

VIETNAMESE AMERICAN SURVIVAL LITERATURE AND HUMAN RIGHTS DISCOURSE

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In Vietnam, the imposition of regulations governing socialist writing since 1975 differentiates Vietnam's postwar literature from that of its preceding period, 1945-1975, although the writings of both periods criticize French colonialism and American imperialism. The governmental guidelines draw both positive and negative criticism. In his discussion of the fundamental characteristics of post-1975 Vietnamese literature, Nguyễn Văn Long suggests, on the positive side, that Vietnamese literature of socialist realism continuously parallels the national history of the postwar era, and he further maintains that the postwar literature celebrates individualism and becomes more democratic because writers are encouraged to translate realities of life into their works honestly.¹ Christina Schwenkel suggests, on the negative side, "Official history in [postwar] Vietnam has selectively silenced certain pasts that fall outside the dominant paradigm of revolutionary history," and it denies any validity to the historical perspectives articulated by those who had allied themselves with the former Saigon government.² Schwenkel's assessment applies to "official" Vietnamese literature, just as it applies to "official" historical writing, because both forms of writing must affirm the government's political agenda. Pham Van Dong, former Prime Minister of Vietnam, stated in his 1975 Independence Day speech: "[t]he victory of the revolutionary cause of our people is also a victory of the great doctrine of Marxism-Leninism, the peak of human wisdom, which has lighted our revolutionary path full of glorious victories."³ It is this doctrine, therefore, that must be affirmed by all sanctioned authors in Vietnam. Discussing major characteristics of Vietnamese literature acceptable for publication under the ideological vision articulated by Pham Van Dong, Nguyen Hung Quoc—a Vietnamese Australian scholar—concludes:

Vietnamese communist literature is under *one* leadership: that of the Communist Party; writers must be members of *one* organization: the

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- 1 Nguyen Van Long, "Mot so van de co ban trong nghien cuu lich su van hoc Viet Nam giai doan tu sau 1975" ["Some Fundamental Issues in Vietnamese Literature since 1975"], *Van Hoc Viet Nam sau 1975* [*Vietnamese Literature Since 1975*], ed. Nguyen Van Long and La Nham Thin (Hanoi: Giao Duc, 2006), 9-25.
 - 2 Christina Schwenkel, *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam: Transnational Remembrance and Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2009), 7.
 - 3 Phạm Văn Đồng, *Selected Writings* (Hanoi, Vietnam: Thế Giới, 1994), 394.

Vietnamese Authors Association; they share *one* ideology: Marxism and Leninism; they follow *one* approach to literature: socialist realism; they have *one* writing style: simplicity; they aim at *one* goal: to acknowledge the absolute power and righteous leadership of the Communist Party, and to praise communist leaders and socialism; all published literary texts have *one* characteristic: politics.⁴ (my translation)

This is a concise and accurate assessment of the status of writing under the postwar government in Vietnam. Due to the Vietnamese government's strict censorship of verbal and written expression, the darker aspects of social life during the postwar period, especially in southern Vietnam, rarely are recorded in the literature or history published or legally accessed in Vietnam. The United States, since 1975, consistently has placed Vietnam on its list of countries that violate human rights, and particularly in regard to freedom of speech,⁵ and it is primarily the Vietnamese refugees living in the United States (the anticommunist partisans and victims of repressive communist policies prior to their exodus) who openly discuss the communists' power abuses.⁶ Thus, from their asylum-granting country, the refugees draw attention to the suffering of the Vietnamese people in their homeland, on the one hand, and they register general condemnation of Vietnamese communism for its inhumane and barbarous practices, on the other, because these issues cannot be addressed in the homeland.

I. Vietnamese American Survival Literature

In this article, I begin by arguing that many first-generation Vietnamese refugee writers of non-fiction use the battered human body, and what Foucault describes as undemocratic space,⁷ to criticize the Vietnamese communist government's violation of human rights and expose the regime's unacceptable treatment of those who had affiliated themselves politically or militarily either with the United States and/or the former Saigon government. Furthermore, the battered physical body is used by victims

4 Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, *Văn Học Việt Nam dưới Chế Độ Cộng Sản 1945-1990* [*Vietnamese Literature under the Communist Regime, 1945-1990*] (Westminster, CA: Van Nghe, 1991), 339. Reprinted 1996. [available in Vietnamese only]

5 For more information about human rights and restraints on individual freedom, see Gareth Porter, *Vietnam: The Politics of Bureaucratic Socialism* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1993), 152-184.

6 In *Changing Identities: Vietnamese Americans 1975-1995* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1995), James M. Freeman notes, "According to the 1990 census, 614,547 persons in America are of Vietnamese descent, of whom about 110,000 individuals or 18 percent were born in the United States" (10).

7 For a thorough discussion of democratic and undemocratic space, see Charles E. Scott, "Democratic Space: A Study of Political Excess in Foucault's Thought," *Politics and the Human Body*, ed. Jean Bethke Elshtain and J. Timothy Cloyd (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt UP), 226-42.

as an object of negotiation to obtain assistance or freedom from the communists in power while making application for asylum. Schwendel elaborates upon this important human rights issue, placing it in a larger, geopolitical context:

There is a long historical relationship between U.S. human rights discourses and challenges to sovereignty [...]. Representations of ‘savage’ communists with no value for human life or respect for freedom justified military intervention and attempts to ‘save’ the country [Vietnam] from communism.⁸

Just as human beings certainly are not indifferent to their own pain, suffering, and violation of their human rights, neither are they indifferent to the pain of others. In Arne Johan Vetlesen’s words, most people “call for an explanation” after hearing stories about violations of individuals’ physical beings.⁹

Generally, a life narrative is characterized by its creative, self-expressive, and artful aspects, which enrich the expression of its author’s personal experience, memory, and history. Nevertheless, as Alfred Hornung and Ernstpeter Ruhe illustrate in their book *Post-colonialism and Autobiography*, autobiographical writing, “in its widest definition [,] seems to provide a convenient genre to embrace the crossroad cultures from East to West and to launch an emancipatory political and cultural program.”¹⁰ Thus, Vietnamese life narratives, especially those written by diasporic authors, are often political, despite their most apparent intentions. Moreover, the former victims of physical maltreatment who voice their grievances against such abuses are attempting to garner sympathy from Western readerships and governments for human rights violations in Vietnam, both to justify their own decisions (and the decisions of others like them) to flee Vietnam and resettle in Western countries as political refugees and to call attention to the continued abuses suffered by their compatriots who remain in their homeland. Outside Vietnam, many individuals and groups also attempt to use violations of human rights in Vietnam to vindicate the Vietnam War as a just cause—i.e., a war fought to prevent the spread of communism and to assure democracy in South Vietnam. Thus, their writing, besides sharing memories and personal experiences, helps to assure asylum for themselves and other refugees and to condemn human rights violations in postwar Vietnam.

Approximately a dozen narratives about post-1975 life under Vietnamese communism have been written in English and published in the United States. They share similar thematic treatments of their subjects: their authors portray a postwar Vietnam in which citizens continue to suffer severe discrimination under communism, and they express a very human yearning for the justice, freedom, and equality that are proclaimed in the theories but rarely realized in the practice of the communist government among the

8 Schwendel, 178-79.

9 Arne Johan Vetlesen, *A Philosophy of Pain* (London, UK: Reaktion Books, 2009), 11.

10 Alfred Hornung and Ernstpeter Ruhe, eds, Preface, *Postcolonialism and Autobiography* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), 3.

Vietnamese people under its authority. Both Jade Ngoc Quang Huynh and Kien Nguyen use the battered human body to image and discuss the postwar abuse of human rights, exposing the power relations between the Vietnamese communist regime and its own internal, Vietnamese “enemies”—i.e. the Vietnamese people who had allied themselves with the United States, the former Saigon government, and the democratic values that they claimed to cherish. Ironically, while both Huynh and Nguyen believe that freedom and democracy are present in the United States (or generally present in the West) and absent in Vietnam (or generally absent in the East), they ignore the fact that it is the West that traded in African slaves, established modern colonialism, exploited laborers in third-world countries, and initiated two world wars. In addition, U.S. history and the U.S. legal system always have been racialized; various ethnic groups continuously have been fighting against discrimination, racial profiling, and stereotyping. Also, torture, punishment, and detainment are commonly practiced by most governments and political systems throughout the world to serve certain social or political agendas.

The first section of this article focuses upon two memoirs, Jade Ngoc Quang Huynh’s *South Wind Changing* (1994) and Kien Nguyen’s *The Unwanted* (2001), because they well describe the tragic experiences of thousands of victims mistreated under the communist regime in Vietnam,¹¹ and they illustrate the points delineated for the life-narrative genre. *South Wind Changing* records the author’s experience in communist reeducation camps, and *The Unwanted* relates the author’s childhood experience as an Amerasian¹² living in postwar Vietnam. It should be noted that these texts remain suppressed in Vietnam because they do not conform to the government’s censorial criteria, which are noted above. Thus, according to the communist government, they voice the opinions of the betrayers of the nation, or they represent the voices of the puppets and lackeys of the Americans, most of whom sooner-or-later departed Vietnam to seek political asylum in the United States or elsewhere. Such texts can be classified under the rubric “survival literature,” a term coined by Kali Tal to describe works that most often are published at least ten years after the “traumatic experience in question” by the survivors who feel a need to examine a “trauma victim’s notion of

11 There are several memoirs about Vietnamese reeducation camps, such as Tran Tri Vu’s *Lost Years: My 1,632 Days in Vietnamese Reeducation Camps* (1988), Nguyen Qui Duc’s *Where the Ashes Are* (1991), and collections of prose narratives like *To Be Made Over: Tales of Socialist Reeducation in Vietnam* (1988), edited by Huynh Sanh Thong, and *Reeducation in Postwar Vietnam: Personal Postscripts to Peace*, by Edward P. Metzner, Huynh Van Chinh, Tran Van Phuc, and Le Nguyen Binh (2001). However, I choose Huynh’s *South Wind Changing* and Nguyen’s *The Unwanted* because they are originally written in English (not translated into English), and they speak from the perspectives of the victimized authors themselves. Also, both Huynh and Nguyen are Vietnamese American.

12 *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* defines *Amerasian* as follows: “A person of American and Asian descent, especially one whose mother is Asian and whose father is American.” The dictionary notes that the word *Amerasian* was coined in the early 1950s and often refers to “children fathered in Asia by American servicemen.” This word continues “to be restricted in usage to the historical context of the American military presence in East and Southeast Asia” (58).

self and community.”¹³ Tal’s terminology expresses the condemnation of Vietnamese communist political policy and the basic human desire for freedom that define the Vietnamese American refugee/immigrant perspective. In the second section, I examine these works within the larger context of human rights discourse, in order to provide a broader, or more comprehensive, assessment.

Reeducation Camps, the Condemned Body, and Politics

Many early Vietnamese American authors describe their painful experiences in the communist reeducation camps or their tragic experiences as “boat people”—which define their identities as political refugees, haunt their thoughts and memories, and remain present always in the peripheral vision of their consciousness. Many of the memoirs describing life in the postwar reeducation camps are quite similar in treatment of their recurrent themes: they expose how they, as inmates, were dehumanized, humiliated, tortured, punished, and brainwashed by the communist cadres and camp guards. Soon after Vietnam was reunified in April of 1975, partisans who had supported the South Vietnamese government and/or allied themselves with the American military mission were requested to file reports at local police stations on their previous political allegiances, professional activities, and family connections. However, the local authorities blatantly lied to them, saying that if they told the truth and wrote a detailed, honest self-criticism, they would be granted amnesty for the “crimes” that they had committed during the national revolutionary war against the American invaders and the Saigon government they had supported. They then were asked to prepare enough food and pack enough clothing for a short reeducation session, but actually they were transferred almost immediately to remote, deserted areas of the country to endure forced labor and corporal punishment for long periods of time—from one to twelve years, depending on how their offenses were defined and classified by the officials.

In the Introduction to *To Be Made Over: Tales of Socialist Reeducation in Vietnam*, Huynh Sanh Thong clarifies the significance of the equivalent of the English term *reeducation* in Vietnamese:

The term ‘reeducation,’ with its pedagogical overtones, does not quite convey the quasi-mystical resonance of *cải-tạo* in Vietnamese. *Cải* (‘to transform’) and *tạo* (‘to create’) combine to literally mean an attempt at ‘recreation,’ at ‘making over’ sinful or incomplete individuals. Born again as ‘Socialist men and women’ (*con người xã-hội chủ-nghĩa*), they will supposedly pave the way to the Communist millennium.¹⁴

13 Kali Tal, “Speaking the Language of Pain: Vietnam War Literature in the Context of a Literature of Trauma,” *Fourteen Landing Zones: Approaches to Vietnam War Literature*, ed. Philip K. Jason (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1991), 235, 236.

14 Huynh Sanh Thong, *To Be Made Over: Tales of Socialist Reeducation in Vietnam* (New Haven, CT: Yale Council on Southeast Asia Studies, 1988), x.

Huynh is but one among many commentators who are critical of the use of the term *reeducation* in reference to the internment camps where victims were detained. According to Neil L. Jamieson, in his *Understanding Vietnam*, the population of southern Vietnam after the war was around twenty million people, and one million of those citizens of the former Republic of Vietnam were required by the communist regime to register for reeducation. The targeted individuals were intellectuals, politicians, religious leaders, police and military officers, artists, journalists, and writers of the old regime. In order to transform such detainees into citizens useful to the new, liberated Vietnam, the communist government set up camps that were neither schools nor prisons. They were “psychological [and] spiritual ‘boot camps’” in which people were forcefully indoctrinated into acquiescing to Vietnamese communist dogma, Ho Chi Minh’s ideology, and international socialist ideals.¹⁵ In other words, the camps, in fact, were centers for brainwashing the detainees who were required to listen daily to homilies about the *evils* of imperialism and capitalism and the *virtues* of socialism and communism, and they were centers for continuous corporeal punishment of the “wrong-doers.”

The book entitled *Politics and the Human Body* emphasizes that such torture as that inflicted in the Vietnamese reeducation camps is an instrument of coercion often employed for the enforcement of political agendas. Thus, it is pain imposed upon the human body that impresses the submission to the political goals, power relations, and spheres of influence that a regime in power demands for uniformity of thought and action within a repressive political order.¹⁶ These concepts are elaborated upon by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*. J. Timothy Cloyd, in his chapter on “Torture, Human Rights, and the Body,” distinguishes significant differences between discipline, punishment, and torture. These are distinctions useful in the discussion below: *discipline* entails a set of actions aiming toward integrating a person into an established or expected system of behavioral uniformity; *punishment* is applied when an individual violates this established uniformity, but “its goals remain within the notion of integration.” Contrastingly, however, *torture* does not serve the purpose of integration: it aims only to “inflict severe pain as a means of punishment, or coercion,” and the individual henceforth must bear the resulting physical, psychological, and emotional scars of degradation.¹⁷

In *South Wind Changing*, Huynh describes scenes that illustrate uses and abuses of the human body that are employed to bend the will of people, by both subduing and humiliating individuals. In the reeducation camps, Huynh and other inmates, subjected to hard labor, given limited access to tools, and forced to endure a hostile working environment, were ordered to convert an airfield into a garden; they worked until their

15 Neil L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1995), 364-66.

16 Jean Bethke Elshtain, and J. Timothy Cloyd, eds, *Politics and the Human Body* (Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 1995), *passim*.

17 Timothy J. Cloyd, “Torture, Human Rights, and the Body,” *Politics and the Human Body: Assault on Dignity*, ed. Elshtain, Jean Bethke, and J. Timothy Cloyd (Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 1995), 245.

hands blistered and “turned numb,” but they never were allowed to stop.¹⁸ Based on the circumstances that prevailed in the general exercise of such discipline, punishment, and ultimately torture, as Cloyd has explained, the camp guards were not attempting to integrate inmates into conformity with communist ideals: the conditions that the detainees were forced to endure passed beyond the rubrics of discipline and punishment and fell squarely within the category of torture. Descriptions of malnutrition and eventual starvation, back-breaking labor, dehumanizing treatment, preventable disease, and painful death fill almost every page of Huynh’s memoir. True reeducation might awaken a detainee to the socialist precept that “labor is glory,” but humiliation can only break a detainee’s spirit. Foucault states that crime and punishment are related, but that the latter can express itself as genuine atrocity, which is *not* “the result of some obscurely accepted law of retaliation.” He emphasized that “[humiliation] was the effect, in the rites of punishment, of a certain mechanism in the exercise of power: of a power that not only did not hesitate to exert itself directly on bodies, but was exalted and strengthened by its visible manifestations.”¹⁹ The two crimes that the communists most often accused detainees of committing were of harboring an uncooperative attitude toward the national revolution and of advocating the justice of the U.S. presence in Vietnam during the war, each apparently deserving of execution. Thus, as Huynh affirms, one of the purposes behind the communist guards’ maltreatment of inmates was to deprive them of their sustaining energy and vitality so that they would “die slowly” and not revolt: “They forced our labor and kept us busy so we would never have any time to scheme against them. If someone provoked them, they would punish all and shoot that person in front of us as if they were telling us, ‘I’ll shoot anyone I want.’”²⁰ In this way, humiliation was inflicted so that any response could be controlled.

As a corollary to this abuse of inmates’ bodies, a study by Elaine Scarry finds that the *belief of the persecutor* and the *body of the victim* generally are directly and indirectly associated with a belief system in such maltreatment as that described by Huynh, because *either* “the belief belongs to a person other than the person whose body is used to confirm it” *or* “the belief belongs to the person whose body is used in its confirmation.”²¹ Scarry’s concept can be understood through Huynh’s own situation: he was arrested and sent to a camp without having committed a crime, merely because he was believed to be, and indeed was, a student—a representative of the intelligentsia. Another inmate wearing glasses was believed to represent a dangerous threat to the regime because, according to the guards’ assertion, he must belong to the intelligentsia, and must, therefore, be too well-educated to be indoctrinated into the communist agenda, and he would, in all probability, refuse to join the communists in their on-going revolution. Unlike the narrator, this particular inmate, however, was simply a near-

18 Jade Ngoc Quang Huynh, *South Wind Changing* (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf, 1994), 53.

19 Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punishment: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 57.

20 Huynh, Jade, 57.

21 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995), 149.

sighted mechanic. In both situations, that of Huynh and that of the mechanic, the belief that drives the maltreatment derives from a false belief: that of the police who arrested Huynh, in the first instance, and of the morally myopic camp guard who interrogated the near-sighted mechanic, in the other. In almost all instances, the human body becomes the target of abuse in the reeducation camps, and such physical and psychological abuse enters into the discourse of survivors of reeducation by the communist liberators of Vietnam. Images of blood and death pervade Huynh's memoir. The author himself often thanked fate or destiny for maintaining his life amid the dehumanizing circumstances in the camps in which he experienced and witnessed sadistic acts and tragic deaths occurring almost hourly. Due to external assistance, Huynh himself was spared much of the actual horror of being caught in the vice of the assumptions or beliefs of the guards and their torture of the inmates' bodies.

While many anticommunist Vietnamese people hold the communists accountable for their atrocities and violations of human rights, they rarely address similar practices by agents of the former Saigon government, with whom many had allied themselves. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Jean Bethke Elshtain finds that psychological and physical torture is used routinely as a means of "political coercion and control in regimes we describe as anti-democratic."²² The image of the suffering body and of the torturers who inflict the suffering are emblematic of the extent to which such regimes inflict physical pain upon detainees in order to hold a population in check. Scarry articulates this same concept in somewhat convoluted but memorable phrasing: "The physical pain is so incontestably real that it seems to confer its quality of 'incontestable reality' on that power that has brought it into being. It is, of course, precisely because the reality of that power is so highly contestable, the regime so unstable, that torture is being used."²³ Almost as confirmation of this observation made by Scarry, Huynh presents the battered body effectively in his denunciation of the tyranny exercised by agents of the authoritarian regime upon "undesirable" in postwar Vietnam.

Scarry states a truism about such uses of torture as that employed in the Vietnamese reeducation camps: "To have pain is to have certainty; to hear about pain is to have doubt." She continues: in a situation in which "some central idea or ideology or cultural construct has ceased to elicit a population's belief [...] the sheer material factualness of the human body will be borrowed to lend that cultural construct the aura of 'realness' and 'certainty.'"²⁴ This powerful observation also holds true when a regime imposes a new belief system upon a population that earlier had affirmed other values, as when the communists imposed their rule over the former South Vietnam, which prior to liberation had accepted the values of capitalism. Huynh's memoir targets, of course, the Western readerships' long-attested affirmation of democracy, and he contextualizes the infliction of severe pain and suffering within the category of abuses of power—a category that serves the interests of "the West, particularly the United States," which

22 Elshtain, x.

23 Scarry, 27.

24 *Ibid.*, 13-14.

celebrates an “individual’s uniqueness and unique story, and his or her individual rights.” Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith emphasize this particular point in their significant discussion of the relationship between life narratives portraying suffering and survival and the imperatives prevailing in the Western literary market.²⁵

In addition to the brutal treatment the officers and guards imposed upon prisoners, the reeducation camps often were located in malaria-infested jungles in which inmates faced the constant threat of heat-stroke and of such preventable infectious diseases as dysentery. Detainees repeatedly were transferred from one camp to another in animal-transport vehicles, and they were not informed of their next destination until they had reached it. Those who miraculously survived these inhuman experiences rightly claim that life in the camps literally was “hell on earth.” Even after their release, the former detainees and their families were forced to resettle in newly established economic zones, where they were deprived of electricity, farming tools, or the basic necessities of life, so that they would have to endure the hardships that many northern Vietnamese and the Vietcong had experienced during their struggle to achieve Vietnam’s reunification. As is said to be true for souls in hell, life for many detainees in the camps was lived in a state of continuous despair. Huynh captures some of this despair in his memoir. Although his personal experience is mediated by intervention and reprieve, his descriptions convey an emotional charge that moves readers deeply.

Discrimination Against the Amerasians and Their Mothers

In order to understand the Vietnamese discrimination against Amerasian children and their mothers, it is crucial briefly to examine the larger historical and cultural context in which this discrimination occurred.²⁶ During the Vietnam War, American soldiers often were criticized for their decadence, loose morality, and use of drugs. The existence of their particular demands stimulated the reciprocal development of means of supply in the market. “Tea houses,” or brothels, mushroomed whenever American troops were stationed, and many young Vietnamese girls from the countryside moved to larger cities to work as bar girls, street prostitutes, or “hooch maids” because they could earn even more money in those capacities than people who had completed college education or acquired professional skills might earn in most legitimate enterprises. At another social level, girls with some passable English competence sometimes worked as secretaries in American offices, and many married American men.²⁷ No specific number of

25 Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith, *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 24.

26 Traditionally, the Vietnamese had never approved of interracial liaisons or marriage because of their racially based conservative bias toward ethnic or pedigree purity, which stemmed partly from the centuries-long Vietnamese dislike or even hatred of all foreign invaders: the Chinese, the French, the Japanese, and the Americans, who left their genetic imprint upon the people. During the Vietnam War, Vietnamese women who dated American men often were despised in their community and often in their family.

27 Trin Yarbrough, *Surviving Twice: Amerasian Children of the Vietnam War* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2005), 16-20.

Amerasians born during the war is available, but more than 75,000 Amerasians and their family members migrated into the United States after the government passed the Amerasian Homecoming Act of 1987.²⁸ The number of lasting interracial marriages between American servicemen and Vietnamese women was small, however, compared to the number of casual encounters that engendered Amerasian children during the war. Most of these children and their mothers were left behind when the United States started to withdraw its troops in 1972, and they became subjects of discrimination that was intensified in the postwar society, under its communist government. The Amerasians were ignominiously referred to as *bụi đời*, or “dust of life,” because they represented the “remnants” or “leavings” of the Americans after the war had ended. According to Le Ly Hayslip, the Amerasians were hated, and their mothers were referred to as “*ban than cho de quoc My*,” which means “those who sold their bodies to the American empire,” and their children, the Amerasians, were “carriers of foreign aggressor blood.”²⁹ Hayslip then rephrases the matter in more delicate terms: the Amerasian children were considered “the product of unnatural and ill-fated matings.”³⁰

The Unwanted, a thoroughgoing account of Kien Nguyen’s life as an Amerasian in postwar Vietnam, is the first and thus far the only memoir describing the life of a Vietnamese Amerasian child. The book recounts Kien’s happy life before the war as the son of an upper-class family, and of his misfortunes following the war as a “half-breed,” after his family’s property had been confiscated under the new political order. The English word *half-breed* carries negative connotations because it implies “biological abnormality and reduce[s] human reproduction to the level of animal breeding,” as Françoise Lionnet describes the parlance.³¹ Kien’s cousin Tin defines the term to Kien: “a half-breed is a bastard child, usually the result from when a woman has slept with a foreigner. Like you.”³² Throughout his childhood, due to racial discrimination, Kien’s mother “had always tried to protect us [him and his younger brother, Jimmy] from the rumors, stares, and judgment that our American features drew.”³³

According to Maria P.P. Root, a mixed-race individual in the United States encounters personal obstacles in his or her process of establishing a “racial and ethnic self in relationship to a nation that is structured around race—and a monoracial model [in the U.S.] driven by assumptions that racial purity exists and is desirable and somewhat

28 Himicle Novas, Lan Cao, with Rosemary Silva, *Everything You Need to Know about Asian-American History* (New York: Plume, 2004), 307.

29 Le Ly Hayslip, with James Hayslip, *Child of War, Woman of Peace* (New York: Anchor Books, 1993), 123.

30 Le Ly Hayslip, with Jay Wurts, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Place* (New York: Plume, 2003), 202.

31 Françoise Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-portraiture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1989), 13.

32 Kien Nguyen, *The Unwanted: A Memoir of Childhood* (Boston: Backbay Books, 2001), 97.

33 *Ibid.*, 44.

necessary or sufficient for the retention of cultural heritage.”³⁴ Root’s observations in this quotation about biraciality in the United States also apply to the postwar Vietnamese society described in *The Unwanted*, but in a very harsh manifestation, because the discrimination was enforced with impunity by unscrupulous government officials. The appearance of Kien’s body, or more specifically the American physical features manifested in his body, becomes his mother’s major concern in his upbringing because it was the source of persecution directed against him, and it emphatically revealed her own physical relationship, or connection, with the Americans during the war, which cast her and her children into a most dangerous political and social category.

Kien’s defining fair complexion and hair coloring prevented him, for example, from receiving proper recognition for his outstanding academic achievement. He was the best student in his local elementary school, and his progressive-minded, non-biased teacher selected him to lead a school parade. However, he ultimately was denied the honor he had earned because the school board decided that the parade marshal had to be both an excellent academic achiever and also a “positive symbol of our school.”³⁵ In the minds of the members of the school board, he, as a “half-breed,” represented the shame of the nation’s pre-liberation past and the submission of his mother’s body to the will of the occupying forces. His light complexion and curly brown hair stigmatized him as “trash” left behind by the Americans, and he was teased and marginalized by his neighbors, classmates, and relatives. His subsequent encounters with local authorities, policemen, reeducation camp guards, and customs officers further illustrate the racist attitude and biased treatment inflicted upon the “children of the enemy.” Kien’s stories of body-based discrimination perpetrated upon him during his childhood emphasize the total disregard of basic civil liberties and a cessation of human sympathy that was released under the communist regime, newly imposed in the former South Vietnam. Kien’s Amerasian physical features deprived him of his civil rights, thus leaving him with emotional scars from his childhood experiences as the “unwanted other” in the postwar Vietnamese society in the South.

No historical document or governmental directive written or publicized by the Vietnamese communist government has been found to support the claim that it was the national government’s official political policy to marginalize and discriminate against the Amerasians, or to deprive them of educational opportunities. Steven DeBonis affirms, for example, that there was “no bloodbath, nor any national policy of violence against Amerasians and their families.” Nevertheless, discrimination undeniably existed, but locally, rather than nationally, with its severity depending on the culture and population in each place. Thus, the Amerasians were subjected primarily to the prejudicial attitudes of their local officials, who determined the fate of the Amerasians.³⁶

34 Maria P.P. Root, “Multiracial Asians: Models of Ethnic Identity,” *Amerasia Journal* 23.1 (1997): 31.

35 Nguyen, Kien, 145.

36 Steven DeBonis, *Children of the Enemy: Oral Histories of Vietnamese Amerasians and Their Mothers* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1995), 9.

Based on his interviews with several Amerasians, Robert S. McKelvey, in his book *The Dust of Life*, concludes that the Amerasians “were denied educational and vocational opportunities as a matter of government policy.”³⁷ Particularly harsh bigotry was manifested against Amerasian children whose appearance revealed African American parentage. Their noticeably darker complexion made them targets of verbal and physical harassment. In *Children of the Enemy*, DeBonis records the oral narratives of many Amerasians in refugee camps who were denied basic human rights because of their darker complexion.³⁸ Many such children, unfortunately, accepted and internalized the assessment by the society that they were the “dust of life” or the “leavings” abandoned by the departing Americans.

“Race, class, culture and politics,” as Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen observes, “all played their part in the adverse conditions experienced by Amerasians and their mothers in the postwar years.”³⁹ The body of Kien’s mother, Khuon, became a target for political accusation and disdain. In the opening chapter of the memoir, which relates conditions of his family’s life before the war ended, it is Khuon’s body that reflects her affluence, beauty, and aristocratic social status. Her fingers, “the ultimate pride in her life,” were so beautiful that she was employed as a “hand model” for a jewelry company.⁴⁰ During the war, she had worked for and socialized with the Americans; her sons—Kien and Jimmy—resulted from her love affairs with an American civil engineer and an American officer, respectively. Although Khuon was not a prostitute, after the war ended, during a public confession session at a local community meeting house, a butcher’s wife proclaimed fervently: “‘Under the Imperialist government, [...] there are two possible ways for a person to have had mixed-blood children: through prostitution or through adoption. You have admitted earlier that fucking was how you got them, so you must be a hooker.’”⁴¹ Khuon had to accept the label of a degraded prostitute in order to avoid more severe punishment ascribed to an “arrogant capitalist,” because under the new regime, the word *capitalist* carried more anathema than other epithets.⁴²

Rocio G. Davis correctly notes that, before the war ended, Khuon’s relationships with some American men had brought her financial security and wealth, but after the war ended, these very relationships brought her opprobrium and ignominy. Kien’s and his brother’s biraciality, therefore, “is read positively or negatively, depending on the

37 Robert S. McKelvey, *The Dust of Life, America’s Children Abandoned in Vietnam* (Seattle: U of Washington P, 1999), 9-10.

38 DeBonis, 99.

39 Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen, “Euroasian/Amerasian Perspectives: Kim Lefèvre’s *Métisse Blanche* (White Métisse) and Kien Nguyen’s *The Unwanted*,” *Asian Studies Review* 29 (June 2005): 118.

40 Nguyen, Kien, 8.

41 *Ibid.*, 111.

42 *Ibid.*, 111.

historical moment.”⁴³ In postwar Vietnam, Khuon’s body became identified as a subject for abuse because of her “past sins against the Communist Party.”⁴⁴ However, by denying her political connection with the Americans and the Saigon regime, and by contritely admitting to “illicit” carnal relationships with some Americans, she was not interned in any of the reeducation camps for reactionary behavior. The communists accepted her sincere self-criticism and repentance, although she and her children remained objects of persecution within the society.

II. Human Rights Discourse

For the sake of balance, it is necessary to analyze the works of Huynh and Nguyen not only in terms of the arguments they present but also in terms of the counterarguments they imply. The United Nations categorizes human rights under the rubric of “universal” concerns and obligations,⁴⁵ and the West at times has tried to justify its colonialism in Asia on the argument that colonialism would bring the high culture of Western democratic rule and a fuller measure of human rights to its Asian colonies. Gayatri C. Spivak defines *human rights* as follows: “‘Human Rights’ is not only about having or claiming a right or a set of rights; it is also about righting wrongs, about being the dispenser of these rights.” She further defines *human rights* in terms reminiscent of those used by exponents of “social Darwinism,” but from a reverse perspective (because in her view the *stronger* must protect the *weaker* by sharing the responsibility of righting wrongs). As a consequence of this reversed perspective, Spivak is highly critical of using the pretext of human rights “as an alibi for interventions of various sorts,” which can be asserted economically, militarily, or politically.⁴⁶ Other postcolonial critics and scholars, such as Rajat Rana, are equally concerned about how the West perceives issues of human rights in third-world countries, but because the West’s interventions also have required suppression, diasporic voices show that such interventions actually result in “reinstating yet another form of power.”⁴⁷

In his remarkable book *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said reminds us that, often times, when we try to focus the world’s attention upon human sufferings and the denial of human rights, we forget that “the world is a crowded place, and that if everyone were to insist on the radical purity or priority of one’s own voice [or opinion], all we would have would be the awful din of unending strife, and a bloody political mess.”⁴⁸

43 Rocio G. Davis, *Begin Here: Reading Asian North American Autobiographies of Childhood* (Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 2007), 100.

44 Nguyen, Kien 109.

45 Rajat Rana, “Symphony of Decolonisation: Third World and Human Rights Discourse,” *The International Journal of Human Rights* 11.4 (December 2007): 370-71; Schaffer, 2.

46 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Righting Wrongs,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103.2/3 (Spring/Summer 2004): 523-24.

47 Rana, 367.

48 Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), 23.

Both Rana and Said emphasize the possibility of the Third World being re-colonized because the First World still claims that its “leadership and interference” in Asia can establish democracy and human rights there, especially when Asian culture is viewed arrogantly to be “essentially incompatible with Western principles” and absent of “the endogenous will and competence to develop [its own] democracy and human rights.”⁴⁹ Their works provide insight into the global dialogue on the issues of oppression that are addressed in microcosm in the memoirs of Huynh and Nguyen.

Nguyen, who writes about life in postwar Vietnam, condemns the post-1975 communist government for its barbarity, corruption, and injustice. In his book *Yellow*, Frank H. Wu makes an interesting observation about Asian Americans who feel that they “must denounce Asia” before they can discuss civil rights in the United States. Wu notes that, in the American public media, the voices of Asian people often are not considered reliable and objective, even when the subject under discussion is Asia. Although racism exists globally, Asian Americans do not need to criticize Asia first before they participate in U.S. racial discourses, just as European Americans do not need to criticize Europe first before they discuss U.S. social problems. Wu affirms, rather, that Asian Americans should focus on racial and ethnic issues in the United States, the country of their citizenship, which many first-generation authors fail to do. People who suggest that Asian Americans should be more concerned about oppressive governments or corrupt political systems in Asia, rather than about social and political problems in the United States, “make their own concern racial.”⁵⁰ Nguyen is like the Asian American critics that Wu describes above; however, it should be noted that, by writing about his traumatic childhood in postwar Vietnam, Nguyen rightly identifies himself as an Amerasian refugee and a victim of social and political circumstances.

It perhaps can be inferred that Nguyen, by exposing the atrocious acts committed against him and many others by communist officials and camp guards, might prefer to have kept a divided Vietnam, and that Nguyen also might justify the U.S. intervention in Vietnamese politics on the grounds that he had enjoyed a comfortable life when the American military troops were stationed in his homeland. A few years after the war ended, Kien’s mother indeed still hoped that the Americans would return to save South Vietnam. Huynh’s later escape from the country suggests that he, too, no longer could bear the social injustice and atrocities exercised by the regime that succeeded in uniting the nation. This inference is never stated directly by either author. It does, however, remain as an implied subtext.

Both Huynh and Nguyen later became successful in the United States, but they both seem to ignore the fact that racism long has been an issue in U.S. culture and history, and that ethnic minorities long have been fighting for racial equality among the

49 Inoue Tatsuo, “Liberal Democracy and Asian Orientalis,,” *The East Asian Challenge for Human Rights*, ed. Joanne R. Bauer and Daniel A. Bell (New York: Cambridge UP, 1999), 37.

50 Frank H. Wu, *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 86.

majority establishment in the United States. Vietnamese refugees and boat people were, at first, not welcomed by many of the American policymakers and the general American public upon their arrival in the United States in the late 1970s and 1980s, and like many other Asian Americans, they also have experienced the racism and prejudice in the country that, in theory, was founded on principles of freedom and democracy for all. While the Amerasians were not accepted but frequently were physically and mentally abused in Vietnam, many also were rejected, or at least ignored, in the United States, either by their American birth fathers or by postwar U.S. society. DeBonis observes that the Amerasians who had nurtured “unrealistically optimistic expectations” about a new life in the United States soon became chagrined, and those who strove to identify themselves as real Americans soon realized that they remained Vietnamese, linguistically and culturally,⁵¹ as they were viewed as such within their new society.

In the Introduction to *Vietnam in American Literature*, Philip H. Melling notes that memoirs or personal life narratives have played a significant role in the traditions of American literature because they have “served as a familiar means of addressing issues in public history.”⁵² Despite the sometimes surprisingly harsher realities faced by many Vietnamese refugees and Amerasians who came to the United States, both *South Wind Changing* and *The Unwanted* convey a strongly pro-American political message. Published in English in the United States, the two narratives emphasize issues of democracy and freedom that corroborate the U.S. government’s reports of violation of human rights in third-world countries such as Vietnam. Human rights, Louis Henkin notes, has been the “subject of many international agreements, the daily grist of the mills of international politics, and a bone of continuing contention among superpowers.”⁵³ Beneath the surface of both texts, there lies a subtext that is flattering to the targeted Western audience.

Lisa Lowe asserts that Asian American authors who address the differences between Asia and America (or between the East and the West) in terms of human rights and civil liberties tend to accept and justify the imperialistic role assigned to the United States as a global policeman.⁵⁴ In her discussion of human rights and postcolonial intervention, as they are exhibited in Asian American literature, Leslie Bow argues that texts and reports about the absence of freedom and democracy in many Asian countries congratulate the United States on its “triumphantly touted brand of capitalism” and on its right to “export” that brand of economic order to Asia.⁵⁵ In this regard, as Huynh and Nguyen raise global awareness of a repressive regime in Vietnam, and as they

51 DeBonis, 14.

52 Philip E. Melling, *Vietnam in American Literature* (Boston: Twayne, 1990), xiii.

53 Louis Henkin, *Age of Rights* (New York: Colombia UP, 1990), xvii.

54 Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1996), 5.

55 Leslie Bow, “The Gendered Subject of Human Rights: Asian American Literature as Postcolonial Intervention,” *Cultural Critique* 41 (Winter 1999): 38.

call for international action, their memoirs, like many Asian American texts, resemble reports in the media, “where the representations of Asia are reproduced for American consumption,” and because the authors live and write in the United States, they “produce critiques of postcolonial state politics that employ First World conceptions of individual rights.”⁵⁶ Although an implied subtext affirming U.S. policy and practice, as well as audience expectations, must be taken into account in any consideration of the works by Huynh and Nguyen, the critiques given in the memoirs, nevertheless, are powerful reminders of the notable failures of one Asian regime, the Vietnamese communist government, to live up to its highly proclaimed humanitarian ideals.

Huynh and Nguyen also display the bias of people of middle or upper-class origin against people from a lower economic class. The authors seem to view the war fought to reunite a divided Vietnam as one waged by peasants involved in a class struggle or a war of the have-nots against the haves. This is far too simplistic a perspective, because the Vietnam War was a political and military war between two opposite ideological forces, and it must be contextualized within the global discourse on U.S. imperialism in Southeast Asia. Many ignorant, poor, and generally uneducated peasants and factory workers, actually felt that their country (and they themselves) had been victimized by the capitalist regimes of colonial and postcolonial administration in Vietnam that had divided the nation for external political reasons. Nevertheless, in *South Wind Changing*, for instance, Huynh calls camp guards and communist officers “yellow cow[s]” because of the disgusting color of their uniform, which made them look animal-like, or “uneducated and stupid.”⁵⁷ In *The Unwanted*, when Kien heard Mrs. Qui Ba vilifying his mother about his mother’s affair with her husband, Kien felt angry because “[t]he thought of Mr. Qui Ba [...] and how his dirty, uneducated, Communist hands had fondled my mother enraged me.”⁵⁸ Many communist partisans, in fact, were highly educated and had studied abroad, and they did successfully lead the Vietnamese revolution against the more technologically advanced Americans. Although many camp guards had completed only an elementary education, Nguyen’s referring to the communists he suffered under as animals and degrading them due to their cosmetic shortcomings reveals the authors’ less thoughtful anger directed toward the communists as stereotypes. Howard Zinn argues that Marxist ideals, which communism proclaims, have attracted many “good people” from all over the world. On the one hand, communism proclaims the higher ideals of “peace, brotherhood, racial equality, the classless society, [and] the withering away of the state.” On the other hand, class struggle, which is the Marxist mechanism that propels social reform, ultimately requires a revolution to bring that reform to fruition. If communist regimes lose sight of their higher ideals in pursuit of their revolutions, by employing shallow propaganda, rigid and barbaric approaches to indoctrination, totalitarian and corrupt governing systems, and even torture to win hearts and minds, then these regimes must be criticized and reproached for their

56 *Ibid.*, 40, 41.

57 Huynh, Jade, 75.

58 Nguyen, Kien 211.

practices. However, one also must criticize the other social systems that have created “war, exploitation, colonialism, and race hatred” in promoting their ideals. Thus, Zinn satirizes all who “judge ourselves by ideals, but others by actions.”⁵⁹

South Wind Changing and *The Unwanted* appeal to Western readerships that share the anticommunist biases of their authors. It should be noted that life narratives and memories, as Schwenkel well observes, are governed by ideological paradigms that are specific to both socialist and capitalist societies. In the United States, American historical memory, which is formulated by historically developed and accepted sets of images, ideas, and texts, “shapes the thought process of U.S. populations.”⁶⁰ Both memoirists, Huynh and Nguyen, are attracted to the American anticommunist ideological paradigm, and their works are appealing to the American reading public because they reinforce and reaffirm the political expectations of that audience.

In regard to the Vietnam War, the United States has tried to defend its role in helping South Vietnam realize self-determination and escape a communist takeover, but the United States cannot satisfactorily justify its aggressive actions through “fragile arguments and feeble analogies.” Zinn concludes that a unified Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh’s form of communism is preferable to the blatant corruption that prevailed under the Saigon government. Zinn states a conclusion that most critics and historians avoid: “Right now [the 1980s and 1990s], for Vietnam, a Communist government is probably the best avenue” because of the goals it sets for the majority of the citizens under its rule: “the preservation of human life, self-determination, economic stability, the end of race and class oppression, [and] that freedom of speech which an educated population begins to demand.”⁶¹ It is these doctrinal ideals that actually won the hearts and minds of the majority of the Vietnamese people and that helped to make the communists victorious in the war they waged against the United States and its “puppet Saigon government.” In the Vietnam War and its aftermath, both sides have to accept accountability for violations of human rights issues. In all human endeavors, nothing is simply “black and white,” and it is the “shades of grey” that allow for continued discussion.

Conclusion

Vu Pham, in his 2003 review essay “Signs of Maturation: Directions in Vietnamese American Studies,” states that there is a “dearth of published critical books with groundbreaking scholarly research on Vietnamese Americans,” especially on their life experiences under communism.⁶² Robert S. McKelvey, in his book *A Gift of Barbed Wire: America’s Allies Abandoned in South Vietnam*, observes that while the American

59 Howard Zinn, *The Politics of History* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1990), 218.

60 Schwenkel, 7.

61 Zinn, 220-21.

62 Vu Pham, “Signs of Maturation: Directions in Vietnamese American Studies,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 6.1 (Feb. 2003): 95.

reading public is more familiar with stories of American soldiers and veterans who had served in the Vietnam War, the stories of their Vietnamese allies who were left behind after 1975 are too seldom mentioned or recorded.⁶³ McKelvey also feels that the United States should register greater responsibility for its desertion of South Vietnam, its Vietnamese supporters, and the Amerasians, whom he calls “our children.”⁶⁴ The most important message that both *South Wind Changing* and *The Unwanted* express is the fundamental nature of the human desire for freedom—a concept that “stands unchallenged as the supreme value of the Western world.”⁶⁵ From this powerful perspective, Huynh and Nguyen, as well as many other Vietnamese people living in exile, understand that gaining political freedom and respect for their civil rights is the ultimate motivation for their daring deeds—deeds that contribute to a self-respect and a feeling of personal worth that they were denied in postwar Vietnam.

Granting *South Wind Changing* and *The Unwanted* their proper place within the U.S. and international discourse on human rights is important, but assessment of their contribution to our understanding of postwar Vietnam must be made using a balanced approach. Both Huynh and Nguyen are aware of the fact that the United States assumed a position as guardian of the well-being of its partisan supporters when it prosecuted its war in Vietnam, and to a large extent the United States ultimately did not succeed in fulfilling its obligations to those who allied themselves with its political agenda. Michael Ignatieff affirms: “Across the political spectrum since 1945, American presidents have articulated a strongly messianic vision of the American role in promoting [human] rights abroad.”⁶⁶ In accordance with Ignatieff’s formulation, Talal Asad states that human rights has been integral in the “universalizing moral project” of the United States, which, theoretically, aims toward “humanizing the world”; many Americans feel responsible for maintaining human rights worldwide, and they “see themselves in contrast to their ‘evil’ opponents.”⁶⁷

Nhi T. Lieu, in her most recent book entitled *The American Dream in Vietnamese*, notes that it is through “cultural assertions of anticommunism and citizenship that Vietnamese immigrants have begun to claim their place in the United States” and to “gain entrée into the [U.S.] political arena.”⁶⁸ Although Lieu refers to products of the Vietnamese American entertainment industry using the words *cultural assertions*, her

63 Robert S. McKelvey, *A Gift of Barbed Wire: America’s Allies Abandoned in South Vietnam* (Seattle: U of Washington P, 2002), xix.

64 *Ibid.*, x.

65 Orlando Patterson, *Freedom* (New York: BasicBooks, 1991), ix.

66 Michael Ignatieff. “Introduction: American Exceptionalism and Human Rights,” *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights*, ed. Michael Ignatieff (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2005), 13.

67 Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1993), 147.

68 Nhi T. Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2011). xviii.

statement also is true for Vietnamese American literary assertions and productions. *South Wind Changing* and *The Unwanted* stand as literary testimonies on communist atrocity and corruption, and the memoirs affirm the attention that international audiences should give to on-going efforts toward realizing the promise of Vietnamese democracy and human rights, but which so blatantly have been thwarted by the communist regime in power since April of 1975. Daniel Lehman argues in *Matters of Fact: Reading Nonfiction Over the Edge* that non-fiction must be read in its historical context because it is a historical document.⁶⁹ The memoirs help to bring to light some important, but all-too-often ignored, elements in the history that lies behind the identity of the Vietnamese Americans. These are elements that differentiate that large community from earlier migrations of peoples—an identity as refugees and descendants of refugees to the United States who had supported a U.S. foreign policy agenda prior to their departure from their homeland. The memoirs help to indicate a symmetrical balance between two appellations that conjoin, after all is said and done, to designate that identity: Vietnamese American.

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69 Daniel Lehman, *Matters of Fact: Reading Nonfiction Over the Edge* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1997), 5.

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