demonstrates the unbridgeable gulf between what she knows about herself and what others desire to see.

Significantly, Linda informs her readers about her refusal to "equate [her] body with what others have projected onto it," rather than expressing this directly to her fiancé Leo, who "would have [her] equate the two." By telling the reader that Leo "wasn't a very good listener," she presents the opportunity to know her actual experiences (173). She reaches out for a relationship that she could not form with her actual community members. I read the fictional account of *Bitter* as a testimony because art productions as testimony are a critical and viable way to resist dominant knowledge of minority experiences, history, and culture. In an interview with Jihii Jolly for Lambda Literary, Truong explains that she began the novel with a sense of anger:

> I like to say that I am a Southern Girl, twice over: South Vietnam and the American South. . . . Boiling Springs was where I learned that I was physically different, ugly, and a target. So, yes, I wanted to revisit this small town that I have carried with me with so much anger, and I wanted to make it mine. I wanted to tell my version of its story. (n.p).

It is through fiction that Truong, like Linda, can narrate her own presence and build a community outside of the Boiling Springs one that refused to accept her. Another Vietnamese American writer, le thi diem thuy, explains that she rejects the memoir form because “fiction creates its own universe” and the trauma of war and exile continues to be present throughout the world: “I didn’t want to write a memoir because I wanted people to engage with these characters and this narrator . . . because this happens in the world” (le qtd. in Johnson 97). Fiction, according to le, also traces violence—*this happens.*

For many marginalized people, it is only in the space of the imagination that they can be fully recognized and form community. The fictional Linda’s experiences are refracted within the geopolitical event of encounter between the marked Asian woman and other Americans, blurring the real world and the aesthetic realm and highlighting the ethical dimension of *Bitter.* American men’s (and women’s) failure to distinguish among Asian women leads them to classify them, regardless of their citizenship, as sexualized objects, a classification that produces detrimental psychological effects of alienation and leads to sexual harassment and rape. In an essay on Vietnamese American aesthetic strategies and how they respond to the problematic representations of Vietnamese women in the US cultural imaginary, Diem-My Thi Bui testifies to the direct material consequences of the sexualized and racialized conception of Vietnamese women that she experienced when she returned to Vietnam on a study abroad program. On several occasions at local bars where other Americans would congregate, Bui was mistaken for a prostitute. In response to these accusations, Bui shaved her waist-long hair. Bui’s hair—its black color, sleek texture, and long length—is a visible marker of Asian femininity. Her hair, like her eyes and nose, are biological traits passed down by her parents. Bui’s attempt to destroy the visible marker of her identity as a Vietnamese woman suggests a rejection of Vietnamese

identity and identification. This problematic assertion of agency and deep desire to acclimate to the American expat community is a form of self-erasure. Bui's act of shaving her head is a material and real example of self-disembodiment as a coping mechanism that further illuminates the pain motivating Linda's nightly ritual of imagining "not having different parts of my body" (162). Like Bui's hair, Linda's body parts are a source of trauma and anxiety, and psychological pain takes physical form, collapsing the mind/body divide. Linda's and Bui's bodies were returned to them, not as their own, but as Southeast Asian women of "Vietnam War" theatre—as nameless commodities for white male consumption.

The disembodying violence, while gendered and historically specific, is also racial mutilation that results from the gap between *looking* and *being*. Racialized bodies are embodiments of anxiety and fears. In *Black Skin, White Masks,* Frantz Fanon eloquently describes the collapse of the corporeal schema produced by white eyes: "I transported myself . . . far, very far, from myself, and gave myself up as an object. What did this mean to me? Peeling, Stripping my skin, causing a hemorrhage that left congealed black blood all over my body" (92). Fanon continues to present the encounter with the white gaze with descriptions of physical amputation: "My body was returned to me spread-eagled, disjointed, redone, draped in mourning on this white winter's day;" "The white gaze, the only valid one, is already dissecting me. . . . Once their microtomes are sharpened, the Whites objectively cut sections of my reality"; "I felt the knife blades sharpening" (93, 95, 98). Fanon's persistent surgical metaphors call to mind the original physiological meaning of trauma as a break or wound in the body produced by an external agent. Fanon and the adult Linda describes the devastating force of racial objectification. In contrasts, Linda's childhood game of disembodiment describes self-infliction as a game without blood or pain. Rather than recognizing violence done to her body, the young

Linda understands her alienation in isolation and internalizes the violence. This discrepancy highlights an important context of some testimonies, in which victims deny experiences of external violence and, as a result, allow the perpetrator to escape accountability. These examples (along with Hayslip's father's suicide) reveal that self-injury, erasure, and suicide are part of the system of debilitation produced by the Vietnam-US War. Their injuries and death are not legible, or to be more accurate, erased, within discourses of war, adoption, and immigration.

Linda's academic and professional success further absorbs this contentious history. By the age of twenty-nine, she was already a senior associate at a large law firm in New York City. The first time we learn that Linda is a Vietnamese adoptee is during her graduation when her name is called "Linh-Dao Nguyen Hammerick […], summa cum laude" (158). The construction of her Vietnamese identity in relation to academic success highlights American exceptionalism as a country generous enough not only to adopt the child of their enemy, but also to give her the means to exceed her American-born peers. Linda never expresses a desire to be smart. During the "summer of transformation" before high school, when Kelly decides that, while she can lose thirty pounds and become a high school beauty queen, Linda has "got only one option: smart" (20). Linda's decision to play the only role available to her demonstrates her yearning to be incorporated into her community, regardless of the position or cost. Linda's transition from a C student to summa cum laude is neither natural nor easy; it comes at great social and bodily cost. While she recognizes the health risks, she settles on smoking cigarettes to suppress the taste of words after experimenting with different substances that summer. Furthermore, her choices to study at Yale University, attend Columbia Law School, and become a successful lawyer reflect an effort to establish her worth, belonging, and acceptance as a Hammerick. It is a materialization of the exercise of repeating her last name out loud to herself. Linda's education

choices follow the pattern of what Lisa Park calls "conspicuous consumption." Conducting and examining interviews of one hundred second-generation Asian Americans, Park concludes that Asian American high school and college students make career decisions "in conscious effort to establish their own and their family's worth, belonging, and acceptance into US society" (8). Like other second-generation Asian Americans, Linda's attempts to absorb her "otherness" and, therefore, reach a status of "normal" in US society through her profession, accent, and Southern cultural activities, such her love for Dolly Parton, her baton twirling, and her dance moves (173).

Despite her effort to reconstruct her body and cultural knowledge, she remains an unacknowledged outsider: her presence "dissipated into a kind of non-seeing" (173). Linda's disavowal of her body—*I have no body*— occurs because people refuse to see her (216). She explains, "I had no role to play within the romances, the dramas, and the tragedies that my classmates' hormones were writing for them. I was never considered a heroine, love interest, vixen, or villainess." Even her best friend Kelly refuses to speak to her in school and "assigned [her] to the role of a secret confidante (173)." While their friendship "relied on carefully written letters to keep ourselves informed of our inner lives," as the written medium mitigated the flood of incomings, it also became a mode for erasing Linda. No one actively returns her gaze. As an adult Linda reflects, "I was the Brain. Everyone else around me became their bodies" (173). The isolation and dismemberment of her brain emphasizes productivity rather than interiority, casting her as a machine. She is reduced to a brain, a category of intellectual labor that falls into a long history of labor exploitation of Asian immigrants albeit a new form. Historically, the indentured Asian laborer, the coolie, has been said to embody "[a]n absence of nerves," remarkable "staying qualities," and a "capacity to wait without complaint and to bear with calm endurance." As Eric Hayot describes, "The coolie's biologically impossible body was the displaced ground for an

awareness of the transformation of the laboring body into a machine"—to have no blood. To feel no pain (103). The position of perfect efficiency is not far from the abject—and never sustainable.

Linda's academic and professional choices reflect the dangerous, even disabling, conditions demanded by the construction of the hyper-abled Asian bodies. Yến Lê Espiritu has cogently demonstrated how the US has prolgated the success stories of Vietnamese refugees as a way to fold "capitalism into freedom and democracy that discursively distances 'the free world' from the 'enemies of freedom'; and it is this alleged distance that justifies continued US military interventions in the service of defending and bestowing freedom" ("Thirty" xiv). Using Vietnamese refugees' achievements to valorize democracy and capitalism implicitly declares the Vietnam War as a just and successful war that helped Vietnamese people reach a level of prosperity that they, presumably, could never achieve in Vietnam. The political deployment of Vietnamese refugee experiences shares the rhetoric of transnational adoption and Vietnamese war bride, particularly the utilization of notions of rescue, vulnerability, exceptionalism, and gratitude. These notions impel hyper-ableness. As a result, even as Linda recognizes her exposure to unfair living conditions, she still invests in the myth of meritocracy and democracy that ephemerally promises access to social and political citizenship if she follows social norms (or in most cases, exceeds standards). The disciplinary rhetoric of the Vietnamese refugees, adoptee, and war bride reflects the systematic structure of erasure and narrative manipulation that erases violence, discrimination, and alienation. US deployment of the experiences of refugees and adoptees, like Vietnam's strategic deployment of war victims that I detailed in the first chapter, exploits testimony and absorbs, and even weaponizes, the victim's pain to verify the regime's liberalism or innocence.

Her narrative demonstrates the model minority myth's deep roots in US imperialism, militarism, racist exclusion, and ableist ideologies. The deployment of the "good refugee" narrative further negates the trials and pain that Vietnamese people endure as refugees in the US, making it imperative to center pain. Asian American and disability studies scholars have exposed how the intimate link between labor and citizenship defines racialized, gendered, and disabled subjects in the US and regulates social worth, citizenship, and community identification. For example, Rosemarie Garland Thompson asserts that "nowhere is the disabled figure more troubling to American ideology and history than in relation to the concept of work: the system of production and distribution of economic resources in which the abstract principles of self-government, self-determination, economy, and progress are manifest most completely" (46). As disembodied tools (of brain, hands, or breasts), they are simply useful or useless. As a result, Linda played the role of a "secret confidante" when Kelly judged that Linda's physical appearance could jeopardize her status as beauty queen. Leo rescinded his marriage proposal when he judged her "useless to him" because she could not bear biological children (173, 169). Linda, as a commodity, has lost her use-value and become disposable. Linda's broken engagement, secret friendship with Kelly, being cheated on by Wade, and being fired from the law firm reflect a broader history excluding Asian Americans from full legal and social citizenship. The promise of citizenship through exceptional labor is simply a disciplinary myth to justify racialized labor exploitation.

The construction of hyper-abled bodies bolsters the racist logic of Asian foreignness and characterization as inhuman. Race regulates how people negotiate Linda's experience of disability. Before Linda learned to suppress the incomings with cigarettes, sex, and alcohol, her teachers regarded her academic struggles as an "unwillingness to pay attention in class" (21).

Rather than recognizing her as a feeling and thinking subject, Linda's teachers and community regard her as an object of dis-ease. Within a society that values Asian bodies solely as laborers, rather than as subjects, Asian Americans are not granted the complex experiences of disability. The failure to understand her synesthesia as perception difference forestalls accommodation (which might include transcribed notes and written assignments). During her first year at Yale, she loses her self-taught ability to control her synesthesia because her vocabulary is expanding so quickly. As a result she "often had the shakes and exhibited what appeared to be a mild form of Tourette's syndrome" in classes. Linda's peers recognize her physical symptoms of synesthesia not as physiological difference but as byproducts of racial difference. As a result, her disability arouses resentment and anxiety rather than sympathy: "By the end of my freshman year at Yale, there were rumors circulating on campus that I was taking large quantities of speed, never slept, read every assigned page, and aced all my papers and exams, and was therefore responsible for skewing the delicate grading curve in all my classes" (103). Linda is regarded as a super-performing inhuman, who unnaturally alters the rules of the academic game and threatens the positions of the other students. Unsympathetic responses to Linda's symptoms at Yale once again mark Linda as deviant and even immoral. Linda is deemed as a threat whether she is under- or over-performing.

Resentment towards Asian immigrants in the labor sector is too familiar in the Asian American archive.[44] The failure of Linda's classmates to recognize the visible signs of her struggles reflects the inability of mainstream America to see disability when it is mapped on

[44] The most famous case is the murder of Chinese American Vincent Chin, who was beaten by Chrysler plant superintendent Ronald Ebens and his stepson, Michael Nitz in 1982. The perpetrators were angered by the layoffs in Detroit's auto industry in response to greater competition from Japanese automakers. Chin died four days later, and Ebens and Nitz were sentenced to three years of probation. In other words, Chin's murder was prompted by the anxiety that Asians were stealing the jobs of more validated, read white, Americans.

Asian American bodies that they imagine are inherently hyper-abled. While many founding disability scholars have argued that disability serves as an interface with forms of otherness such as race, class, and social identity, the juxtaposition of critical works in Asian American studies and disability studies calls for a need to reject disability as a universalizing category of undesired difference. Race, gender, sexuality, class, and disability are produced and compounded with each other. People's failure to see Linda's disability forecloses access to resources and accommodations—their responsibilities towards her as their community member. Disability—or rather the legibility of disability— is a privileged category not only, as Puar notes, "by virtue of state recognition," but by virtue of social and intimate recognition that allows formation of relationships (xvi). Re-witnessing Linda's experiences, then, considers disability both as "a form of massification" and as the lived experiences that create space for interiority and complexity—to imagine the possibility of love and friendship with a disabled Asian-marked individual (xviii).

Re-witnessing recognizes the imperative for these Vietnamese individuals to testify to and justify their belonging through hyper-ableness (legible through Yale, Columbia Law School, and partnership at a New York law firm) and gratitude. As result, re-witnessing examines sites of pain even when the testifier denies pain: "There was no blood or pain" (162). While Linda insists on the absence of blood and pain, there is, in fact, both. At age eleven, Linda was raped in her home by Bobby, Kelly's cousin and the family's lawn worker. Despite the presence of blood, DeAnne fails to witness evidence of violence on her daughter. As Linda notes, DeAnne "hired a predator, lusted after him, trusted him to be alone with her daughter, and when the evidence of the predator's crime emerged, sought solace and explanation in the body of the victim. Menstrual blood was normal" (109). The presence of blood and physical pain make Linda's assertion of the absence of pain and blood in the disembodiment game more disturbing and returns us to the

question of who has the right to feel pain and who can speak of their violation. The denial of blood and pain is not natural, but a result of meticulous disciplining from the adopted family and culture. The structure of testimony and witnessing that is crucial to the justice system collapses when communities socially and culturally discipline victims to believe that the violence done to them is normal or when we highlight model minority narratives in order to hide vulnerability and suffering. In soliciting the readers as participatory witness, Linda asks readers to know what DeAnne neglects to understand and insist on the evidence of perpetration even as Linda claims, "I have no body."

Through re-witnessing, we can recognize the rape as a material legacy of the history of American men's assertion of perverse power over Asian female bodies as commodity. Linda wonders why Bobby had treated her differently than Kelly: "When Kelly was ten, Bobby had held her hand, forced it into the crotch of his pants. Why was that not enough for him when he found me?" (118). She recalls bruises on her thighs and neck from when, "Bobby had pushed himself into my vagina and into my mouth, in that order' (117). As with many other disclosures, Linda reveals the rape before she reveals her ethnic identity. The implication that the rape is racially motivated reveals the US imperialist legacy. The gender economy under militarism has become a part of the Asian female body, crossing national and temporal borders. The sexual terrorism of the Vietnam-US War marks an object for Western male sexual consumption. The military history resides not only in the economic and political relations between Vietnam and the US but also, as my dissertation shows, in the construction of the Vietnamese women in US imagination as commodities during and after the war. US popular culture upholds this sexual terrorism. US women perpetuate and glamourize the construction of the submissive and hypersexual Vietnamese women. Mariah Carey, Fergie, and Nelly Furtado all promise to "love

you long time" in their songs, a slur that originates in Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* to describe the readiness and willingness of Vietnamese women to perform sexual acts, willing to give anything and everything for five dollars. In several songs, Lana del Rey references herself "queen of Saigon." There are Tumblr and Pinterest boards of "Queen of Saigon – Lana del Rey" to celebrate this affiliation. These cultural imageries bolster stereotypes of Vietnamese and Asian women, celebrate men's sexual aggression, and uphold US military sex economy.

The destruction of the Vietnam-US War cannot be accounted for solely by the number of deaths caused by guns or bombs. Examining the names on the Vietnam Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C., Le Ly Hayslip "wondered how many of these men had made love to dark-skinned, dark-haired Vietnamese girls and left their seed to bloom as the gaunt Amerasian kids" (*Child* 267). The overlooked victims of the Vietnam-US War, according to Hayslip, are the orphans produced by the war. The location of Linda's rape, in her adopted home, depicts the overlapping of domestic and imperial violence. While Linda wants to but does not ever ask Kelly "why had he [Bobby] treated me so differently [than Kelly]," she does pose the question to the implied reader. Despite Kelly's command "Don't tell anyone" about the rape, Linda—at eighteen—tells her great-uncle Baby Harper, who responds that "there was no shame worse than silence" (118, 120). He drives Linda to the gravesite of her rapist, who had died in a car accident, and paints "the word RAPIST down the length of the headstone" in peony red (122). Baby Harper tells the people of Boiling Springs that Bobby is a rapist. He acknowledges Linda's experiences and publicizes the evil act that Bobby had done in secret, which DeAnne refused to see, and which Kelly sought to silence. Baby Harper, as the initiator of the idea and painter, participates in the burden and responsibility to pronounce the violent history. While victims are so often abandoned with the task of interpreting and testifying to oppression, Linda is not alone

in verbalizing the crime of her perpetrator. Perhaps the most powerful aspect of this vandalism is simply to have someone believe her and to navigate the perpetration with. By telling readers about the silenced crime within the context of Vietnamese woman refugee, Linda also inserts marginalized knowledge into broader American society.

Becoming and Forgiveness

Reading *Bitter* through the framework of witnessing insists on the realness of Linda's experiences and the moral implications of this bildungsroman. Linda models this possibility of witnessing across aesthetic borders through her bond with fictional characters, historical figures, and other synesthetes. Late in the novel, in her twenties, she finally learns the official diagnosis for her language perception from a PBS special. What interests her is not a medical diagnosis to explain her experience but the fact that she is not alone in her experience: "I saw myself, or rather my doppelgänger. He was a British man in his late thirties with thinning blond hair" (217). Throughout the program, she mocks the interviewer often and encourages the interviewees to "[f]orget about the interviewer. Better yet, pity her. She has only five senses" (221). While she is speaking alone in her living room, these acts mark moments of reaching out—of creating a community: "I was on my knees in front of the television, and not only my hands but my face were also pressed against the screen. I was no longer as interested in seeing the images as becoming one with the images" (222). Linda expresses an intimacy of knowing what it means to have the questioner regard a personal recounting with suspicion. She presents community formation as the transition from *seeing* to *becoming*. Becoming, as an affective response to the presence of the synesthetes, does not interrupt nor claim authority over their experiences. Becoming does not objectify or appropriate pain. This moment of Linda becoming reflects Baby Harper's response to Linda's disclosure of rape. The process of becoming asks not for the

testifier to move or change, but rather emphasizes the observer's accountability as a privileged listener to vulnerability and pain.

Linda makes several attempts to communicate with the people from the documentary by writing to PBS, but her attempts never are never successful. These "real" people remain characters for Linda. The phrase "not his real name" that follows the designations of the interviewees highlights their status, like characters in fictional works, as physically unreachable (218, 222, 225). It also blurs the distinctions between genres of documentary and fiction. Instead, the bond that forms between Linda and other people with synesthesia results from an intellectual and emotional connection. When Linda identifies herself as Boo Radley and Scout from Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Sethe from Toni Morrison's *Beloved,* Virginia Dare, Wilbur Wright, George Moses Horton, or the blond British man, the identification with characters and historical figures suggests an alternate community—one that transcends time, national borders, race, and gender, and bridges the division between realms of the real and the aesthetic (171). Readers, too, can recognize our own liminal presence between the aesthetic and real space as we read Linda's experiences through the practice of becoming. Linda's reading and viewing practices ask us to reach through the pages and speak directly to, identify with, and defend Linda, just as she does with her fellow synesthetes when she presses her face against the television screen and asserts her belonging to them (222). The intersection between the aesthetic domain and reality allows us to imagine new relationships and identifications with marginalized subjects that transcend our common expectations and realities. Rather than rescript the corporeality and subjectivity of the marginalized subject, this junction, as a space for contestation of society's dominant ideologies, provides opportunities for the readers to re-imagine.

The possibility of community, I insist, requires listeners and readers to engage actively, changing established ideas and affinities: *to become*. In the final chapters of the novel, Linda reconciles with DeAnne, whom she had stopped loving at age eleven when DeAnne lusted after Bobby, refused to believe that she had synesthesia, and failed to recognize the evidence of rape. DeAnne's initial rejection of Linda's synesthesia and experience of being raped is a common process of witnessing. Her failure to fully listen to and invest in Linda testimony results from her inability to process her husband's infidelity and Linda's adoption—to accept and be reminded daily that she has never been loved by her husband. Witnessing the narrative of someone whose experience intersects and challenges your own experience and subject positioning is understandably difficult. It is precisely DeAnne's willingness to listen *again,* to alter her normal communication behavior in order to accommodate Linda and to acknowledge the hurt caused by her negligence and denial, that embodies re-witnessing. Demonstrated by the eighteen years it takes for Linda and DeAnne to reconcile and Linda's restraint from telling her mother about the rape, re-witnessing is a slow process. DeAnne, now sixty-six, has also faced tremendous loss and has undergone a transformation of her own, as evident in her altered language, tone, eyes, and even scent. During this reunion, DeAnne listens to Linda's explanation of synesthesia and even watches the PBS video an additional four times after Linda has gone to bed. Linda notices that "[s]he tried to use the fewest possible words to convey her thoughts. She was conscious of how she had only partial control over their effect on me. She was self-aware and self-editing almost to the point of silence" (246). DeAnne's response to the knowledge of Linda's synesthesia, reflects what Mia Mingus calls "access intimacy," an "elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else 'gets' your access needs. The kind of eerie comfort that your disabled self feels with someone on a purely access level" ("Access" n.p.). DeAnne has changed so significantly that

Linda remarks that she was meeting "DeAnne Whatley Hammerick for the first time," whom she renames "DWH" (244). Becoming is an engagement practice marked by a recognition that permits the possibility of relation between self and other, and thus, it ultimately allows a renewal of their mother-daughter relationship. Their restored relationship reveals that access intimacy is "an antidote to the pain and the extreme isolation that pound like crashing waves with no end" to feel dignity ("Access" n.p.). Becoming develops trust, faith, and practice that allow Linda to eventually trust DWH enough to be vulnerable and tell her about the rape. Becoming, in other words, is an ongoing process. Becoming is connection and love—a growing together.

DeAnne's transformation speaks directly to the possibility of re-witnessing, particularly since their closer relationship forms when DWH opens herself to a new system of perception that she does not experience and acknowledges the hurt she caused when she did not believe Linda about her synesthesia. In this regard, I agree with Michele Janette that the novel "redeems DeAnne" (172). Janette reads DWH's acknowledgement and accommodation of Linda's synesthesia as a moment "when the majoritarian figure allows her world to be affected by minoritarian knowledge" and readers can choose to "emulate DWH's affective openness" (174). However, I want to complicate their reconciliation by contextualizing the uneven power relationship between them. Linda returns to Boiling Springs only after she has been diagnosed with ovarian cancer, abandoned by her fiancé, and stripped of her position at her law firm. Additionally, Linda depends on DeAnne for a story about her origin—"Only DeAnne was left to answer the question for me now" (161). In order not to overwhelm DeAnne, Linda also restraints from telling her about her failure to acknowledge the evidence of rape. I do not intend to minimize DWH's transformation, particularly as many of these changes result from her experiences of pain after her husband and mother died. I also do not want to understate the

benefits of their amended relationship to both of them at a time when they both are experiencing new losses. However, to ignore the complexity of their reconciliation dismisses important aspects of the history of the Vietnam-US War and the subsequent refugee exodus that painfully affect Linda. Linda explains that their reunion depends not only on her forgiveness of DeAnne, but also on DWH's willingness to forgive Linda: "We were forgiving each other" (279). Within this framework, Linda has become a perpetrator and DWH a victim. But what crime has Linda committed? *Looking* Asian, and thus, serving as a reminder of Thomas's infidelity?

Despite their estrangement, Linda depends on DeAnne for a story about "where [she] came from and how [she] got here" so she "could . . . put down [her] tender roots and stay" after the deaths of Thomas and Baby Harper (282). DeAnne begins Linda's origin story by saying "Thomas*orangeNehi* loved*Nestea* her" (268). "Thomas loved her" reiterates the phrases "My father was in love"; "Thomas was in love"; "my lovesick father," uttered by Linda and Baby Harper in chapter 12 when Thomas died during intercourse with his secretary (126, 127, 128). As I previously detailed, the story that DeAnne tells Linda about Thomas is highly sentimentalized and fails to hold him to account for his failures as a husband and father. DeAnne's construction of Thomas as a romantic hero who saved a Vietnamese orphan after her parents died in a mysterious fire echoes the military and imperial complicity that the adult Linda acknowledges: "Complicit, because they would rather not know the answer to that question [how many of the men would remember the young female bodies that they bought . . . while wearing their country's uniform in the Philippines, Thailand, South Korea, or South Vietnam], the mothers and sisters and wives of these men looked right through me as well" (171). Thomas's heroism also upholds DeAnne's altruism, especially in the sociopolitical context of transracial and transnational adoption that results directly from military aggression.

DeAnne's story of Linda's adoption gives Linda access to some of DeAnne's painful experiences of knowing that her husband loved someone else and being the object of the town's pity when he died of a heart attack while cheating on her. The story, regardless of its motivations, effectively explains her negligence. Linda also demonstrates that acknowledging her experiences does not close possibilities for recognizing the pain of others. As DeAnne tells the story, Linda thinks, "as I grew older I began to look more and more like the young Vietnamese woman whom her husband had loved. . . . When I was in the house, Mai-Dao was in the house." Understanding DeAnne's resentment and loneliness, Linda "reach[es] over the kitchen table and hold[s] on to DeAnne's hands," even as she recalls the memory of DeAnne lusting over Bobby (281). She does not tell DeAnne about Bobby's crime. Linda's reaching out to DeAnne even as she recalls DeAnne's negligence reveals that becoming does not depend on the erasure of the violence that Linda experienced; forgiveness does not absolve the history of perpetration. Her conscious decision to withhold the fact about Bobby reveals the deep emotional labor of the testifier. By emphasizing Linda's act of forgiveness, I seek to reclaim the power of forgiveness and return autonomy to the body in pain. As I have emphasized in the previous chapter, forgiveness is not docility; it is a (at times, difficult) willingness to practice empathy even when it is not reciprocated. Linda's hand gesture, moving outward to DeAnne, answers the denial of pain by modeling the possibility of an alternative and more inclusive community that accounts for multiple, even contradicting, experiences. Her conscious effort to establish a connection with DeAnne demonstrates agency, civility, and a profound investment in a new future.

While the US and Vietnam have translated and mobilized the forgiveness of war victims towards nationalist agendas, forgiveness indexes atrocity and belongs only to the person in pain.

For Linda, forgiveness marks a willed attempt to renew a relationship based on recognition and the possibility of community. Marginal people whose existence is formed from genocide, slavery, war, and imperialism forgive every day as a practice of healing and surviving. Linda acknowledges the possibility that DeAnne could be making up the story about her adoption (282). As with her dismissal of pain during the dismemberment game and her indifferent reaction to her newfound knowledge that she is Vietnamese, Linda reacts flippantly, stating "it didn't matter. At least it was a story" (282). She attempts to shut down the need to investigate and accepts the story as a gift to "put down [her] tender roots and stay" (282). While the letters between Thomas and Mai-Dao substantiate the story, the adoption story might as well be Linda's own construction of her relation to Athena and Virginia Dare. By adopting the story regardless of its veracity, Linda values the affective transmission between two individuals above a direct translation of history. This story links Linda and DeAnne within a speaking/listening act, to stay—not only as an identity anchor to know her history, but also with DeAnne and in Boiling Springs. While Linda's narrative ends with "tender roots and stay" that gestures to a home and belonging, Truong's book ends with the final question "Is Linda Hammerick a Southerner? . . . Why or why not?" (297). Truong gives the readers a possibility of becoming, of imagining and creating a reality in which someone like Linda has a "role to play within the romances, the dramas, and the tragedies." (173).

The Ellipse of Testimony

At the end of the first chapter, "Disabled Nation," I ask what it might mean to attend to living with a disability *not* produced by the Vietnam-US War. To ask this question another way, what does it mean to care for poor, disabled Vietnamese people if that care does not absolve US guilt or uphold US liberal identity? As poet Barbara Tran stated in 2004, "It is not the right time to 'move on' from the war, for there are still too many who cannot do so because the past has gouged too deep a hole in their lives. They keep falling back in" (Tran qtd. in Pelaud 59). In *Body Counts*, published in 2014, Yen Le Espiritu echoes Tran's concern: "I worry that such a decoupling of Vietnamese Americans from the Vietnam War risks assimilating Vietnamese into the apolitical and ahistorical category of 'cultural diversity'" (15). Time is a critical criterion of testimony—when is there language to tell, when is there an audience to tell, when is it safe to tell, when is it productive to disclose or to withhold information? Testifiers, as Linda Hammerick shows, withhold information and adapt to their audience.

My question, however, concerns the trapping parameters of "Vietnam War" discussions that fail to capture the reality of the Vietnamese diaspora. Minority identity has been constructed as antithetical to governing power and always tied to notions of resistance and counternarrative; however, this description inadequately captures the complexity of minority lives and their engagement with violence and corruption. I have pointed to the ongoingness of the injury produced by the Vietnam-US War, in which the past intrudes upon and materializes in the present in the US. Living in the US exacerbates old injuries and causes new debilitation rather

than heals. That is, I agree that the Vietnam-US War is an important history that the US needs to remember and that US-born Vietnamese need in order to explain the violence they face, as well as understand their parents. Many Vietnamese without memories of the war only know it through US-centric discourse and through their parents' fights, withdrawal, alcoholism, and domestic abuse. The past of the war is transplanted into the present—into a different generation, a different location—but refuses equal access to everyone. However, Vietnamese American studies has to move beyond being an alternative history to US mainstream discourse about the Vietnam-US War. Vietnamese American studies, a sociopolitical reaction, is produced during a period of time when identity, established legally and socially, threatens to exceed the mappings of the Vietnamese subjects. Vietnamese American narratives in the late 20th and early 21st century, as a counterdiscourse, allows Vietnamese Americans to be viewed as people rather than as objects of a war. Long Bui, Yen Le Espiritu, Mimi Khuc, Nhi T. Lieu, Mariam Lam, erin Khue Ninh, Fiona Ngo, Mimi Nguyen, Viet Thanh Nguyen, Isabelle Pelaud, Caroline Kieu Linh Valverde, and other Vietnamese American studies scholars have done foundational work to provide a language for moving beyond having to prove our humanity. Pelaud writes, "I walked a fine line between the desire to represent, primarily for the purpose of social justice, and the desire not to replicate the logic of domination that can take place when abiding by a nonself-reflective and nonstrategic essentialist approach" (135). As I have tried to show in this dissertation, dominant society places such hard parameters around how people can talk about atrocity happening to them that social justice, if we are to be effective, depends on adopting a language and framework different from the native tongue. Destabilizing these barriers depends on a collective effort, each individual building on from another.

There is tremendous violence in always being seen through the lens of the "Vietnam War." In le thi diem thuy's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For,* the unnamed narrator describes the arrival of a black-and-white photograph of her grandparents. Jutta Gsoels-Lorenson explains that the description evokes other famous black-and-white photographs from the war in Vietnam, such as the "Accidental Napalm" photograph of Kim Phuc (5). This reading of the intimate, honorific portrait of her grandparents as "Accidental Napalm" echoes Linda Hammerick and Diem-My Thi Bui's experiences of being observed as prostitutes. In addition to the daily navigation of the difference between looking and being and the material consequences of these "Vietnam War" stereotypes, 1.5 and 2nd generation Vietnamese Americans have a completely different experience at home. Contrary to the comparison with "Vietnam War" photographs, the photograph is very personal with a unique history and has a life of its own. When the photograph arrives in the mail, it causes an explosive fight between her parents. I suggest a Vietnamese American studies future that might begin with the explosive fight between her parents, the longing that comes with holding that photograph, the guilt of failing to meet their filial obligations, and the impact of that fight and photograph on the child. I want to move from the larger framework to the details. De-emphasizing the framework of the war shifts away from waging a counternarrative and stops using dominant language and images to express our love, longing, and pain. What does it mean to keep atrocity in the public imagination as our community members privately suffer?

I worry that conversations about the ongoing effects of Agent Orange or the harm of "Vietnam War" stereotypes might not be the most urgent or legible legacy of war for, say, a US-born Vietnamese whose father is in jail again. I want to think about the war through the perspective of the child whose father has died from drug overdose, or the woman who delivers a

daughter alone while her partner steals her car to get high and crashes it into a ditch, or the child who runs away to escape her father's beatings. I want to think about the war from the perspective of the mother estranged from her daughter after she suggests aborting her unplanned pregnancy. I can't forget the mother's words—"why doesn't she [her daughter] know that I also had to kill my baby? Why doesn't she know that she's not alone? That's our lot. We kill our own children." These topics are difficult to talk about. Few want to publicly announce these realities because society has constructed them as personal failures. There are anxieties about the appropriation of pain to withhold citizenship, to sanction systematic violence, to be used as evidence for closing borders, and to simply devalue and hate us. As Linda Hammerick demonstrates, the compulsion to be a model minority is neither natural nor sustainable. Speaking on these topics seems counterintuitive to survival as the navigation between looking and being brings enough shame and self-loathing.

Betrayal and loyalty underline testimonies because experiences never solely belong to the teller. As Pelaud writes, "There are still many ghosts and many secrets that continue to gnaw at individuals, families, and communities. . . . silences and self-censorship still protect the living. Secrets are kept to protect children from unresolved karma, or they are shared selectively within families to maintain a collective identity" (136). I call on the importance of testimony as an authentic and truthful—but moving—object that takes on different afterlives to engage in concerns that might be too ugly for public attention. As I have noted in my discussion of Hayslip's testimony, testifying is not entirely about negotiating with various audiences. It is a public, but also personal and private, endeavor. There are many ellipses of testimony, marked memories postponed for future discussion. I will surface domestic abuse as an urgent ellipsis that Vietnamese American studies may now have the language and audience to explore. During a

discussion of his graphic memoir *Vietnamerica*, GB Tran reports that one of the panels depicts his father physically abusing his mother. He does not point to the mentioned panel, keeping it private even as he calls attention to it. He explains that the graphic genre permits a reading in which his father and most readers miss the portrayal of abuse. Tran's decision to both imprint *and* hide domestic violence reflects a vexed relationship to the truth and loyalty. He uses the image/text genre to negotiate the ethics of speaking for his family, particularly his mother, whose perspective commands half the memoir. The indexing of this private violence marks his witnessing and refusal to forget a difficult component of his mother's life.

A conversation about domestic violence that paints the abuser solely as a villain, singularly wrong and evil, fails to capture the full experience of the testifier—the difference between looking and being. *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* explicitly addresses domestic violence, particularly the father's alcoholism, his flashbacks from the war, and his rages that leave "bruises that blossomed on the people around him" (118). The overwhelming violence in the home caused the narrator to begin running away at sixteen. Despite the real impact of his violence, she could not bear watching two counselors judge her father when he picked her up at a shelter. She expresses, "I thought they had no right to frown at my father. I could not wait to get us out of there. . . . I remember crossing the parking lot, my hand in my father's hand, the two of us running to the car as though we were escaping together again" (118-119). Throughout the text, le portrays in detail the father's abuse and its painful impact on the mother and narrator, yet the portrait of the father is tender, complex, strong, and full of a love that remains invisible to the counselors as guardians of US society. The daughter returns home—"I told the counselors that I was ready to go home"—with her father that night at tremendous cost to her. In order to protect her father from further shame and reprimand, she makes the sacrifice of returning home only to

find herself running away again. There are so many examples of domestic violence in Vietnamese American literature (it breaks my heart). . . In *Catfish and Mandala*, Andrew X. Pham dedicates the memoir to "my sister Chi, my brother Minh, one and the same . . . if only I had learned to see without looking" (n.p). The memoir opens with Minh's suicide. Like *The Gangster'*s nameless narrator, Minh ran away at sixteen to save herself and her family. One day a counselor notices a bruise on Minh's body and calls the police to arrest their father. Minh tells her siblings, "I can't come back here. Dad will kill me." Beyond just fearing for her life, she also wants to prevent their father from going to jail "because of her." She believes that she would be forced to testify to their father's abuse, which would surely lead to his imprisonment and "that would be the end of us all" (214). Her sacrifice allows the family to stay together. The criminal justice system and US cultural simplification of domestic violence ends up silencing the victims rather than protect them.

The figure of the grieving and violent father or his complete absence looms in the majority of Vietnamese American texts, yet domestic violence is rarely discussed in analyses of these texts. To name but a few examples: Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* (1997), Andrew X. Pham's *Catfish and Mandala* (1999), Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt* (2003), Lac Su's *I Love Yous Are for White People: A Memoir* (2009), Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do: An Illustrated Memoir* (2017), and Ocean Voung's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019). The opacity produced by the desire and need for secrecy does not adequately capture the why domestic violence has received so little critical attention. Many critical analyses of domestic abuse in minority communities address it through the history of slavery, colonialism, war, dislocation, and race. I recognize that these violent systemic structures provoke problematic racial subjectivities. Indeed these structures compel individuals to act against their nature, will, and personal interests,

making them unrecognizable to themselves. However, as Pelaud reminds us, for "some, issues of life and death, loss of nation, or of domestic violence both in Viet Nam and in the United States, come *before* or *with* the desire and need to claim America" (54). Furthermore, discussing domestic violence only through these frameworks fails to address toxic masculinity. As a result, these scholarship tend to ignore patriarchy's effect on minority men, trans, and women across generations, and most importantly, how we heal ourselves and each other. I'm deeply concerned about abandoning women refugees and immigrants to suffer in silence and fear: "afraid to tell their stories, afraid to seek outside help, afraid of being blamed, afraid of suffering more violence, and afraid of community censure. For some, the only way out was suicide" (Tan 110-111). A discussion that prioritizes US history over domestic concerns fails to acknowledge the complexity of real lives, such as Minh's transidentity and the daily ritual of bandaging their chest since puberty. I previously noted that Minh ran away from home because of the father; however, that analysis is incomplete. Minh's mother, siblings, the counselor who called the police, and the incessant mocking and torture that come with being trans—in addition to the Vietnam-US War, the brutal boat passage to the US, and their difficult resettlement together—produced Minh's death. This overlooking is deadly and erases our responsibilities to our students, sisters, brothers, parents, and children—to each other. In addition to these systemic debilitations, our memory construction and knowledge production, in its demarcation of whose pain matters, we are complicit in the manufacturing of casualty of immigrant and resettlement.

this is all I choose to tell[45]

[45] I take this phrase from Isabelle Pelaud's book *this is all I choose to tell,* which comes from a poem by Truong Tran. Telling is a communal act, constructing an archive of a people.

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