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# When Memory Speaks: Transnational Remembrances in Vietnam War Literature

Quan Manh Ha\*

This article offers a brief overview of the problems in representations of the Vietnam War and the Vietnamese people, in Vietnamese, American, and Vietnamese American literatures. Each literary corpus ideologically politicizes collective and individual memory about the war to serve a certain political agenda. Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* and Dang Thuy Tram's *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace*—two narratives written from the perspective of the Vietnamese victims of the war—which are selected for textual analysis in this article, with an emphasis on traumatic memories and suffering, debunk the myth of the just cause of the war claimed by the United States and decenter the Euro-Americacentric view on trauma and human suffering, thus challenging the common, one-dimensional perceptions about the Vietnamese and the Vietnam war in American cultural politics and memory.

**Keywords:** trauma, postcolonial discourse, Vietnam War, Vietnamese literature, Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War*, Dang Thuy Tram's *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace*

The conflicting attitudes toward, and the moral dilemmas surrounding, the Vietnam War are recorded extensively in Vietnamese, Vietnamese American, and American histories and literatures. Each side interprets the war from its own partisan perspective, creating a plethora of opinions and well-argued positions on the political and military conflict. The year 2015 marked the 40th anniversary of Vietnam's reunification, and although nearly half a century has elapsed, the Vietnam War remains actual in the socio-political determinants, literary productions, and cultural memories of both Vietnam and the United States. Viet Thanh Nguyen notes, "So much is told about Viet Nam, and so little is understood" (V. T. Nguyen 2006, 13), and Neil L. Jamieson advises the Americans to "learn more about Vietnamese culture and Vietnamese paradigms in order to untangle the muddled debates about our own," because the Vietnam War is an important event that Americans must excavate in their attempt to understand the Vietnamese and them-

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selves (Jamieson 1993, x). Discourses on the Vietnam War, in the West and particularly in the American cultural memory, have been criticized for their exclusion of the Vietnamese experience and suffering, and even if the Vietnamese are present in U.S. films and books, they tend to be presented as “shadowy cardboard figures, merely one-dimensional stage props for the inner workings of the American psyche” (*ibid.*). Thus, in order to gain a multidimensional understanding of the war, Edward Miller and Tuong Vu suggest a new critical approach, dubbed “The *Vietnamization* of Vietnam War Studies” (Miller and Vu 2009, 2) that accentuates “Vietnamese agency and the sociocultural dimensions of the event as lived and experienced by Vietnamese” (*ibid.*, 5). This approach facilitates examinations of how the war exercises perennial effects upon Vietnamese society and its postwar mentality and how it enriches our knowledge about this conflict. In this article, I respond to the appeal made by Miller and Vu above by highlighting several problems occurring in representations of the war in both U.S. and Vietnamese literature in order to challenge or debunk certain misconceptions about the Vietnamese experience. My analysis of Bao Ninh’s *The Sorrow of War* and Dang Thuy Tram’s *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace* will indicate that these two Vietnamese literary texts function to humanize victims and pay due respect to the wounded and the dead on the Vietnamese side, thus challenging the way U.S. and Vietnamese American cultural politics funnel “all of these histories into the single story” that serves a narrow ideological agenda (Nguyen-Vo 2005, 171). The nameless faces and the faceless names of the Vietnamese victims of the war that Bao and Dang lament demand questioning the “narcissistic myths of the war as a US tragedy” (Schwenkel 2009, 39).

### **Epic Heroism in Vietnamese Literature about the Vietnam War, 1960 to 1975**

Prior to considering the two literary texts selected for this article, it behooves readers to understand how war-related trauma and suffering necessarily were treated in Vietnamese literature produced under the guidelines prescribed by the Hanoi government: writers were required “to support the national endeavor by authoring stereotyped works that featured typical characters and themes and that focused on the goals of the collective struggle” (Schafer 2000, 13). If one were to study the wartime corpus of literature without some background knowledge of its historical and political context, one might mistakenly conclude that the Vietnamese did not suffer excessive loss and pain during the war, because the war was romanticized in the literature, as a propagandistic expedient to invigorate the people in their struggle against the enemy (the Americans and anti-

communist South Vietnamese troops). Vương Trí Nhàn observes, retrospectively: “Accentuate the positive, cover up the negative”—this way of thinking has sunk deep into the Vietnamese psyche and silently guides society” (Vương 2008, 182). He also quotes Nguyen Minh Chau, a well-known Vietnamese author, who wrote that the Vietnamese traditionally have “idealized texts as sacred objects” devoid of “the vulgar and dirty” and that the public expects authors to portray patriotic heroes and their sacrifices nobly and beautifully, without “a single spec of dirt” (*ibid.*). Vương emphasizes that Vietnamese wartime literature had to be ideological, inspirational, and propagandistic because “[o]ne must depict the war in Vietnam as different from all other wars in the world” (*ibid.*, 183). He uses the term *epic-propagandistic* to characterize the wartime literary corpus: in order to achieve victory, a soldier must be ebullient and possess a different mindset by showing “dogged determination and be[ing] able to steel his soul to the suffering of combat” (*ibid.*, 185). Literature that deviated from such criteria was censored and rejected from dissemination.

Anthropologist Christina Schwenkel, in her article on a 2000 photographic exhibition about the war in Ho Chi Minh City, insightfully reminds us that visual images of warfare must be contextualized within specific “structural and ideological frameworks and offer only partial and situated insights rather than transparent historical truths and accuracies” (Schwenkel 2008, 37). Her statement is also germane to our reading of Vietnamese war literature, which attempts to represent the national struggle against the Americans very differently from the way the United States and Western media often portray the “violence and suffering” (*ibid.*). In Vietnam, “[o]fficial narratives of the American War are encoded in images that symbolize *national* heroism and sacrifice, rather than *individual* memories of hardship, loss, and trauma” (*ibid.*, 47). Vietnamese writers were required to produce narratives that celebrated triumphs, virtues, solidarity, and optimism that imbued people with great faith in the Party and the army and that honored those who joined the revolution. For example, Lam Thi My Da’s poem entitled “A Sky in a Bomb Crater” (1972) expresses the speaker’s admiration for the heroine’s distinguished mettle or fortitude:

Your friends said that you, a road builder,  
 had such love for our country, you rushed  
 down the trail that night, waving your torch  
 to save the convoy, calling the bombs on yourself. (Lam 1998, 111)<sup>1</sup>

In a later stanza, the speaker romanticizes the road builder’s audacious sacrifice, endow-

1) The poem was published in Vietnamese in 1972, and it was translated into English and published in 1998.

ing her soul with celestial beauty:

Now you rest deep in the ground,  
 quiet as the sky that rests in the crater.  
 At night your soul pours down,  
 Bright as the stars. (*ibid.*)

When the speaker and his comrades pass by this area, they are inspired by the road builder's intrepidity, and in their minds, she has metamorphosed into beacons, "columns of white clouds," and "the sun," beaming light upon the hearts of other soldiers (*ibid.*). The poem does not depict her death as tragic; the pain associated with her death is mitigated because "Our country is so kind" (*ibid.*). The stanzas quoted above can be construed theoretically, based on Shaun Kingsley Malarney's discussion of the definition and connotations of the Vietnamese word *hi sinh* (sacrifice) as: "The revolutionary formulation of selfless virtue was conjoined with the public glorification of death and personal sacrifice to advance the revolutionary cause. The greatest virtue was achieved with death, a transformation that reached its apotheosis in the concept of 'sacrifice' (*hi sinh*)" (Malarney 2001, 49). Because the road builder exemplifies selfless virtue, her death is nobly transformed into sacrifice that kindles in soldiers the fire of patriotism and dedication for the revolutionary cause. Or as Peter Zinoman observes, "Representations of revolutionary heroism" are efficacious in evoking patriotic spirits in wartime (Zinoman 2001, 37).

War causes separation, which is especially traumatic between loved ones, and it generally engenders feelings of sorrow, despair, and loneliness. Phan Thi Thanh Nhan's "Secret Scent" (1969), however, romanticizes the separation of two friends who are lovers. The girl learns about her friend's pending departure for the front, and "She [hides] a bunch of flowers in her handkerchief" when she comes to say goodbye to him, so that the scent of her flowers will follow him everywhere and fill his heart: "Leaving each other / They still didn't speak, / Yet the fragrance sweetens the young man's journey" (Phan T. T. N. 1998, 117).<sup>2)</sup> In her aforementioned article, Schwenkel notes that, at the photographic exhibition in Ho Chi Minh City, the photos taken by Vietnamese correspondents not only expose the cruelties of war but also capture the solidarity and cooperation between soldiers and civilians by focusing on their daily activities and hopeful futures (Schwenkel 2008, 45–46). She adds that even when deaths and injuries are evident, "the emphasis is on camaraderie," rather than on "pain and suffering" (*ibid.*, 49). Visual images are political-ideological expedients, and so is literature. This fact urges us to

2) The poem was published in Vietnamese in 1969, and it was translated into English and published in 1998.

reexamine how deaths and injuries are portrayed in canonical Vietnamese literature. Nguyen Duc Mau's "The Grave and the Sandalwood Tree" (1969), for instance, is an in-memoriam poem about the death of a fellow soldier named Hung; however, its tone is heroic as the speaker celebrates Hung's fearlessness, their comradeship, and their mutual affection. As the speaker buries his friend, he says,

Not much distance between us now.  
 Only a yard of earth separates us. But you don't hear my call?  
 A yard of earth becomes an endless sky.  
 Now, I miss you more than ever. (Nguyen D. M. 1998, 107)<sup>3</sup>

The speaker later calls Hung's sacrifice "a source of happiness" (*ibid.*), and Mother Earth tends his grave with blossoming flowers and shining stars. To live the life of a soldier is "beautiful," and Hung's corpse "perfume[s] the earth and sky" (*ibid.*, 109).

Although poems like these served the government's ideological agenda effectively in wartime Vietnam, they undoubtedly have a different effect upon American readers who might fail to see death, separation, loss, and suffering on the Vietnamese side as the tragic and traumatic realities that they, indeed, were to the Vietnamese. A de-romanticized reality was coldly expressed in 1995, when the Hanoi government released the numbers of deaths caused by the long conflict: over three million Vietnamese lost their lives, including both civilians and combatants. The effects of the war remained truly tragic and traumatic in every aspect of postwar Vietnamese society, and they continue to be so even today. This fact is further reaffirmed by Hue-Tam Ho Tai in her essay "Faces of Remembrance and Forgetting," in which she discusses museum photographs of lugubrious faces of Vietnamese mothers grieving the "supreme sacrifice" of their sons who "gave their lives to the cause of independence and revolution." Many Vietnamese women and wives "[hugged] to themselves memories of loss," while others became maritally devastated by the cruelty of war (Tai 2001, 167).

### Problems in Representations of the Vietnam War in U.S. Literature

In the 1980s and 1990s, Vietnam War literature in the United States burgeoned, as veterans returning from the war started to write about their experiences in Vietnam. In 1980, the American Psychiatric Association introduced the neurobiological term *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (PTSD) to describe and diagnose the mental and psychological

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3) The poem was published in Vietnamese in 1969, and it was translated into English and published in 1998.

conditions of victims of warfare more properly, and another authorial perspective emerged: the literature of trauma. Literary criticism on Vietnam War literature generally tends to be one-dimensional, focusing extensively on the American experience and perspective, and it “is concerned with the ways in which the literature of the war challenges and adjusts American myth” (Jason 2000, 4), and with how a sense of American masculinity is constructed when boys achieve manhood through experience in war (Boyle 2009, 3). This corpus of literature and its criticism have been negatively criticized for their Americentrism and ethnocentrism. Philip H. Melling observes that, in American literature about Vietnam, “the Vietnamese have been culturally undermined”—they are portrayed merely as “figures of darkness and obscurity who live on the wrong side of history, the bearers of a primitive and fallible wisdom who have fallen prey to an atheistic mission and a communist myth” (Melling 1990, 32). This attitude toward the Vietnamese during the war, Viet Thanh Nguyen argues in his book *Race and Resistance*, effectively “served the interests of the United States” because it focused the discourse on *the just cause* of the war (V. T. Nguyen 2002, 111). Peter Marin criticizes the Americans for not being able to “extend our own sense of human reciprocity or responsibility past the ordinary limits of family or nation to include those unlike ourselves” (Marin 1980, 51). The Vietnamese and their sufferings are almost invisible in American literature, and the apologia for this exclusion is based on the pretext that U.S. authors do not have “sufficient knowledge” of the Vietnamese to “feel comfortable in characterizing them,” because, during the war, there was hardly any close contact between the Americans and the Vietnamese. Therefore, U.S. writers focus on the American tragedy instead of the universal tragedy of the war (McGregor 1990, 54). In his book *Vietnam in American Literature*, Philip H. Melling points out that U.S. writers who attempted to portray Vietnam as a country, and not simply as a war, did not attract substantial critical attention:

In our discussion of the Vietnam War, those who write about the Vietnamese people are often relegated to the periphery. In criticism we continue to regard the Vietnamese as second-class citizens, culturally impoverished, socially unimportant, and aesthetically dull. Their presence has yet to fire the imagination of those of use who bring to Vietnam much of the cultural baggage—and the cultural prejudices—of a vast colonial undertaking. The tragedy of indifference is the continuing tragedy of the war itself: the failure to recognize that the war in Vietnam belongs to the country, not the country to the war. For Graham Greene this was the problem that lay at the heart of the American dilemma in Indochina. (Melling 1990, 95)

Melling’s insightful comments explain why, to most Americans, Vietnam remains a war and not a nation with a long history and significant culture. In Bruce Franklin’s words, the United States generally has viewed Vietnam as “something that happened to us, an event that divided, wounded, and victimized America” (Franklin 2003, 28).

## The Vietnamese American Perspective

The gear shifted slightly when Vietnamese American literature started to gain some attention in U.S. academe in the 1990s, especially with the publication of Le Ly Hayslip's *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (1993) and Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* (1998), both of which deal with traumatic memories caused by the Vietnam War and introduce the American readership to another reality—that of the Vietnamese refugees. Isabelle Thuy Pelaud argues that Vietnamese American literature, which focuses primarily on diaspora, displacement, nostalgia, and emotional attachment to the homeland, “provides alternative portrayals of the American War in Vietnam and its legacy” by emphasizing the “complexities and contradictions of abandonment and protection” (Pelaud 2015, 109–110).

The gap between Asian American Studies and Asian Studies recently has become narrower, as scholars in both fields promote transnational discourse, transoceanic interaction, and interdisciplinary research. In the United States, although discourse on Vietnam War literature in the last two decades has attempted to include both the American perspective and the Vietnamese American perspective, the transnational discourse remains incomplete and even biased, as the voice and presence of the Vietnamese nationals have not yet received enough serious consideration. I attended a panel on the future of Asian American studies at the 2014 Association for Asian American Studies conference, held in San Francisco, and one member in the audience expressed his concern about the absence or exclusion of Asian scholars from critical dialogue in the panel. Although all discussants promoted transnationalism and global discourse in the field, the panel members either were born in the United States, or grew up in the United States from very early in their lives, and all had earned graduate degrees from U.S. institutions. In his book *Literary Criticism*, Charles E. Bressler raises a question on the credibility of some critics of postcolonialism who are “products of the Western mindset”: they have completed their formal, advanced education in the West and come from the upper echelon in society; therefore, they do not represent the voice of the subaltern cultures and their peoples (Bressler 2011, 209). To refer to the lens through which most Asian Americans view Asia and Asian people, I coin the term *Amerasia-centricism*. A characteristic of this Amerasia-centricism, to borrow Frank H. Wu's argument on the issue, lies in the perception that Asian Americans feel a need to criticize Asian cultural mores and political policies negatively as “prerequisite” to addressing racial and socio-political in the United States (Wu 2002, 86). To this, I would add that Asian Americans tend to interpret the concepts of freedom and democracy from a Eurocentric viewpoint. In his article “Just Memory, War and the Ethics of Remembrance,” Viet Thanh Nguyen discusses problems of recollection in Vietnamese American literature. He argues that Asian



American literature, in general, is both “an act of resistance against oppression” and “an act of accommodation.” For example, Hayslip’s memoir *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* has been positively and widely received in the United States because the book not only addresses the cruelties of war but also expresses the author’s forgiveness for the atrocities committed by the Americans. However, her forgiveness cannot be accepted as the Vietnamese people’s general forgiveness of the Americans: the theme of reconciliation in Hayslip’s book “becomes problematic and premature when the historical conditions that produced such pain have not yet themselves been resolved, including American global domination and the inequitable place of minorities within the US” (V. T. Nguyen 2013, 147–148). Nguyen also observes that Southeast Asian refugees in the United States speak out about their trauma, poverty, and oppression, all of which make them empowered or “ideal Asian Americans” whose activism and representation gain attention within the dominant culture. However, they are also “unideal Asian Americans” because they speak from a partisan point of view, expressing an “anticommunist, conservative, and prowar” attitude (*ibid.*, 149), and Vietnamese Americans, in particular, “have the unnerving experience of seeing themselves in those crosshairs of American solipsism and American memory” (V. T. Nguyen 2006, 25).

Like the Vietnamese literature of the period, the Vietnamese American literature fails in objectivity. Many Vietnamese American literary texts about the war illustrate the problems that Nguyen mentions above. By romanticizing South Vietnam before the war ended, supporting the U.S. involvement in Vietnamese politics, and dehumanizing the communists and soldiers of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), many authors justify their life in exile, express their rapport with the United States, reaffirm their anti-communist political affiliation, strengthen their diasporic solidarity, and gain sympathy from the American public. Ironically, while Vietnamese American refugees left their home country because of discovering an absence of freedom, human rights, and democracy in postwar Vietnam, many of them subsequently have demonstrated extremism and hostility toward those fellow refugees who do not share their anti-communist perspective in the United States. For example, Hayslip says that, after the publication of her memoir, several Vietnamese refugees threatened to kill her because of her former affiliation with the communists during the war. In *Child of War, Woman of Peace*, Hayslip observes that books about Vietnam generally have been authored by “generals or soldiers or politicians or scholars—nobody has told Americans what the war was like for ordinary people, villagers and farmers” (Hayslip 1993, 283). She is the only Vietnamese American author who did not come an elite background—the educated class of wartime Vietnam. Her wartime experience was that of a peasant, and even that of a prostitute. In his most current book, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, Viet Thanh Nguyen notes

that while the majority of Vietnam's population was of the peasantry and of the farming class, Vietnamese American literature is written by or about the "classes above them"; therefore, it fails to represent the voice and experience of Vietnamese Americans in general: "If using literature gives the Vietnamese American author a voice, it does not give a voice to the people for whom the author speaks, or is perceived to speak" (V. T. Nguyen 2016, 208).

It should also be noted that most of these texts focus extensively on the traumatic experiences of the Vietnamese refugees while ignoring those similar experiences of the Vietnamese nationals who fought for the country's reunification. They erroneously assume that the victorious Vietnamese are not subject, as they are, to human suffering. For instance, Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* portrays Uncle Michael as an American diplomat, or a representative of U.S. goodwill, who embodies the U.S. efforts to help the oppressed, miserable, and least fortunate peoples worldwide. The narrator's mother, Thanh, lavishes encomia upon the Americans for their amiability, simplicity, and politeness, although she once refers to them as "*day ghosts*" and "*elephants*" (Cao 1998, 241). She compares the Vietcong to "*swarms of invisible fleas*" and "*ghosts*" (*ibid.*, 239), accusing them of forcing her and other villagers to participate in political meetings, donate money, and supply foodstuff from their own meager larders:

*[T]here were Vietcong study sessions we were forced to attend, and fund drives we had to contribute to. Rice had to be supplied to the Collective and Purchasing Committee of the Front, in exchange not for cash but for promises of payment and receipts redeemable only after the revolution. There was even a rice-bowl policy, so that everyone had to set aside a designated portion of rice every night for a Vietcong soldier, the way you would for a dead family member. (ibid.)*

While the arrival of the Americans to the village signaled presents, joy, and laughter, the arrival of the Vietcong heralded only marauding, indoctrination, and atrocity. Similarly, Kien Nguyen's *The Unwanted* (2001) romanticizes the narrator's happy childhood and his family's wealthy lifestyle in South Vietnam during the war, when the Americans were present, and a few years after the reunification of the country, his mother, Khuon, still hoped that the Americans would return to save South Vietnam. After 1975, his family's mansion was appropriated, and the family consequently lost its privileged, upper-class status. Although the Americans are described only briefly at the opening of the memoir, they leave positive impressions upon Kien's childhood memory. In opposition to this, postwar communist officials, who had affiliated themselves with the NVA, are described as dirty, ugly, uneducated, corrupt, and uncivilized. These prejudicial descriptions of the communists and NVA veterans, and the romanticized depictions of pre-1975 South Vietnam, are also present in many other Vietnamese American texts, such as Jade Ngoc

Quang Huynh's *South Wind Changing*, Truong Nhu Dinh and Tran Thi Truong Nga's *The Last Boat Out*, and Nguyen Qui Duc's *Where the Ashes Are*. Wayne Karlin, in his Introduction to *Love After War*, debunks this biased myth about Vietnamese combatants as he reflects upon his experience of interacting with Vietnamese writers about the war: "I found a common humanity and rapport with them, and when I began to read their stories, I discovered that they both reflected our own heartbreaks and concerns" (Karlin 2003, x).

Another challenge for U.S. readers in understanding the experience of the Vietnamese nationals lies in the limited number of Vietnamese texts that are available in English translation. Since the U.S. diplomatic normalization with Vietnam was achieved in the early 1990s, some attempts have been made on both sides to understand the war from a more balanced perspective. With the publications in English translation of Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War*, Le Luu's *A Time Far Past*, Dang Thuy Tram's *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace*, and editors Kevin Bowen *et al.*'s *Mountain River: Vietnamese Poetry from the Wars, 1948–1993*, as well as through international conferences on the Vietnam War and its literature held in both Vietnam and the United States, the war has been re-examined more critically, although many obstacles and ideological myths still impede true dialogue.

### **Trauma and the Politics of Remembrance in Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* and in Dang Thuy Tram's *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace***

*The Sorrow of War* is the first Vietnamese novel written about the Vietnam War to be translated into other languages, and it first appeared in English in 1994. Upon its initial release in Vietnam in 1987, the novel had a different title, *Thân phận của tình yêu* (*The Destiny of Love*), and even though it had won a prestigious award from the Vietnam Writers' Association and was widely received by the Vietnamese readership, it was soon after mysteriously banned for a year, primarily because it entered realms of cultural politics antithetical to the Party's policy directives. The "destiny" of this novel seems to have been prophesied in its original title. *The Sorrow of War* represents the spirit of the Vietnamese literature of the Reform (or Renovation) period of the late 1980s, when writers began to critique societal reality more vigorously, focus upon individual experience more insightfully, experiment with unconventional narrative styles more imaginatively, and expose negative perceptions more candidly. In his summary article on Vietnamese literature since 1975, and more specifically the period between 1986 and the early 1990s, Nguyễn Văn Long observes that such authors as Nguyen Minh Chau, Bao

Ninh, Duong Huong, Nguyen Khac Tuong, and Ma Van Khang are pioneers in portraying dark corners of reality that had been sugar-coated under the veneer of propagandistic romanticization. These authors candidly use their works as “wake-up calls” to draw the public’s attention to various frustrating, anguishing social issues, as a response to the new mission of Vietnamese literature, which encourages artists to “enthusiastically reform society, express aspirations for democracy, and demonstrate candidity in critiquing reality directly” (Nguyễn V. L. 2006, 12; my translation).<sup>4)</sup>

Prior to my discussion of *The Sorrow of War*, it is important to contextualize the novel within the literary movement of the Reform period, which has attracted substantial attention from Western critics. In 1986, Le Luu published *A Time Far Past*, which became a glorifying success as he critiques the psychological effects of war and “collective concern” upon the male protagonist Sai, who is unable to adjust himself to postwar marital life and society. John C. Schafer notes that Sai has always had to live his life according to the expectations of his family and society; thus the novel emphasizes the “private battles” and “the hopes and fears of individuals” (Schafer 2000, 13–14). With the appearance of *The General Retires* (1987), Nguyen Huy Thiep established his reputation as one of the most prominent writers of the late 1980s. After having devoted all of his youthful life to the national resistance against the French and the Americans, the general finds himself alienated from a postwar society that views him merely as a forgotten piece of wood. In an interview, Nguyen stated that he “was interested in judgments about the work’s literary merits [. . .] rather than assessments of its political or social project.” He refuses to follow the traditional portrayals of “colorless, monotonous, and one-dimensional characters” by examining the richness and profundity of the gamut of human emotion and comportment, often times through sarcasm and irony (Dinh 2006, 492). Peter Zinoman observes that in Nguyen’s fiction, he critiques the state’s “prescribed and policed socialist realism” (Zinoman 1994, 304). Duong Thu Huong’s *Paradise of the Blind* (1988) is another salient example of this literary movement, but unfortunately it was banned in Vietnam due to its political incorrectness: her novel criticizes patriarchy, rampant corruption, and bureaucracy in postwar socialist Vietnam, and the female protagonist Hang eventually has to free herself from the suffocating past of her family and national memory. By doing so, Hang “embodies a totally different attitude toward [the] revolutionary past” and articulates her “yearnings for different futures” (Tai 2001, 8–9). Duong is a maverick whose fiction is a polemical counterblast to the ugly realities camouflaged under socialist idealism, and Linh Dinh, a Vietnamese American author and

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4) For more information about Vietnamese literature since the mid-1980s, see Nguyễn Ngọc’s “An Exciting Period for Vietnamese Prose,” which has been translated into English and published in *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 3, no. 1 (2008): 197–219.

translator, insightfully notes that “many Vietnamese writers [of the Reform period] are not concerned about “the exigencies of war and politics,” but that they “are plumbing their own subjectivity and reinventing the multifaceted self” by not conforming to “[t]otalitarian, dogmatic truth” (Dinh 1996, xiv).

Paralleling the literary ideologies promoted during this period, in *The Sorrow of War*, Bao empowers his protagonist to explore his personal reflections and memories, and he resists adherence to the official history of the Vietnam War mandated by government agencies. Memory plays a significant role in the protagonist’s search for self-identity, because memory “establishes life’s continuity; it gives meaning to the present, as each moment is constituted by the past. As the means by which we remember who we are, memory provides the very core of identity” (Sturken 1997, 1). Vietnamese culture often is portrayed as a culture of remembrance: the media and a common set of images, ideas, and texts record the nation’s past and reinforce the public’s awareness of important facts and events. War memorials, war monuments engraved with “The Fatherland is grateful,” and cemeteries for the martyred dead are built everywhere in Vietnam to honor the fallen soldiers of the victorious and reunited country. Hue-Tam Ho Tai observes that in the postwar period, the Vietnamese government “has tried to shape collective memory,” which is equated with a significant form of “cultural production,” in order to emphasize the necessary and unbreakable nexus between the national revolution against the Americans and Vietnam’s preceding struggles for independence (Tai 2001, 177). *The Sorrow of War* weaves the protagonist’s individual memory into the nation’s collective memory, and by doing so, the novel both subverts the official narrative of historical events and diversifies the collective memory, which heretofore has been ideologically limited; or to borrow Tai’s words from her Introduction to *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, the protagonist’s private memory and counternarrative are “powerful weapon[s] against the totalitarian conspiracy of silence” for the sake of political hegemony and official commemoration reinforced by the state (*ibid.*, 7).

Bao’s novel can be categorized under the rubric of the literature of trauma. Andrew Ng describes the traumatic memories portrayed in the novel as “the unspeakable” and “the unrepresentable,” those which resist linguistic representation and defy attempts to impose meaning upon them (Ng 2014, 85–86). *The Sorrow of War* is a quasi-autobiographical fictional account (not a memoir) that displays the emotional and psychological wounds caused by warfare in thousands of Vietnamese veterans, including the author himself, who joined the national revolution against the Americans from 1969 through 1975. The novel’s protagonist, Kien, is plagued by the traumatic and indelible memories of his past experience: the deaths of his comrades, the atrocities of war, the haunting images of damaged souls, and the fragility of human life. Unlike most previous Vietnamese fiction

about the war, which was used as propaganda to extoll heroism, promote patriotism, and romanticize soldiers' experiences on the battlefield, *The Sorrow of War* condemns how the cruelties of warfare enervate soldiers' spirits and cause lasting mental, physical, emotional, and psychological damage to those who suffered through them.

A salient characteristic of the literature of trauma is a fragmented plot, resulting from the victims' inability to articulate their thoughts coherently. After his deployment, Kien processes his war-zone trauma in order to construct personal meaning out of his experience. The war-zone reality is so devastating for Kien that it violently intrudes upon and disrupts the present, and the line between past and present, space and time, becomes blurred, as Kien struggles to understand the incomprehensible past while attempting to achieve reconciliation with it. Ng notes that Bao depicts Kien's tragedy through both *what* cruelties surface and *how* they are translated into language (*ibid.*, 84). Kalí Tal explains that traumatized victims constantly write and rewrite their traumatic experiences "until they become codified[,] and narrative form gradually replaces content as the focus of attention" (Tal 1996, 6). In *The Sorrow of War*, events are narrated non-chronologically, through a mediated consciousness: Kien is unable to enjoy his present moments because lingering war-related memories and the powerful emotions evoked by them constantly intrude into his consciousness. The traumatic scars of war impede Kien's ability to establish events in a linear order or see them in logical, cause-and-effect relationships. He cannot translate the chaotic ebb and flow of his combat flashbacks into a conventional narrative, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Thus, the novel's plot is structured around Kien's "sensations of psychical/temporal dislocation" (Ng 2014, 88). This psychological phenomenon, Cathy Caruth insightfully explains, results from the fact that the traumatized victims "carry an impossible history with them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess" (Caruth 1995, 5). Therefore, Elizabeth A. Waites defines *trauma* as "an injury to mind or body that requires structural repair" (Waites 1993, 22), and a common way to "repair" the injury is through *scriptotherapy*—"the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic reenactment" (Henke 2000, xii). Kien transforms his experience into fiction, attempting to find healing and self-redemption through such scriptotherapy, but his pen refuses to comply with his intended plan to piece together a postwar plot about the Missing in Action Remains-Gathering Team. Living in postwar Vietnam, Kien struggles to return to his prewar life: "He drinks to stay awake"; alcohol helps him become more alert, imaginative, and creative, especially at night, because "[i]t seems that darkness truly reflects the darkness of his soul" (Bao 1998, 107). Kien hopes that writing down his memories will help him "rid himself of his devils" and mitigate his trauma: "[t]he spirits of all those killed in the war will remain with Kien beyond

all political consequences of the war (*ibid.*, 44, 57). Writing becomes a therapy for Kien's repressed memories because it helps him redirect his frustration, agony, paranoia, and fear, especially when he is unable to communicate these "unspeakables" directly to any other human being.

In postwar Vietnam, there is no battlefield and no bombardment, but Kien's mind contains its own battlefield, and the sounds of screaming souls call to him in his sleep as Kien is unable to exorcise the demons of war from his consciousness: "And now his whole fighting life parades before him, with troops of dead soldiers met on the battlefields returning through a dim arch in an endless dream. The echoes of the past days and months seem like rumbles of distant thunder, paining then numbing his own turbulent soul" (*ibid.*, 22). Caruth points out that a traumatized victim, when directly confronting reality, often experiences "an absolute numbing to it" (Caruth 1995, 6). She further emphasizes that traumatic remembrance is by no means synonymous with memory, literally, because this act of recollection conflicts with the inaccessibility to the past "through the very denial of active recollection" (*ibid.*, 151–152). Kien struggles with how he should comprehend past catastrophic events and where truth actually resides. In her book *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth once again elaborates upon this complicated issue, stating that the traumatized victim is trapped "between knowing and not knowing," which can be seen in "the language of trauma and in the stories associated with it" (Caruth 1996, 3–4). Echoing Caruth's observations, Dominick LaCapra draws our attention to the fact that the disruption engendered by trauma deprives the self of the ability to articulate itself effectively and meaningfully. In fact, trauma "has belated effects that are controlled only with difficulty and perhaps never fully mastered" (LaCapra 2001, 41). The ghosts of Kien's war are seen in the recurring images in Bao's novel, and Heonik Kwon reminds readers of the novel that, because the images are associated with "the troubled memory of the war," the readers must bear in mind that death in this war occurred primarily in Vietnam and that "it is the Vietnamese who count [as] the vast majority in the list of the war dead" (Kwon 2008, 13–14). That Kien, in postwar Vietnam, serves as a member of the Missing in Action Remains Gathering Team is important: as a war survivor, his excavation task to restore fallen soldiers' bones evokes gruesome memories about the war, reminding him of the unrelenting impact of severe trauma, and of the constant threat of mortal danger that he and his comrades had faced. The nightmares that constantly haunt Kien in his sleep suggest that he not only is suffocated by brutal reality but that he also is unable to comprehend its violence (Caruth 1996, 6). While peace should be celebrated and enjoyed, Kien must conduct his persisting, internal war, in which "[a]ges and times were mixed in confusion, as were peace and war" because "peace is a tree that thrives only on the blood and bones of fallen comrades" (Bao 1998,

37). Kien's traumatic memory disruptively intersects Vietnam's hegemonic history in this way: whenever he recollects calamitous events, he suffers "the same quality of shock or disruption" (Leys 2000, 10). Thus, postwar peace, to him, is not rewarding but a reminder of tragic deaths, sorrows, and sanguinary battles.

The damages caused by warfare are incalculable, and the sorrows associated with them often are unbearable. Fear, agony, frustration, and anxiety dominate Kien's psyche. For him, "war was a world with no home, no roof, no comforts. A miserable journey, of endless drifting. War was a world without real men, without real women, without feeling" (Bao 1998, 27). These felicitously written lines capture the entire picture of Kien's war, in which tragic death, bloody massacre, and human vulnerability comprise the human condition: "Dying and surviving were separated by a thin line" (*ibid.*, 81). Christina Schwenkel, in her book *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam*, comments that, by emphasizing the horrors of war, especially the sounds, smell, and images associated with death, injuries, lost souls, and suffering—all of which "permeated the solemn air for years"—the novel gives "representation to individual suffering in a broader context of pervasive social trauma" (Schwenkel 2009, 63). Kien learns, from his 10 years as a combatant, that romantic love becomes a luxury because the fear of death deprives combatants of their sense of humanity.

*The Sorrow of War*, a novel of disillusionment and subversion, deviates thematically from the orthodox Vietnamese war literature that promotes the Vietnamese government's agenda of praising the national revolution and the spirit of noble sacrifice. Postwar literature was expected to portray the war as a heroic endeavor and to view the reunified Vietnam through a rose-colored lens. Bao's iconoclastic novel does not comply with these tenets. Its depictions of "rampant but admittable despair, uncontrollable violence, broken dreams, and pain" help to explain why it was once banned in Vietnam (Janette 2015, 51). Kien neither romanticizes nor glorifies the soldiers' experience on the battlefield. In most traditional Vietnamese literature about war in general, the image of the soldier has been idealized and ennobled; tragic events involving soldiers are uncommon, and even if tragic events occur, they are depicted with elements of heroism. Soldiers in Vietnamese war narratives live and fight for the collective cause, and they repress their personal feelings and inner crises. Living in postwar Vietnam, Kien, unlike traditional Vietnamese war heroes, feels imprisoned by memories of his hellish past: "Since returning to Hanoi I've had to live with this parade of horrific memories, day after day, long night after long night. For how many years now" (Bao 1998, 41), and these memories bring him only "utter isolation" and "spiritual emptiness" (*ibid.*, 67) as he is unable to salvage his life and career. Kien also considers the way the local authorities treat his fellow soldiers, searching their pockets "as though the mountain of property that had



been looted and hidden after the takeover of the South had been taken only by soldiers” (*ibid.*, 73). In his description of postwar Hanoi, he exposes its “loneliness in poverty,” characterized by “unbroken, monotonous sorrow and suffering” and “cheap flashing lights” (*ibid.*, 138). After 10 years of fighting the war, Kien is unable to appreciate the arrival of peace: how can he enjoy peace when his comrades have suffered so long from hunger, cold, malaria, and death? A soldier does not have the right to choose his fate or destiny; he responds to external circumstances; he basically is powerless to do otherwise. The former soldier drinks, thinks of women, dreams of family reunions, or seeks solace in drugs to evade the ghosts of the warfare that has been experienced. The soldiers’ wartime lives were defined by endless fighting, and former combatants generally do not perceive their former military duties as noble and glorious. At the time, they had no other choice, trapped, as they were, in a meaningless game named *war*. Bao humanizes his protagonist by highlighting his simple aspirations and his continuous effort to live with past trauma. Kien is not developed as a traditional hero; he is a victim of the events that determine the sorrows of his life.

A question arises concerning how Bao’s *The Sorrow of War* could be interpreted in terms of truth claims and historiography. Dominick LaCapra analyzes the relationship between narrative structures and truth claims profoundly in his book *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. He coins the term *traumatic realism* in his discussion of art (more specifically, fiction) and historiography (LaCapra 2001, 14): “Truth claims are neither the only nor always the most important consideration in art and its analysis. Of obvious importance are poetic, rhetorical, and performative dimensions of art which not only mark but also make differences historically” (*ibid.*, 15). The language and plot development employed by Bao highlight how the present and future are blocked by the “compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes” (*ibid.*, 21). Kien camouflages his personal emotions and private memories as a way to present multiple histories and to deconstruct the orthodox History policed by the government.

*Last Night I Dreamed of Peace*, a diary by Dang Thuy Tram, was first published posthumously in Vietnam in 2005, and its English translation was released in the United States in 2007. Commenting upon that book, Vietnamese American author Bich Minh Nguyen emphasizes the importance of Dang’s diary in her brief review of the book in *The Chicago Tribune*. In the United States during the last 40 years, the Vietnam War usually has been interpreted from an Americacentric point of view, but for this reason crucial elements tend to be omitted: “the voice of the Vietnamese and, even more so, the voice of the ‘other side’—the North Vietnamese.” The English version of Dang’s diary “helps fill this gap and presents a major contribution to the literature of the Vietnam War” (B. M. Nguyen 2007, n.pag.). Richard C. Paddock, in his discussion of Dang’s diary in the *Los*

*Angeles Times*, asserts that the book is “an emotional account of sacrifice, love and bloodshed, the diary humanizes an enemy of America once demonized as ruthless and sneaky” (Paddock 2006, n.pag.). Clearly, *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace* enables U.S. readers to reconsider the war and adjust the dehumanized image of the Vietnamese communists projected by most American writers. The diary also questions the “just cause” for the Vietnam War, which the United States has claimed.

Historically, American political involvement in Vietnam began in the late 1940s and early 1950s, when American support of French interests there arrived through allotments of aid and deployments of advisors. The escalation of that early involvement into a larger-scale military commitment by the United States occurred during the 1960s under the Johnson administration. It reached a turning point when the Tet Offensive of 1968 proved the determination of the communist partisans to reunite their divided nation. It was during this climactic period of concerted communist effort that Dang volunteered her service. The original title of the diary in Vietnamese was simply *The Diary of Dang Thuy Tram*. Translator Andrew X. Pham changed it to *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace* for its English publication. An interesting history lies behind the publication of the diary. In 1970, Frederic Whitehurst, an American intelligence specialist, captured Dang’s diary but did not burn it, although he was ordered to destroy any seized documents written by the communists that had no intelligence value. He returned to the United States with Dang’s diary in 1972 and kept it until 2005, when he decided to give it to Dang’s family in Hanoi. For several months, following the publication of the diary in 2005, it became a much-discussed topic in all national newspapers and public media in Vietnam, and it still foments strong sentiments among Vietnamese readers of all generations. Its English version reaffirms the fact that the Vietnam War served primarily an American political agenda. For American audiences, the diary highlights a Vietnamese spirit of humanity and survival amid the chaos, atrocity, and destruction caused by the war, which presented a new perspective for an American audience. It is its positive spirit that transforms the diary into a literary text worthy of international attention, and since 2005, the diary has been published around the world, in more than 20 languages.

Dang’s diary chronicles her life as a civilian doctor between April 8, 1968, and June 20, 1970. After graduating from Hanoi University of Medical Studies in 1966, Dang immediately volunteered to serve in the country’s war against the Americans, joining the National Liberation Front. In March 1967, she arrived in Quang Ngai, a province in central Vietnam, where she was assigned to work at the Duc Pho Hospital, a civilian hospital but used primarily to treat injured communist soldiers. As a diary, the text is fragmented and somewhat difficult to follow because it does not have a central plot, and names are mentioned but often are not contextualized. The diary reflects, rather, Dang’s

daily or weekly thoughts and feelings about the war, the goals of the revolution, the Vietnamese Communist Party, Dang's comrades and patients, her nostalgia for Hanoi, and her homesickness.

Despite its purely chronological presentation of events, many recurring themes are developed, which provide coherence: the professional challenges Dang encounters as a doctor in an inadequately equipped, thatched-roof clinic in war-torn Vietnam; her abhorrence for the Americans who were killing her countrymen and destroying her country; the patriotism and heroism of the communist soldiers; and the fragile divide that separates life and death amid the cruelties of war. On April 27, 1969, Dang returned to her clinic after an evacuation and witnessed the ubiquitous destruction caused by American bombing, which saddened her deeply. She wrote: "Last night, a dream of peace came to me [. . .]. Oh, the dream is not mine alone, but it's the dream of Peace and Independence burning in the hearts of thirty million Vietnamese and in millions of people around the world" (Dang 2007, 111). The English title of the diary emphasizes Dang's and the Vietnamese people's burning desire for peace and for an end to suffering caused by war. The word *dream* suggests that peace remained for Dang an almost unattainable dream, because the war would not end soon.

At the opening of her diary, Dang quotes a famous statement from Nikolai Ostrovsky's *How the Steel Was Tempered*, a Russian novel about courage and self-sacrifice for a socialist, labor-exploitation-free society: "All my life and all my strength have been dedicated to the most noble goal in life, the struggle to liberate the human race" (*ibid.*, 3). This statement expresses the philosophy of her life, permeating all of her thoughts and actions, as well as those of many other communist soldiers and civilian workers. Dang's diary shares many themes common to other literary texts and memoirs about war: it portrays the human body in pain and the terrors and absurdities of war; it treats comradeship, love, and humanity vs. enmity, rancor, and violence; it celebrates a resilience of the human spirit and an undefeated optimism for a better future. Judith B. Walzer, therefore, lauds the diary for its "human qualities that much of the American literature [about the Vietnam War] lacks" (Walzer 2010, 99). Love and war, of course, form a leitmotif in *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace*. Despite the horrors of war and the scenes of death that Dang and her comrades witness daily, American weapons and bombardments cannot extinguish their longing for peace and liberty.

The Vietnamese communists and soldiers are not stoic, unemotional "jungle fighters" as they often are stereotyped in American writings. Haywood T. Kirkland, an African American veteran, says that before U.S. soldiers went to Vietnam, they were trained to detach themselves from the realities of a war zone and instructed "not to call Vietnamese 'Vietnamese.' Rather, everyone is called gooks, dinks, slant-eyes, and not

talked about as people and not to be treated with mercy or apprehension” (Terry 1984, 90). The reason behind this practice was to free U.S. soldiers from moral dilemmas, so that killing the enemy would be perceived as tolerable. Even as the United States racialized and dehumanized the Vietnamese, Dang humanizes her countrymen: her diary is replete with human interactions and affectionate exchanges between fellow nationals. She writes, for example, “A wounded soldier under my care wrote me a poem [. . . which] was filled with compassion for my broken heart, it spoke of the bitter grief of a girl betrayed by her lover” (Dang 2007, 7). At the time, Dang is upset with her own lover, M., who has become indifferent to her feelings, but in this scene the reader sees that she finds consolation in the abundant affection that she receives from her soldier patients, friends, and nurses. The romantic soul of the Vietnamese infuses Dang and many soldiers with the courage and confidence to overcome fear and danger, even when they know that death is a constant companion to all in wartime Vietnam.

Occurrences of bravery and self-sacrifice for the noble cause of reunification are noted throughout the diary. Many soldiers and colleagues that Dang mentions or describes reveal these qualities; they are true patriots and nationalists fighting for the liberation of Vietnam. The possibility of being captured and tortured does not make them unduly fearful or tractable. She writes: “The war has not hindered our nation on the road to victory (of course it has suffered grievous wounds, but it marches forward like a wounded soldier who still has a smile on his lips and determination and conviction in his heart)” (*ibid.*, 37). Comradeship and solidarity strengthen platonic sister-brother relationships and motivate comrades to fight heroically for the realization of their two most cherished aspirations: “Independence and Liberty,” and Dang herself is “ready to die for the final victory” (*ibid.*, 27, 93). She emphasizes that no victory can be attained without sacrifice.

It is important to be aware of the genre of *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace*. Because it is a diary, and its author did not intend to have it published, it records the perceptions of her individual “I” and her private reflections on the war and the Party, which were not censored. Thus, as she criticizes corrupt and parochial communist cadres, exposes the atrocities of war, and contemplates the tragedy that her countrymen must endure, her diary does not conform to the strict constraints imposed by government agencies upon the writing of history. The daily entries reflect her internal battles and express her personal fears, hopes, and frustrations. The diary portrays “purity and innocence” in the attitude of its author, who devoted her entire life to the communist cause (*ibid.*, 110), or to the idealized paradigm of values iterated and published publically as guidelines for the national revolutionary struggle for a reunified Vietnam. However, Dang does not romanticize war. Unlike Bao, she does see the revolution as an epic struggle for the right of

self-determination of political identity for Vietnam, and she does view the efforts of the Vietnamese people, both military and civilian, as heroic. She condemns the Americans for their war crimes and atrocities, laments the tragic deaths of Vietnamese soldiers and civilians, grieves with families whose sons or daughters are killed, and emphasizes the incalculable sacrifices that the Vietnamese people must make for liberation's sake: "War means losses. On this scorching soil of the South, it seemed one hundred percent of the families had suffered a loss. Death and suffering weigh heavily on each citizen's head" (*ibid.*, 24); she later adds, "day after day, blood pours, bones shatter" (*ibid.*, 27). Like Bao's *The Sorrow of War*, Dang's diary highlights the thin line that separates, even in peacetime, life and death, which is made all-the-more narrow by the cruelties and absurdities of warfare. Tragic but often heroic deaths, or severe and often mortal injuries, are images that recur on almost every page of *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace*. Thus, the conditions of trauma come to define the usual experience of the life that Dang's diary records. Humans necessarily live on the cusp between life and death. Gunfire, bombing, fighting, and possible imprisonment bracket one's life dramatically and focus the mind upon the existential moment. Dang perceives the cruel reality of war when she all-too-often receives news of the deaths of her comrades: "I suddenly thought of my dear ones in both parts of the country, and told myself, Death is so simple" (*ibid.*, 121). Unlike Kien, in *The Sorrow of War*, however, Dang stands as a witness to much of the trauma experienced in battle. Her personal experience remains peripheral, while Kien's direct experience more seriously impairs his ability to break free of the existential moment and live again in the challenging continuum of time, the medium through which a meaningful postwar life is to be constructed.

The diary acerbically condemns American atrocities. The fire of hatred for the American enemies burned deep in the thoughts of Dang and in the hearts and minds of millions of Vietnamese people. She accuses the Americans of "trampling on our nation and killing our countrymen" and of raining havoc upon Vietnamese families who "are still scattered in all directions" (*ibid.*, 86). Language fails to expose fully the deep-seated resentment for war crimes that the Americans perpetrated in Vietnam and for all of the suffering that the Vietnamese experienced due to the long-term effects of those atrocities: "This is war; it spares no one, not a baby or an old woman, and the most hideous thing about it is the bloodthirsty Americans" (*ibid.*, 149). Dang uses obloquies to describe the Americans, referring to them as "devil bandits," "invaders," "the enemy," "bloodthirsty devils," "foes," and "imperialists" (*ibid.*, 84, 119, 118, 47, 83, 187), and she calls President Richard Nixon a "mad dog" who "has foolishly enlarged the fighting" (*ibid.*, 210).

Dang's fragmented diary is unified in part by the metaphorical recurrence of the

word *fire*. When Frederic Whitehurst was about to burn Dang's diary along with other seized documents, his Vietnamese translator Sergeant Nguyen Trung Hieu alerted him: "Don't burn this one, Fred. It has fire in it already" (Fitzgerald 2007, xvi). Dang's use of the word *fire* bears various layers of metaphorical meaning. It refers to the fire of patriotism and sacrifice, the fire of youth and service, the fire of love and comradeship, the fire of the revolution, the fire of desire for peace and a unified Vietnam, and the fire of partisan animosity for the American enemy. It is these references to raging fires that compelled Whitehurst to reread Dang's diary repeatedly for more than 30 years, to gain on-going understanding of the war from the "other side." It is these fires that help make Dang's diary a very significant literary text in Vietnamese, and an important historical document in the transnational discourse on the Vietnam War, as it makes visible the sufferings of the Vietnamese people during the devastating conflict.

Contextualizing Dang's *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace* within the postcolonial discourse on war and trauma is difficult because of its uniqueness as a text. Her diary does not treat the theme of traumatic memory, as does Bao's *The Sorrow of War* does, because Dang was martyred to her political cause before the retrospective conditions of a memoir, or of a fictional reconstruction of past events, could prevail. However, her family, and especially her mother, who read the diary must deal emotionally with the memories that the diary evokes. Her mother is "unable to bear reading more than a few passages at a time" (Võ 2008, 201), because the painful recollection of wartime events continues to impinge upon her present moments. The Vietnamese version of the diary, published in Vietnam in 2005, adds a brief anecdote about the journey taken by the diary, written by the author's younger sister, Đặng Kim Trâm, who writes: "Mrs. Doan Ngoc Tram, Dang Thuy Tram's mother, has agreed to have the book published although she has not dared read twice the bloody lines written by her own beloved daughter thirty-five years ago" (Đặng 2005, 27, my translation). The photo of her mother holding the diary close to her chest at the Vietnam Archive of Texas Tech University and her moving words, "Her corpse is in Vietnam, but this is her soul. [ . . . ] She's right here in front of me. I want to hold her, but I cannot. I can only hold her diary," emphasize that the war and memories of lost loved ones pressure the present (A. Phan 2005, n.pag.). The lingering vexation of inexpressible grief caused by the war haunts Dang's mother, as her memories of extreme personal suffering continue to register as the lingering effects of trauma caused by a mother's loss of a daughter to the senselessness of wartime events. Although Fred Whitehurst's return of the diary to Dang's family in Hanoi 30 years later and its subsequent publication in Vietnam stand as tangible acts of contrition, on the one hand, and of reconciliation, on the other, "the emotions are no less intense for those who lived through the war," as both sides were victimized mentally, emotionally, and physically (Võ 2008,

196). Diane Niblack Fox, in her essay on “Fire, Spirit, Love, Story [in Dang’s *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace*],” states:

Through an interaction of narrators and listeners in the process of recasting traumatic events—events that engulfed them and stripped away their previous identities, threatening to turn them from active subjects and victims—storytelling creates new narratives that restore agency and give narrators some control over the events that overpowered them. The challenge is to tell stories in such a way that they both bear faithful witness to the past and transcend its deadly limits. The publication of Dang Thuy Tram’s diaries as *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace* may be one such retelling. (Fox 2008, 220)

The diary became a best-seller in Vietnam because the Vietnamese born after the war find the book’s personal reflections on love, perseverance, homesickness, and nostalgia appealing, while the veterans who had joined the revolution in their early 20s identify with the death or the memory of missing loved ones, which the diary depicts so heart-wrenchingly (Võ 2008, 200). Vrong Trí Nhàn, in his article “*The Diary of Dang Thuy Tram* and the Postwar Vietnamese Mentality,” states that the book “happened to appear at a time when Vietnamese were yearning to understand more about the war’s impact on society. In the diary they found an account of the war in real time, enabling them to look back and examine both its conditions and participants” (Vrong 2008, 189). It is such immediacy that defines the uniqueness of Dang’s diary within the context of Vietnamese war literature.

While trauma generally has been studied through a psychoanalytical lens in the West, war-related trauma often is dealt with from a cultural and ritual perspective in postwar Vietnam. In *Culture, Ritual and Revolution in Vietnam*, Shaun Kingsley Malarney rightfully observes that the Vietnamese government recently has become more “tacitly tolerating, and sometimes encouraging” when it comes to ritual practices, although it theoretically endorses Marxist materialism (Malarney 2002, 1–2). In 1996, the Center for Studying Human Potentialities was established as a necessary response to the needs of families searching for missing-in-action or dead soldiers of the Vietnam War. Interestingly, with the assistance of spiritual mediums, several families have been able to retrieve the remains of war martyrs.<sup>5)</sup> Malarney describes the “audible sobbing” and “distress inflicted by their loved one’s death” when members of the deceased’s family learn about how their soldier had died and where the soldier had been buried in wartime Vietnam. It should be noted that dead soldiers were buried where they fell, and only “[f]ew were

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5) A few years ago, the BBC and the Discovery Channel broadcasted a 45-minute documentary film on how Vietnamese spiritual mediums proved successful in locating unidentified graves of the honored dead. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z--4NZklTA0>

transported back to their natal villages for burial” (*ibid.*, 181, 183). Wayne Karlin states that missing-in-action soldiers and war martyrs who lost their lives on the battlefield are “wandering souls [...] that still haunt Viet Nam” (Karlin 2009, 183). This fact is portrayed vividly in *The Sorrow of War*, as Kien is unable to enjoy any moment of postwar peace while his comrades are still wandering souls in the jungles. Vietnamese families who lost their loved ones in the war suffer, of course, from psychological trauma, especially when the families have not been able to locate where the martyrs were buried and to commemorate their deaths properly, which requires the presence of the deceased’s corpse. Karlin adds, “It is as if the arc of trauma and recovery has been given corporality in the form of the dead who still need to be discovered, disinterred, and brought home again, wrapped into the lives of their families” (*ibid.*). Vietnamese people feel that the remains of the dead must be brought home to their families, or no one, neither the living nor the dead, “[can] find peace, in the simplest and most profound meaning of that word. As long as they [the martyrs] remained lost, the war [will] never be over” (*ibid.*).

## Conclusion

Bao’s *The Sorrow of War* and Dang’s *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace* bear witness to the suffering of the Vietnamese people caused by the Vietnam War, standing as testimonies, as they do, to the cruelties of war inflicted upon the so-called “victorious side.” Although the two narratives differ, primarily due to their genres, they can be read as documents that effectively decenter the Americacentric writing of history and literature about the war. Stef Craps and Gert Buelens argue that trauma studies based in a Euro-American context or agency “maintain or widen the gap between the West and the rest of the world” (Craps and Buelens 2008, 2). Therefore, according to their findings, scrutiny of a marginalized group’s trauma and the historical experience in which the traumatic events occurred “can contribute to a cross-cultural solidarity and to the creation of a new form of community” (*ibid.*, 1). Generally, trauma studies focus on individual psychological damage, but by situating an individual’s traumatic experience within a larger, historical and societal context, one gains a more profound insight into the agonies of a marginalized group that had remained voiceless in Western literary history. In Bao’s novel, Kien’s PTSD lingers as an intolerable presence in Kien’s psyche; in Dang’s diary, Dang’s depiction of the horrific suffering of Vietnamese soldiers and civilians in wartime Vietnam become pain-inducing memories, 30 years later, in the minds of her family members, and in the minds of Vietnamese readers who had lived through the war. By presenting the textual analyses in this article of *The Sorrow of War* and *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace*, I



emphasize the marginalized pathos of the Vietnamese people that these narratives evoke, rejecting thereby the post-structuralist ahistorical perspective celebrated by post-modernists. Because much information about the Vietnam War is filtered through the ideological and discriminatory lenses of the U.S. media and the society's *idées reçues*, reading of the traumatic experiences of the Vietnamese people becomes an ethical responsibility for anyone interested in the Vietnam War, and anyone is seeking to discover the humanity that is common to each side in the a partisan divisions that persist even after nearly half a century. Through a deep consideration of the wounds suffered by the "enemy," American readers may find healing for some of the wounds from which they also suffer. The English version of Bao's novel and Dang's diary, the Vietnamese version of Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, and the publication of U.S. veterans' journals, such as Wayne Karlin's *Wandering Souls: Journeys with the Dead and the Living in Viet Nam*, about their returns to Vietnam and their reflections upon their former enemy, just to name a few, help both sides of the conflict gain a more humanistic perspective of the war. The inclusion of both perspectives in college courses on Vietnam War literature narrows the gaps between Vietnam and the United States in terms of historical analysis and interpretation.

Vietnamese author and literary critic Nguyễn Ngọc observes that writers help readerships remember: they are entrusted "with the ongoing task of holding a mirror up" from the past for later generations to view (Nguyễn N. 2008, 211). Remembrances of past events, whether they be fictional or non-fictional, necessarily are subjective. David G. Marr expresses this observation with candor: "The only truth in history is that there are no historical truths, only an infinite number of experiences, most of them quickly forgotten, a few remembered and elaborated upon by bards, novelists, philosophers, priests, filmmakers, and, of course, professional historians" (Marr 1995, xxv). However, it is important to discuss the Vietnam War with an informed attitude of fairness toward both sides of the conflict in order to appreciate the human costs for each side. *The Sorrow of War* and *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace* and other such insightful accounts help to generate that attitude of fairness for all readers who seek mutual understanding and reconciliation in our postwar world.

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