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INTRODUCTION

'NAM NO LONGER

What sources have shaped your conceptions of Vietnam? When I ask this question to my Midwestern college students, two answers predominate: an uncle or father who fought there but doesn't talk about it and the movie *Forrest Gump*. While they might seem anecdotal or trivial, I think these answers are actually iconic of the symbolic meaning that Vietnam has had in America for much of the last thirty-five years: either a mysterious cipher or a place that bit us in the ass when we went there.¹ These emphases on silence and trauma have dominated American narratives about Vietnam. They have resonated through veterans' necessary and fascinating accounts of the American experiences, delineating "Nam" as a surreal hellscape separate from "the World." But, though valuable in their own right, those narratives have almost entirely ignored the autonomous nation, people, and culture of Vietnam. As Katherine Kinney has argued,² America experienced the Vietnam War primarily as "friendly fire"—Americans fighting themselves, whether through domestic division over our involvement, or as fragging and frustration among the fighting forces. This focus on America generally has tended to erase the Vietnamese from the picture and more specifically has erased America's South Vietnamese allies. When the Vietnamese are imagined at all, it is nearly always as the "enemy"—and usually as only one part of the opposition, the "Vietcong." The existence and experiences of the citizens and government of South Vietnam are almost never portrayed.

Fortunately these omissions have been noted and are being addressed. Since the end of the Cold War in 1989, and especially since normalization of diplomatic relations with the Socialist State of Vietnam in 1995, interest in and attention to Vietnam and Vietnamese voices have increased. In cinema, Oliver Stone concluded his Vietnam War trilogy of the 1980s and '90s with *Heaven and Earth*, a film based on Vietnamese American author Le Ly Hayslip's memoirs;³ in publishing, presses such as Curbstone have recently brought translations of important Vietnamese writers to the English-speaking audience, while new Vietnamese American voices are

appearing in both single-authored works and anthologies such as *Watermark*;⁴ and in academia, Vietnamese American experiences and literatures are appearing with ever-increasing frequency in conferences, scholarly journals, and class syllabi. Students, scholars, and citizens alike are increasingly interested in learning about Vietnam itself, not just about the phantasmatic “Nam”—though that one continues to fascinate us as well. Indeed, my students who claim *Forrest Gump* and silent relatives as their prior sources are generally saying so in classes about Asian American or Vietnamese literature, to which they are drawn precisely in order to complicate and challenge their prior impressions. Yet despite this interest, it has remained difficult to find Vietnamese American texts, especially those written before 1995.

This anthology offers a valuable resource in this area, collecting texts in which Vietnamese immigrants have been speaking their side of the story since 1962. As often happens with good literature, these texts create individuals instead of stereotypes, and diversity instead of homogeneity. Rather than stock images of bargirls and shoeshine boys, we meet, among others, women who are successful entrepreneurs, girls who must outwit torturers, boys at the top of their school class, and men who seek an honorable path through the chaos of war. The writers collected here come from a wide variety of backgrounds and perspectives: military, civilian, wealthy, peasant, male, female, Christian, Buddhist, pro-Western, pro-Communist, grateful, resentful, nostalgic, and more. By showcasing the ideological diversity of Vietnamese American writers, this literature also challenges the hegemony of conservative ideology as the only Vietnamese American ideology. Like Cuban Americans, Vietnamese Americans as a political force have been predominantly anti-Communist and ideologically conservative. While it is important to recognize this political history, it is also worthwhile to emphasize that the Vietnamese American population is not monolithic. It includes an array of political views and perspectives and sometimes doesn't even talk about politics or war.

Whether the title of this volume is read in Vietnamese as a combination of America (Mỹ) and Vietnam (Việt) or in English as a (re)claiming of Vietnam and its significance by writers whose families came from there, this collection offers a broad, inclusive, and nuanced view of Vietnam and of the richness that is Vietnamese American literature.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF VIETNAM

Given the unfamiliarity of Vietnamese history to most American readers, I offer here an overview of that history. This is, by necessity, a very condensed picture, so I also recommend that readers explore the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Vietnam: A History* by American journalist Stanley Karnow, American historian Marilyn Young's *Vietnam's Wars: 1945–1990*, as well as Vietnamese historian Nguyễn Khắc Viện's *Vietnam: A Long History*, and the more concise account offered by American historian Suchang Chen in Part One of *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation*.⁵

Vietnamese culture began in what is now northern Vietnam. The majority of the current population is descended from two ancient cultures, the Lạc Việt and the Âu Việt. Located in the Red River Valley, the Lạc Việt developed a thriving Bronze Age culture. Their major anthropological achievement was the casting of large bronze drums using a lost-wax method. These drums were intricately decorated and up to a meter in height, demonstrating artistic and technical skills far in advance of most of their contemporary cultures. In the third century BCE, the Lạc Việt were invaded and defeated by their northern trading partners, the Âu Việt. The merged nation was named Âu Lạc.

This new kingdom soon began to face threats from another northern neighbor, China. In the second century BCE, Vietnam was repeatedly on the defense against invasions from China, and in 111 BCE China's Han Dynasty defeated the Vietnamese and incorporated the Red River Delta into the Han Empire, renaming the area An Nam (meaning Pacified or Peaceful South, a name the French would later adopt). For the next two millennia, China exerted powerful influences on Vietnam, which adapted many of its social, cultural, and political institutions from China. During this era, Chinese became the official language.

Vietnamese resistance to Chinese rule was persistent, however. The first major uprising, led by two sisters, Trưng Trắc and Trưng Nhị, occurred in 39 CE. The Trưng sisters established an independent kingdom in 40 CE, and although it lasted only two years, the sisters have become canonized as two of Vietnam's most beloved national heroines.

Major uprisings continued for the next one thousand years but were unsuccessful at achieving lasting independence until 939 CE, when Ngô Quyền established the first Vietnamese Dynasty. Under the dynasties of

the next several centuries, Buddhism gained ascendancy, until a system of Confucian exams based on the Chinese model was established to produce the governmental bureaucracy. Confucian doctrines then dominated Vietnamese culture, although Buddhism, Taoism, and the indigenous animistic beliefs continued to be influential.

China briefly reconquered Vietnam at the beginning of the fifteenth century, but in 1427 Vietnam regained its independence when Nguyễn Trãi led guerrilla forces to a definitive victory. Vietnam then began colonizing territory to its south. Over the next several centuries, Vietnam colonized the kingdom of Champa, gaining the terrain that is now the southern half of the country. It also moved into the marshy lands of the Mekong Delta, previously part of the Angkor kingdom of Cambodia. Vietnam began draining the delta, a project that continued under French colonization, eventually producing the most fertile region of the country.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Vietnam suffered under a series of civil wars. In 1802 Nguyễn Phúc Ánh finally united the nation under the Nguyễn Dynasty, naming it “Việt Nam” and himself the Emperor Gia Long. By this point, however, Europeans had begun their challenge to Vietnam’s autonomy. The Portuguese first arrived in 1535, but it was the French a century later who became the major colonizers. The first French to arrive were Catholic missionaries in the early seventeenth century. Among them was Alexandre de Rhodes, who codified the Romanized script (Quốc Ngữ) for the Vietnamese language that is still used today. During the early nineteenth century, the French presence was officially evangelistic rather than political, but given a mandate from the French empire to assure unimpeded propagation of Catholicism, this evangelism frequently involved military interventions.

In 1858 the French began their overt military conquest of Vietnam. In 1862 Emperor Tự Đức conceded three southern provinces and the island of Paulo Condore. In 1867 the French took over three more provinces, renaming this southern region “Cochinchine” and making it a direct colony of France. Over the next fifty years, France gained control over northern and central Vietnam, turning them into “Tonkin” and “Annam,” French protectorates.

Colonization benefited the French rulers enormously while imposing great hardship on the Vietnamese. For example, although the plantations

of Cochinchina became the world's third-largest rice exporters, French prohibitions against exporting rice to Annam and Tonkin caused widespread hunger in north and central Vietnam. The French also imposed heavy taxes on goods such as salt, alcohol, and opium, a burden they compounded by requiring each Vietnamese community to annually consume a quota of alcohol and opium (notoriously addictive substances). Forced labor under deplorable conditions was widespread in the plantations and mines. As the French came to own more and more of the land, the landless Vietnamese turned increasingly to employment in the civil administration of the colonies.

While armed uprisings had been quelled by the twentieth century, resistance had not ended. Scholar-patriots such as Phan Bội Châu and Phan Chu Trinh encouraged Vietnamese youth to study abroad to learn Western technology, science, and politics in order to modernize Vietnam toward future autonomy. This was a period of widespread cultural self-examination as thousands of Vietnamese analyzed their own society as well as the philosophies and ideas of other cultures. This mix of patriotism, intellectualism, and activism produced new political parties during the early twentieth century.⁶ The Russian and Chinese revolutions also offered persuasive models of the power of the peasant and working classes. Marxist Leninism would eventually become the dominant model, philosophically and practically, for the Vietnamese anti-colonialists, but until 1951 the anti-colonial forces, which came to be known as the Việt Minh, were, at least officially, a wide coalition.

During World War II, when France was overtaken by Hitler, the Vichy government gave access to and resources within the French colonies to Germany's ally, Japan. Vietnam was thus not directly involved in the fighting of World War II, but the country was powerfully impacted by the war, and Vietnamese narratives are replete with accounts of cruelty and exploitation by the Japanese during their occupation. When the Axis powers were defeated, Vietnam hoped to be acknowledged as a sovereign state, and Hồ Chí Minh, who had by then emerged as leader of the Việt Minh, in fact proclaimed Vietnamese independence in 1945. However, the Allies assigned Chinese and British forces to oversee the Japanese withdrawal from Vietnam. Pursuing this program, British General Douglas Gracey disarmed not only the Japanese but also the Việt Minh, imposed martial

law, and simultaneously rearmed the main unit of the French Indochina Army. The French officially reclaimed their colony in 1946, igniting the Franco-Viet War.

Famously believing that they would defeat the Vietnamese in a matter of eight days, the French were defeated after eight years of fighting. During this time they had been able to control only the cities; the countryside remained the territory of the Việt Minh. France hoped to increase its political support by reinstating Emperor Bao Dai and promising Cochinchina status as a constituent state of France—giving Vietnam a measure of internal sovereignty while France determined foreign policy and international military interactions. In 1949, however, when the Communist Party came to power in China, the Việt Minh gained a potent supporter. The Việt Minh army, which had previously scrounged for and smuggled its weapons, was now supplied with armaments and training from its northern ally.

As French support for the war in Indochina waned, the government announced that the war would become a topic at the Geneva Conference in 1954. In response, Việt Minh General Võ Nguyên Giáp launched an attack against the French base in the mountainous region of Điện Biên Phủ. The siege lasted from March to May 1954 and cost at least fifteen-hundred French and eight- to ten-thousand Vietnamese lives. But Giáp's victory at Điện Biên Phủ concluded the war and won Vietnam its independence from France. At the Geneva Conference, the Vietnamese delegates reluctantly accepted a compromise urged by China and the USSR to allow Vietnam to be temporarily divided at the 17th parallel. The future of the country was to be decided in 1956, when general elections were to be held, and the nation re-united under whichever government won—the northern communists or the southern pro-Western government (the remains of what had been the French State of Vietnam). Those elections never took place.

The North Vietnamese government continued to be led by Hồ Chí Minh. In the South, the Catholic, Western-educated Ngô Đình Diệm became president. His regime was heavily backed and advised by the United States, which, enmeshed in the Cold War, was anxious about communist expansion in Asia. Diệm's regime was corrupt and ineffective, and in 1963 he was assassinated during a coup d'état sanctioned by the United States. Over the next few years, South Vietnam speedily replaced one unsuccessful president after another. Advisors from the United States were heavily involved in the early South Vietnamese regimes, but it wasn't until 1965

that the United States entered the fighting explicitly, sending in American Marines, support personnel, bombers, weapons, and machinery. In the late 1960s the war became increasingly unpopular in the United States as victory failed to arrive and the body count rose. In 1969 the United States began withdrawing soldiers as part of the “Vietnamization” of the war, and the last American troops left in 1973. Negotiations to end the war had also begun in 1969, culminating in the 1973 Paris Peace Agreement, which granted each government the territory it held at the time (a considerable advantage to the North). After the departure of the Americans, the war continued, now truly a civil war.

At the end of March 1975, North Vietnam launched the “Hồ Chí Minh Campaign,” during which it hoped to gain territory within a year as far south as Saigon. To their surprise the Southern Army fell apart as they advanced, and within only a month North Vietnamese troops were victoriously accepting the surrender of the South Vietnamese government. Over 130,000 South Vietnamese fled Vietnam in April 1975. Some flew immediately to the United States; many were transported by the U.S. and South Vietnamese navies to refugee-processing centers in nearby nations before settling in permanent homes abroad.

In reunified Vietnam, shortly after the communist victory, former participants in the South Vietnamese government, military, or civil service (as well as teachers, artists, and religious leaders) were told to attend “re-education classes.” These classes were supposed to last from three to thirty days, but for most people the “classes” turned out to be months or years in forced-labor camps that lacked adequate food, medicine, and proper shelter. In 1976 business owners had their assets seized, and they were sent to “New Economic Zones,” uncultivated regions where they had to learn to clear and farm land. New military conflicts also arose. In 1978, Vietnam invaded Cambodia and ousted the Khmer Rouge regime. In retaliation China invaded Vietnam in 1979. Additionally, Vietnam suffered a disastrous harvest in 1980, exacerbating food shortages. And since the United States had placed a powerful international embargo on Vietnam after the war, international resources were limited.

Such conditions prompted many Vietnamese to try to leave Vietnam illegally. Thus began the “boat people” exodus in which more than one million people fled Vietnam between 1976 and 2000—most before 1982. (More than 250,000 Vietnamese—mostly ethnic Chinese—also fled over-

land into China.) In addition to suffering from fear of recapture, hunger, and cold, these refugees were preyed upon by Thai pirates who looted the passenger's possessions and often raped and murdered refugees. The plight of the boat people became a humanitarian crisis as overburdened nations near Vietnam turned away refugees, and even those refugees who were able to land experienced terrible conditions in the camps.

Programs such as the international Orderly Departure Program and the United States' Amerasian Resettlement Program, as well as changes in many nations' laws concerning refugees, a relaxation of Vietnam's harshest political policies, and regrowth of economic stability have slowed the emigration flow. Most of the refugee camps were closed by 1996, and the Orderly Departure Program ended in 1999.

In 1986 Vietnam underwent a period of reforms known as "đổi mới." Akin to Soviet *perestroika*, these reforms allowed for more free-market enterprise, retreated from the push to collectivize industry and agriculture, and permitted more personal and artistic freedoms. In 1994 U.S. President Bill Clinton lifted the trade embargo against Vietnam and the next year announced the normalization of diplomatic relations between the two nations. In 2006 Vietnam became a member of the World Trade Organization. Economic and travel connections continue to deepen between the United States and Vietnam. In 2007 Nguyễn Minh Triết became the first president of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam to visit the United States.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF VIETNAMESE AMERICAN LITERATURE

The earliest Vietnamese American publications in English might be considered sojourner writings rather than immigrant or refugee literature. In 1962 and 1965 Nguyen Thi Tuyet Mai and Tran Van Dinh were studying and working in the United States. Though both would later immigrate and become U.S. citizens, in the 1960s they saw themselves as visitors to the United States with homes still in Vietnam. Yet, while in the United States, they published in English for an American audience. While the authors wrote as Vietnamese in America rather than Vietnamese Americans, their writings appeared and were read within an American readership. Their works are important precursors to Vietnamese American literature both historically and thematically. Like the majority of Vietnamese immigrants to the United States, both writers came from South Vietnam. In content,

mode, and purpose, they forecast major characteristics of Vietnamese American writings of the next thirty-odd years: both are based in memoir, both offer strident political critiques of Vietnam's government, and both seek to change America's views, thus hoping to alter America's behavior. Tuyet Mai's personal essay, "Electioneering Vietnamese Style" (1962), explains her unsuccessful bid for office in order to teach Americans about the regime they were supporting in Vietnam. Dinh's novel, *No Passenger on the River* (1965), was published in the same year America landed the first Marines in Vietnam. Like Tuyet Mai, Dinh seeks to illustrate the faulty foundation of the government that American troops were being sent to reinforce; his novel is based on his own involvement in a coup attempt against Ngô Đình Diệm. That coup failed, but the novel relies on Dinh's motivations and experiences to tell his fictional version of the coup that did succeed in 1963, when Diệm was unseated and assassinated. *No Passenger on the River* charts the corruption, propaganda, cruelty, and military mismanagement under the Diệm regime, and, like Tuyet Mai's essay, does so from a Vietnamese perspective.

These two works set the stage for much of the literature to follow. Thematically they forecast the focus on government corruption, thwarted idealism, and the tug of war between expediency and patriotism that would appear in subsequent writings. Stylistically they also preview the efforts in much Vietnamese American literature to explain Vietnam and educate the American reader. Most of the memoirists of the 1970s and '80s wrote because they felt American audiences needed to hear their stories. Their narratives contain hopeful, generous explanations of why they are sharing their stories, such as the desire to promote healing and reconciliation among veterans or the proffering of their lives as examples to other immigrants.

In doing so, these English-language writings differ from the literature being produced by Vietnamese Americans writing in Vietnamese.⁷ Vietnamese-language literature published in the United States, often and aptly termed "exile literature," has been shown by critics such as Qui-Phiet Tran to contain more anger, lament, and criticism of American ways than is present in the English-language literature.⁸ According to Tran, "wrath and anger" more commonly characterize the Vietnamese-language works, which criticize American workaholicism, vehemently denounce reunified Vietnam, and nostalgically recreate the lost Vietnamese homeland. The

English-language works are less invested in the expressions and experiences of exile. There is pain in the English-language narratives, but it is rendered as empathy not lament. There is anger, but it is far more often directed at the imperialist French or corrupt South Vietnamese governments than at the American one. The emotional wellspring here is not exile but reconciliation. The predominant emphases are on achievement, survival, rationalization, and healing.

This didactic, reconciliatory mode dominates Vietnamese American literature in English, but it is not universal. In the last decade especially, the English-language writings have diversified. In part this is because the wars of Vietnam have receded historically and in part because Vietnamese Americans have been in America long enough for the generations who arrived as children or who were born here to be perfectly fluent in English, thus producing a new generation of professional authors. *Mỹ Việt* reflects the historical dominance of the didactic memoir as well as the diversity of this literature by arranging its selections into two groups: the paradigmatic and the deconstructive.

The paradigmatic narratives establish and reiterate the paradigms, or dominant structures, of explanation, memoir, and war-focus. They offer Vietnamese and Vietnamese American perspectives on the major events of the Vietnamese diaspora, from the wars of the twentieth century to emigration and resettlement in the United States. While the narratives often differ in ideology and authorial background, they share an explanatory agenda, seeking to tell America what happened. While these texts challenge the America-centric paradigm of mainstream American portrayals of Vietnam, the challenge they pose is perspectival, shifting the view of the war and its aftermath. They follow the mainstream American association of “Vietnam” with “war,” centering their stories on military and political experiences. They offer new insight into the paradigmatic framework: Vietnamese testimonials regarding the familiar topics of war and migration.

The second grouping, the deconstructive, takes apart that paradigm. These works differ from the first group both thematically and formally. They tend to be imaginative works rather than memoirs, to investigate topics beyond war and immigration or to render these events contextual rather than primary, and most of all to experiment with destabilizing and

unreliable narrative styles. They are driven by the varied goals of literary artistry more than the didactic goals of explanation.

This anthology is the first to include substantive examples from both groups in its two sections: *Tales of Witness* and *Tales of Imagination*.

Tales of Witness

Vietnamese American literature was dominated in its first two decades by the paradigmatic narratives that I call *Tales of Witness*—works that are based in personal experience and driven by the need to inform, to educate, to correct the record and claim a spot in the American psyche. This is largely a corrective literature, a deliberate intervention into dominant American culture. Despite having entered the war claiming to support the South Vietnamese, America in general tended to erase the South Vietnam government and its supporters from its conceptions of Vietnam. The dominant image of the Vietnamese has been the Vietcong, the “enemy.” Post-war Vietnamese refugees thus faced not only the difficulties inherent in losing one’s home and entering a new culture but also the further obstacle of being frequently perceived not as refugee allies but as invasive enemies. In this context, the early creators of Vietnamese American literature were writing for their existence, to be seen as who they are, not through misconceptions and stereotypes. These narratives are thus not only compelling in offering new perspectives on the war and on Vietnam but also impressive in their generosity in assuming that if mainstream Americans were informed of the fuller story, they would abandon their assumption that all Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans are enemy “gooks.”

These witnessing tales combine the historical and the personal. Primarily memoirs, they recount history as the authors lived it, portraying lives in which national, global, and personal issues are inextricable from one another and in which the authority and emotionality of the personal bolster the explanatory claims of the texts. Collectively these writers chronicle the historical arc of Vietnamese history of the twentieth century. They often begin their narratives with descriptions of life in French Colonial Vietnam, contextualizing the later American occupation in a history of foreign imperialism. They poignantly depict the divided loyalties among individuals and families that began mid-century when the Geneva Conventions split Vietnam into North and South. Writing from various levels of involve-

ment with government in the South, they offer both apologies for and accusations against the South Vietnamese regime. As the fighting escalated in the '60s and '70s, they chronicle the atrocities and traumas of war and also the cultural impact of and attempts at co-existence with a huge American presence. They also offer a window into a Vietnam largely unknown to American audiences: reunified Vietnam under Socialism, attempting to rebuild and struggling to reunite. In the '80s and '90s, authors increasingly describe their adjustments to life in America, and especially after normalization of relations between the United States and Vietnam, they explore a new chapter in Vietnamese American experiences: returning to visit reunified and increasingly globalized modern Vietnam. The selections in Part I: *Tales of Witness* are individual examples of these common themes. They range in perspective, including both former South Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyễn Cao Kỳ's view on the ideological appeal of his political foe Hồ Chí Minh as well as peasant child Le Ly Hayslip's ground-level experience of these ideological tugs-of-war; the evangelical fervor of immigrant Nguyen Van Vu's gratitude to the United States and Tran Thi Nga's quiet critique of American "charity"; the ostracism of mixed-race Kien Nguyen in reunified Vietnam; and the awareness of American privilege which Andrew Pham confronts when he returns to Vietnam as an adult.

Many of the narratives in Part I are by writers who came to America as part of the "first wave" of Vietnamese immigration—generally considered to encompass the years 1975–1977. Like Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, most of these immigrants had had ties to the South Vietnamese regime (and thus had urgent reason to leave when that regime was defeated); they also had economic means and personal connections to enable their departure. Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, Bùi Diễm (who served as both Chief of Staff in South Vietnam and as South Vietnamese Ambassador to the United States in the 1960s) and General Trần Văn Đôn (South Vietnam's National Defense Minister in 1964 and subsequent leader of the Vietnam People's Bloc in the South Vietnamese Senate) represent such highly positioned politicians, but the "first wave" also included mid-level military personnel such as Nguyen Van Vu.

Not all of the first generation of immigrants were military men, however, and not all arrived after 1975. Women like Nguyen Thi Tuyet-Mai, Yung Krall, Le Ly Hayslip, and Mai Elliott moved here before 1975. In the 1980s their memoirs began to be published. Nguyễn Thị Thu-Lâm describes middle-class engagements with both the French and American oc-

cupiers, as her father dares challenge a Frenchman, and she later establishes a laundromat business in the American PX. The selections from the memoirs of Yung Krall and Mai Elliott offer poignant bookends to the wars of 1954–1975, as Krall (who would grow up to become a CIA operative) describes the ideological and geographical division of her family when North and South Vietnam are first created, and Elliott portrays the relief and subsequent disillusionment upon reunification. Le Ly Hayslip's excerpt captures the experience of war from a civilian child's point of view. Tran Thi Nga's memories of the brief Chinese occupation at the end of World War II, of working for the Americans, and of refugee life in America, are shaped into poems by native English speaker Wendy Larsen, foregrounding questions of appropriation and resistance in immigrant literature.

One of the most anticipated publications of the 1980s was Truong Nhu Tang's *Vietcong Memoir*. It offered a contrast to many of the preceding publications since its author was a member of the National Liberation Front (NLF), which Americans referred to as the "Vietcong." Tang's account challenges many preconceptions, including the association of "Vietcong" with bombs and snipers. Tang instead explores the role that the author played in the political, social, and psychological campaigns waged by the NLF in opposition to South Vietnam and the American presence.

The 1990s brought new content as memoirs shifted from wartime life to accounts of the painful aftermath of Vietnam's reunification. Jade Ngọc Quang Huỳnh and Kien Nguyen recount two of the most troubling phenomena in reunified Vietnam: the prison labor camps known as "re-education camps" and the treatment of the mixed-race children of American fathers and Vietnamese mothers. Andrew Lam describes another post-war tragedy: the rejection of refugees by the nations they escaped to when those nations felt themselves overburdened.

The normalization of relations between Vietnam and America in 1995 made it possible for many Vietnamese Americans to return to the country they had left years before. Such "Việt kiều" narratives demonstrate the dual perspectives of their authors, as when Andrew Pham ponders his double position in global structures of privilege and oppression.

Arranged in historical order of their topics, rather than the chronology of their publication, Part I: *Tales of Witness* covers major events and experiences of Vietnamese and Vietnamese American history: Vietnam's resistance to French colonization, the "Vietnam War," post-war Vietnam-

ese life, immigration to and life in America, and reconnections with contemporary Vietnam. As individual voices, these selections offer passionate, individual, and sometimes conflicting insights. Together they provide a composite and also complex lesson from these writers in Vietnamese history, culture, and the Vietnamese and Vietnamese American experiences of the twentieth century.

Tales of Imagination

One of the dangers of charting common themes is that such descriptions can create a monolithic master narrative. The second part of this anthology thus explores the exceptional, the idiosyncratic, the deconstructive, and the experimental works of Vietnamese American literature in English. While the memoir genre and explanatory mode dominated Vietnamese American writings in English until the 1990s, these were not the only cultural productions by Vietnamese American writers working in English. Since the 1970s, Vietnamese American authors have written stories and poems that address topics other than war and cultural history. While Part I sketches the ways that Vietnamese American writers sought to counter the invisibility of Vietnam and Vietnamese Americans in America's solipsistic paradigms about the Vietnam War, Part II explores a different intervention.

As captured by the title of a 1997 anthology, many Vietnamese writers have sought visibility not within the military paradigm but beyond it, arguing that Vietnam is "not a war, not a syndrome."⁹ These works differ from those of Part I in several ways: they tend to be written in the more traditionally imaginative genres of poetry, fiction, and drama rather than the more sociological genres of memoir or journalism; they are frequently unstable and experimental in voice and form, rather than linear and autobiographical; and they vary widely in topic. This is in some ways a generational shift. These more traditionally "literary" creations are often the work of generations fully fluent in English: the "1.5 generation" (those who were born in Vietnam but emigrated as children) and the American-born. Whereas the first generation felt compelled to tell their story despite language barriers (and often with the aid of native-speaking co-writers), many of the younger generations of writers have chosen poetry, drama, journalism, and fiction as their careers. They write not only to convey their personal experiences but as professional artists, covering a wide terrain of

topics and styles. Perhaps the most telling difference is that the narratives of Part I have a preservational and didactic imperative, whereas the selections in Part II have an adventurous and introspective impulse. Like any generalization, there are of course exceptions, even within the offerings in this one volume. But in general the works in Part II offer deconstruction as often as explanation, ambivalence as often as reconciliation, and insouciance as often as sincerity.

Several Vietnamese American writers, beginning as early the 1970s, sought to reach child readers. As part of 1970s multicultural education programs and anti-war activism, *Beyond the East Wind* and *The Little Weaver of Thái Yên Village* were intended to open dialogues and enhance understanding between Vietnamese refugee children and their non-Vietnamese, fellow American classmates. These works recount important cultural legends and directly address the experience of child refugees. A decade after the end of the fighting, Huynh Quang Nhuong offered a much more serene, pastoral view in nostalgic tales of mid-century Vietnamese village life.

As the “1.5 generation” and American-born generations have matured, Vietnamese American writing has become increasingly literary and sophisticated. Poets such as Trương Tran, Linh Dinh, Mộng Lan, Barbara Tran, and Kim-An Lieberman depart from chronicles and straightforward accounts to experiment with language, sound, and image. While all literature contains politics and ideology, their works are often more politicized than political—imbued with political and ideological understanding, attuned to social context, but approaching their topics with the indirections of poetry rather than the linearity of explanation.

These writers take up, and complicate, themes that are familiar in American literature, such as the parent/child conflict, which is a staple topic in literature by children of immigrants. Lan Cao’s novel *Monkey Bridge* explores the frustrations and affections between a teenage child and her immigrant mother, a topic canonized by Maxine Hong Kingston in her foundational text *The Woman Warrior*. But readers familiar with that precursor text will also recognize Cao’s twist: here the mother is given a chance to talk back. Aimee Phan explores familial and cultural loyalties stretched to the breaking point as an encounter between a grandfather newly arrived from Vietnam and a teenager who has shaped his filial allegiance around a criminal gang turns from tender connection to violent clash. Thúy’s non-linear story offers prose snapshots of lovers in Vietnam

who become parents in the United States, where their only connection to their own parents is a single photograph hidden in the attic.

American-born, biracial writers Andrew Spieldenner and Kim-An Lieberman further complicate categories and explore intersections. Spieldenner's protagonist faces the homophobia of his partner's sister even as they share an understanding of American racism. Lieberman's poems range widely in their allusions and invocations, from centuries-old poems to contemporary films and from racism in post-war Vietnam to homophobia in gold-rush America. Tying this variety together is an interest in the outsider, in acts of exclusion, and in attempts to negotiate the social structures that define, separate, and connect people.

Monique Truong and Qui Nguyen depart from familiar topics of Vietnamese American, or immigrant literature more generally, by turning to major figures of canonical Western literature, which they rework with sly political awareness. Truong's work of historical fiction imagines the life of the Vietnamese chef employed by Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas. The narrator Binh is multiply closeted: his homosexuality has exiled him from his family in Vietnam, and barriers of language, race, and class isolate him in France. But the sensuous language of Binh's interior monologues reveals an incisive domestic observer and insatiable romantic.

Qui Nguyen's never-before-published play was written for the Vampire Cowboys Theatre Company, which first performed it in 2006. "Living Dead in Denmark" is a campy, musical, martial-arts spoofing, comedic "sequel" to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, in which Ophelia, Lady Macbeth, and Juliet have literally been resurrected as part of Fortinbras' campaign against the zombies who are overrunning Denmark. Within the kung-fu fights, the postmodern pastiche, and the slapstick comedy is a poignant and penetrating allegorical investigation of identity and loyalty.

The concluding work of *Mỹ Việt*, a microfiction by Khanh Ho, encapsulates one of the driving questions behind this anthology: whose story is it? "It Was His Story" succinctly and passionately challenges the appropriation of refugee experiences and the reduction of immigrants to their most traumatic moments. As the culminating work of the anthology, this story asks readers to re-examine their own reactions to the literature contained within the collection.

Part II: *Tales of Imagination* takes Vietnamese American literature beyond the master narratives of war and immigration. While remain-

ing historically and politically aware of their connection to Vietnam and their raced position as Vietnamese Americans, these writers take on the full mantle of literary production. These are some of the best writings in contemporary American literature, and in conjunction with the picture of Vietnamese American history offered in Part I, they demonstrate the full flowering of Vietnamese American literature in English.

ORDER OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATION

- 1962 “Electioneering: Vietnamese Style,” Nguyen Thi Tuyet Mai
 1965 *No Passenger on the River*, Tran Van Dinh
 1976 *Twenty Years and Twenty Days*, Nguyễn Cao Kỳ
 1976 *Beyond the East Wind*, Duong Van Quyen and Jewell Reinhart Coburn
 1977 *Little Weaver of Thái-Yên Village*, Trần Khánh Tuyết
 1978 *Our Endless War: Inside Vietnam*, Trần Văn Đôn
 1979 *At Home in America*, Nguyen Van Vu with Bob Pittman
 1982 *The Land I Lost*, Huynh Quang Nhuong
 1984 *Miles from Home*, Anna Kim-Lan McCauley
 1985 *A Vietcong Memoir*, Truong Nhu Tang with David Chanoff and Doan Van Toai
 1986 *Shallow Graves*, Tran Thi Nga and Wendy Wilder Larsen
 1987 *In the Jaws of History*, Bùi Diễm with David Chanoff
 1989 *Fallen Leaves*, Nguyễn Thị Thu-Lâm
 1989 *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, Le Ly Hayslip with Jay Wurtz
 1994 *South Wind Changing*, Jade Ngọc Quang Huỳnh
 1995 *A Thousand Tears Falling*, Yung Krall
 1997 *Monkey Bridge*, Lan Cao
 1999 *The Sacred Willow*, Duong Van Mai Elliott
 1999 *placing the accents*, Trương Trần
 1999 *Catfish and Mandala*, Andrew X. Pham
 2000 “Georgia Red Dirt,” Andrew Spieldenner
 2001 *The Unwanted*, Kien Nguyen
 2001 *Song of the Cicadas*, Mộng Lan
 2002 *In the Mynah Bird’s Own Words*, Barbara Tran
 2003 *The Book of Salt*, Monique Truong

- 2003 “the gangster we are all looking for,” lê thi diem thúy
2003 *All Around What Empties Out*, Linh Dinh
2004 “Visitors,” Aimee Phan
2005 “The Stories They Carried,” Andrew Lam
2008 *Breaking the Map*, Kim-An Lieberman

NEVER BEFORE PUBLISHED

Living Dead in Denmark, Qui Nguyen (first performed 2006)
“It Was His Story,” Khanh Ho

NOTES

1. *Forrest Gump*, directed by Robert Zemeckis, 1994. In a climactic scene of Forrest’s tour in Vietnam, one of his buddies gets seriously wounded, and Forrest honorably carries him from the battlefield. As he is running with his burden, an unseen sniper shoots him in the butt. As a historical portrait, this scene is woefully partial and romanticized. But as a metaphor for how America narrated this war in the wake of the Gulf War, it is nearly perfect: Forrest is acting from naïve but honorable intentions, the human emphasis is on veteran solidarity and honor, and the invisibility of the sniper makes it seem that the landscape itself thwarts and abuses the American soldiers, turning the “VC” into an invisible and bestial enemy.

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

3. *Heaven and Earth*, directed by Oliver Stone, 1993.

4. *Watermark: Vietnamese American Poetry and Prose*, Barbara Tran, Monique Truong, Luu Truong Khoi, eds. (New York: Asian American Writers’ Workshop, 1998).

5. *Vietnam: A History*, Stanley Karnow (New York: Penguin, second edition, 1997); *Vietnam’s Wars: 1945–1990*, Marilyn Young (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991); *Vietnam: A Long History*, Nguyễn Khắc Viện (Hanoi: Thế Giới Publishing, seventh edition, 2007); *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation*, Suchang Chen (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).

6. For more on this topic, see Hue-Tam Ho Tai’s *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

7. While I recognize that immigrants, exiles, migrants, and refugees are distinct subcategories within the category “American” or “Vietnamese American” and that allegiances of identity, culture, and politics are complex and multiple, I find it impor-

tant to be as inclusive and open as possible in delineating who counts as “American” and thus use the term “American” to refer to any of these writers making a home in America and participating in American literary discourse.

8. Qui-Phiet Tran, “Contemporary Vietnamese American Feminine Writing: Exile and Home,” *Amerasia Journal* 19:3 (1993): 71–83.

9. *Vietnam Forum* special issue: *Not a war, Not a syndrome: American Vietnamese fiction, poetry and essays*, Dan Duffy, ed. (vol. 16, 1997).