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Like a Refugee: Veterans, Vietnam, and the Making of a False Equivalence

Joseph Darda

It don't make no difference to me
 Everybody's had to fight to be free
 You don't have to live like a refugee
 You don't have to live like a refugee

—Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers, “Refugee,” 1979

On March 15, 1980, Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers’ “Refugee” peaked at number fifteen on the Billboard Hot 100. It was a breakout hit for the band and signaled a shift from the glam rock of David Bowie and the New York Dolls to the heartland rock of John Mellencamp and Bruce Springsteen. The song tells the story of a self-sabotaging lover who, having endured some unnamed misfortune, has chosen to live like a refugee. “Somebody must have kicked you around,” Petty sings, but “everybody’s had to fight to be free” and “you don’t have to live like a refugee.”¹ The song was the second single from the band’s triple-platinum third album, *Damn the Torpedoes* (1979), that *Rolling Stone* celebrated for Petty’s “down-to-earth” observations and “heartland twang.”² Unlike the gender-bending, trans-Atlantic rock of the 1970s, Petty and the Heartbreakers channeled a blue-collar, middle-American ethos with a sound that bridged classic rock and bar-band country music. It was a sound that could be heard in the following years on Bob Seger’s *Against the Wind* (1980), Mellencamp’s *American Fool* (1982), and Springsteen’s *Born in the U.S.A.* (1984), all of which reached number one on the Billboard album chart. It was a sound defined by “Refugee.”

Two days after Petty’s song charted at number fifteen, President Jimmy Carter signed the Refugee Act of 1980 into law. Faced with a massive exodus of refugees from Southeast Asia, Massachusetts Senator Ted Kennedy had introduced the bill a year earlier to formalize the legal meaning of refugee and institute guidelines for resettlement in the United States. Borrowing from the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, the law defines a refugee as “any person who is outside any country of such person’s nationality . . . and who is unable or

unwilling to return to . . . that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.”³ The Refugee Act amended the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 by, as Secretary of State Cyrus Vance stated before Congress that spring, “eliminating the previous geographic and ideological restrictions on granting of refugee status” that had favored defectors fleeing Soviet bloc countries. The new law, Vance argued, traded Cold War politics for human rights by adopting the United Nations’ definition of refugee and standardizing the path to resettlement. But he acknowledged that welcoming Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian refugees was “both in our national character and in our national interest” because the war in Southeast Asia had undermined the United States’ self-image as a liberal-humanitarian state. The new law promised to restore that self-image by defining the Vietnamese refugee as an object of humanitarian rescue from racial and religious intolerance. That day, Vance announced that the Carter administration intended to resettle 168,000 Southeast Asian refugees in the United States by the end of the year.⁴

Just as the government sought to limit and legalize the definition of refugee, it became a free-floating cultural signifier that could name an estranged lover in a Tom Petty song or a white veteran of the Vietnam War. The genre that Petty, Springsteen, and Mellencamp invented laments the struggles of white working-class men suffering through the offshoring of manufacturing and extractive industries, the stagnation of real wages, and the decline of trade unions. The down-on-his-luck Vietnam veteran stars in these songs—songs like Petty’s “The Criminal Kind” (1981) and Springsteen’s “Born in the U.S.A.” (1984)—as an all-American boy who served his country in Southeast Asia and returned to a hometown of shuttered factories and vacant storefronts. In Springsteen’s words, the veteran had “nowhere to run, ain’t got nowhere to go.”⁵ If Petty’s forlorn lover doesn’t have to live like a refugee, as he reminds her, suggesting the inappropriateness of the term, the Vietnam veteran has no choice. Petty’s and Springsteen’s songwriting condemns government elites for mistreating vets and waxes nostalgic for a pre-Vietnam War (and pre-civil rights) small-town America. The veterans they imagine had been “refugeed” from the nation they had known as children. With more than half a million Southeast Asian refugees arriving in the United States between 1980 and 1985, the American veteran, whose government had executed the war in Southeast Asia, was reconceived as like a refugee himself.

American officials, novelists, filmmakers, journalists, and social scientists have long treated the white veteran and the Southeast Asian refugee as twinned

characters in a story of national trauma. Yen Le Espiritu identifies the emergence in American news media of the interrelated “good warrior” and “good refugee” narratives in which benevolent veterans saved grateful refugees from a backward and unfree Vietnam. Journalists commemorated the twenty-fifth anniversary of the war’s end by telling stories of affluent, anticommunist refugees that, Espiritu writes, “recuperated the veterans’ and thus U.S. failure of masculinity and re-made the case for U.S. war in Vietnam: that the war, no matter the costs, was ultimately necessary, moral, and successful.”⁶ Somehow the United States won even when it lost. Sylvia Chong has observed how Reagan-era action-adventure films subsumed Southeast Asian life within the trials of the white veteran who, in such films as Chuck Norris’s *Missing in Action* (1984) and Sylvester Stallone’s *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), acts as a kind of “white oriental” who could “reinvigorate a whiteness that [had] lost both its hegemonic wholeness from the protests of the 1970s and its masculine vigor from the Vietnam War.”⁷ Espiritu and Chong show how the figure of the refugee has been marshaled by news media and filmmakers to rehabilitate the white American man, either as a liberal do-gooder or as a virile warrior. The idea of the veteran as like a refugee bridges the liberal narrative identified by Espiritu and the conservative narrative identified by Chong, forming a consensus that what has been “given” to refugees has been taken from “our boys.”

Like the victims of Hurricane Katrina, Vietnam vets were culturally but not legally constituted as refugees. When news media attached the term to black Louisianans in 2005, Jesse Jackson fired back that “to see them as refugees is to see them as other than Americans.”⁸ Adeline Masquelier, a Tulane University anthropology professor, argued that referring to New Orleans citizens as refugees took away “their right to be part of the national order of things.”⁹ The term is freighted with racial and national meaning that is structured by but not limited to its legal definition. For Vietnam vets and nonveteran white men who instrumentalize their alleged mistreatment by the government, the cultural idea of the refugee has given them a way to locate themselves at the *center* of the post-civil rights nation by claiming the refugeeed *margin*. White men embrace that margin with the full knowledge that they don’t belong to it, that they have been mistaken for someone else. The equivalence between white vets and Southeast Asian refugees—if we are to define equivalence as “equality of value”¹⁰—is never made in good faith. That is why it is made only indirectly but consistently in fields ranging from psychiatry to politics to literature. It is a way to assert one’s value by imagining a wrongful comparison to someone perceived as lacking value. To suggest that one is like a refugee is

also to proclaim that one is *not* a refugee. Black victims of a natural disaster and the many American veterans of color who served in Vietnam are less inclined to draw this comparison because, as Jackson suggested after Hurricane Katrina, it achieves the opposite political result for them. If the refugee analogy situates white vets as wounded embodiments of the nation, it casts Americans of color outside it.

On September 7, 2016, at the Union League in Philadelphia, then-Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump claimed that “our veterans” are “treated worse than illegal immigrants.”¹¹ Trump had campaigned for months on a promise to build a wall on the US–Mexico border and bar Syrian refugees, whom he called the “ultimate Trojan horse” for the Islamic State, from entering the United States.¹² He accused Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton of putting the well-being of refugees ahead of medical care for veterans, constructing a zero-sum scenario in which a dollar spent on resettling a refugee in the United States was a dollar *not* spent on caring for a wounded veteran. That belief—that the government was taking in refugees while abandoning its own soldiers—first emerged in the wake of the Vietnam War, when songwriters, journalists, and filmmakers began reimagining the Vietnam veteran as a stateside refugee who had been dislocated from his innocence, his youth, and the national fantasies on which he was raised. The story of the veteran-as-refugee begins with the psychiatric research of antiwar liberals Robert Jay Lifton and Chaim Shatan, whose writing led to the inclusion in 1980 of post-traumatic stress disorder in the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, and it resurfaces in the POW/MIA myth, veteran tour services to Vietnam, and the veteran literature through which most American high school and college students learn about the war in Southeast Asia. Following how the white veteran became like a refugee reveals how Southeast Asian refugees were erased from what Tim O’Brien calls “true war stories” and how pro-veteran politics became anti-refugee policies.

Diagnosing the Veteran-as-Refugee

The same year that Carter signed the Refugee Act into law, the American Psychiatric Association introduced diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder. While the first edition of the *DSM*, published in 1952, had included a diagnosis for “gross stress reaction,” the second edition that followed sixteen years later had omitted it without acknowledging why or how trauma-induced stress should be diagnosed in the future. The APA had authored the first edition

in the wake of World War II, when the Veterans Administration, inundated with men struggling to reenter civilian life, began categorizing combat-related mental disorders. The association would not have the government doing its work for it. In 1980, the APA added PTSD to the third edition of the manual after Vietnam veterans lobbied the association for their ailments to be recognized and treated by the medical establishment. The resulting diagnosis listed the “characteristic symptoms” of PTSD as “reexperiencing the traumatic event” and a “numbing of responsiveness to, or reduced involvement with, the external world.”¹³

The struggle that led to the institutional recognition of PTSD began years earlier when Lifton and Shatan held their first “rap groups” with veterans at the New York office of Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Lifton, a professor of psychiatry at Yale University, had served as an air force psychiatrist in the Korean War and made his name with a National Book Award–winning account of the psychological effects of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima on the city’s survivors. In November 1970, Lifton received a letter from Jan Barry, the founding president of VVAW, describing “the severe psychological problems of many veterans” caused by “the military policy of the war which results in war crimes and veterans’ nightmares.”¹⁴ The next month, Lifton met with Shatan, a clinician at New York University, and twelve veterans at VVAW’s office in midtown Manhattan. It was the first of forty-five meetings that Lifton later described as transformative, leading him to combine his “professional efforts with a more radical social perspective.” He and Shatan sought to use their “raps” to change the national conversation about Vietnam veterans, whom they believed had suffered through combat twice, first in Vietnam and then in an America that had turned against them and their war. They insisted that veterans could not “come home” until civilian Americans could learn to separate the veterans from the war they had executed in Southeast Asia and the divisions it had caused in the United States.

In May 1972, Shatan wrote an editorial for the *New York Times* that introduced the idea of a “post-Vietnam syndrome” among veterans of the war. He told of an ex-marine named Steve who could not walk through Times Square without scanning the crowd for enemies. Steve, like other veterans of the Vietnam War, Shatan wrote, could not put his service behind him. He suffered through alternating bouts of guilt and rage. He felt alienated from those he loved and “deceived, used and betrayed” by the nation. Shatan represented post-Vietnam syndrome as the haunting presence of a violent past that divorced the veteran from the present. “The post-Vietnam syndrome

confronts us with the unconsummated grief of soldiers—‘impacted grief’ in which an encapsulated, never-ending past deprives the present of meaning,” he wrote.¹⁵ The veteran patient Shatan described had been estranged from the present, resigned to living in limbo, caught somewhere between Vietnam and an imagined prewar America. He could not come home.

Lifton delivered a detailed account of his and Shatan’s work in *Home from the War: Vietnam Veterans—Neither Victims nor Executioners* (1973), which received extensive attention from reviewers and editorialists and earned him a second National Book Award nomination. Lifton attributed the distinct struggles of Vietnam veterans to an erosion of what he called “symbolic immortality”: the belief that one’s life, while finite, endures forever within the structure of one’s social world. The Vietnam War had, he suggested, undermined the “psycho-mythology of war-making” through which Americans imagined themselves and their relation to the nation.¹⁶ Without the armor of myth, the soldier had undergone a “moral inversion” that revealed war to be nothing more than an act of killing. The soldier’s belief in social immortality had been reduced to an unmitigated recognition of biological death. The veteran should not, Lifton argued, be understood as either a victim or an executioner but as a “survivor.” He even referred to the Americans who carried out the My Lai massacre—in which Americans killed some five hundred unarmed civilians in the village of Song My—as “the My Lai survivors.”¹⁷ Lifton defended his claim by stressing the similarities between the new generation of American veterans and the Hiroshima survivors he had interviewed for his earlier book. “I found that survivors of the Hiroshima holocaust experienced what I described as ‘a vast breakdown of faith in the larger human matrix supporting each individual life, and therefore a loss of faith (or trust) in the structure of existence,’” he wrote. “The same is true not only for large numbers of Vietnam veterans but, perhaps in more indirect and muted ways, for Americans in general. This shattered existential faith has to do with remaining bound by the image of holocaust, of grotesque and absurd death and equally absurd survival.”¹⁸ Lifton failed to acknowledge that the Hiroshima survivors were, of course, civilians whose families and homes the United States had decimated with a nuclear bomb, while his “My Lai survivors” were soldiers who had executed civilians. “The psychology of the survivor is central even to the killing process,” he insisted.¹⁹ Trauma was, for Lifton, a great leveler, and he dedicated his book to nineteen of his veteran patients and to “Hoang (a surviving child of My Lai).”

Lifton believed that the faithless veteran, having been liberated from American myth, should be regarded as a kind of modern wise man. He argued that societies construct warrior heroes who affirm existing hierarchies, or what he

called “socialized warriors.” Vietnam veterans, recognizing the disconnect between the socialized warrior and what they had done in Southeast Asia, “freed themselves from the powerful cultural pseudomythology to take a hard look at the killing and dying” and carried out “symbolic psychological work for all veterans, and indeed for all of American society.”²⁰ Lifton later wrote in his memoir that the disaffected veteran served a “prophetic function” for the nation by dismantling a myth that had facilitated centuries of war.²¹ But the Vietnam War did not mark the end of the war hero but instead led to the substitution of one hero with another, the warrior hero with the trauma hero. Lifton and Shatan’s research gave rise to the latter by treating the Vietnam veteran as a survivor of the war who had lost the cultural narratives that had allowed earlier generations to make sense of martial violence. These veterans could not return home; they had been refueged from the nation they had known.²²

The idea of the veteran as an internal refugee, an idea that later animated the diagnostic criteria for PTSD, advanced a closed narrative of the war in Southeast Asia in which the American veteran became—notwithstanding the subtitle of Lifton’s book—victim *and* executioner, refugee and giver of refuge. Mimi Nguyen has identified how the liberal state’s alleged conferral of freedom to refugees founds a never-settled debt relation between the refugee and the receiving government. “To be given freedom is a process of becoming without being” that carries a “stubborn remainder of its absence,” she writes.²³ The discourse of the veteran-as-refugee situates the American veteran as the giver and receiver of that gift who accrues no debt as its lender and borrower. As more refugees arrived from Southeast Asia under the Reagan administration, officials, writers, and filmmakers began articulating their “debt” as the source of the Vietnam veteran’s missing “credit.” Equating white vets with Southeast Asian refugees serves to separate rather than unite them. The vets have been mistaken for debtors when they are, as white men, the natural inheritors of liberal freedom. The equivalence carries an implied hierarchy. The arrival of Southeast Asian refugees coincided with a new sense of victimization among white men, for whom the loss of manufacturing jobs and basic services reflected, they believed, not an economic but a cultural crisis. President Ronald Reagan encouraged white men to see themselves in the figure of the Vietnam vet who had been sent off to fight in “a war our government [was] afraid to let [him] win.”²⁴ The government had abandoned them, too, the president suggested, turning its attention instead to immigrants, refugees, and the enforcement of civil rights reforms. From a war fought by a disproportionate number of black, Latino, and American Indian soldiers and marines, the veteran emerged as an icon of *white* alienation.

Lifton himself acknowledged the dangers of anointing trauma heroes. In the spring of 1973, following the signing of the Paris Peace Accords, the North Vietnamese government released 591 American prisoners of war to the United States. The freed prisoners arrived to an orchestrated media event that the Nixon administration dubbed Operation Homecoming. That March, Lifton wrote an editorial in the *New York Times* warning against foisting the “hero’s mantle” on these men. “A long and degrading war has made Americans desperate for heroes,” he wrote, but “we would better serve returning prisoners, and other Vietnam veterans as well, with attitudes of openness, truthfulness and recognition of the extent to which all Americans fighting this war have been victimized no less than their assigned enemies.”²⁵ Lifton could see that heroizing the prisoners could distract Americans from the war itself and the decisions that had led to it. But he did not, it seems, recognize that his then-forthcoming book would contribute to the sanctification of the prisoner of war, who would become an icon in Hollywood films and right-wing political culture. Although President Richard Nixon announced in a television address that month that “all of our American POWs are on their way home,” activist organizations such as the National League of Families held strong to a belief—a belief that Nixon himself had encouraged—that Vietnam still held thousands of American prisoners.²⁶ The POW/MIA issue has shaped American cultural memory of the Vietnam War ever since and contributed to the idea that veterans had been left behind in Southeast Asia by government elites who cared more about welcoming Vietnamese than rescuing their own fighting men.²⁷ Years before the Refugee Act went into effect, leading to the resettlement of hundreds of thousands of Southeast Asians in the United States, lawmakers, news media, and activists laid the cultural groundwork by which the American vet could be imagined as like a refugee and later pitted against those arriving from postwar Vietnam.

The 591 prisoners who returned as part of Operation Homecoming did not reflect the working-class, multiracial troops who had fought in Vietnam. Most of the prisoners were airmen who had been shot down over North Vietnam before 1968, the year President Lyndon Johnson ordered a halt on bombing north of the seventeenth parallel. Eighty-eight percent were officers. Most held college degrees. All were men. An estimated ninety-five percent were white. Not a single one of the 591 prisoners had been drafted.²⁸ In a war waged in large part by working-class soldiers of color, whom Christian Appy identifies as “the nineteen-year-old children of waitresses, factory workers, truck drivers, [and] secretaries,” the POW/MIA issue allowed Americans to remember the war as a struggle to free a group of older white officers who had been abandoned by

their government in Southeast Asia and had come back to a fractured nation.²⁹ News media received the men as “a new breed of Van Winkle” who had left an idyllic pre-civil rights nation and returned to streets crowded with “the perennial banners of militancy, each inscribed with the device, Liberation,” over which “are the words Gay, Black, Women’s, Chicano and People’s.”³⁰ The men had, they suggested, been refugeed twice over, first as prisoners of war in North Vietnam and then as veterans in an unfamiliar America. The veneration of the white POW contributed to what Roderick Ferguson has described as a new form of whiteness “born of critique but still invested in its own material centrality,” a whiteness that counters demands for material redistribution and more compassionate immigrant and refugee policies with stories of white male grievance.³¹ As a *Newsweek* headline declared in 1985, amid stories of American veterans returning to Vietnam as tourists, diplomats, and aid workers, “We’re Still Prisoners of War.”³² The white veteran had left a part of himself in Southeast Asia and would have to return to retrieve it so he could finally come home.

Parallel Returns

In the 1980s, after the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial stimulated interest in revisiting the war, veterans organizations and travel agencies began arranging tours of Vietnam for Americans vets. The United States had enforced a trade embargo on Vietnam since the end of the war, and the Vietnamese government had been reluctant to grant tourist visas to Americans. Few veterans had returned before 1985, when Vietnam began offering trial visas to vets and their families.³³ The first veteran tourists described their visits as a search for something they had lost in the war. One former marine hoped that “going back to Vietnam will maybe help put some emotions from the war behind me.”³⁴ Another acknowledged that he and his fellow veterans felt they could “fill a void by going back there to get some answers” and “find what’s missing here.”³⁵ Journalists wrote hundreds of articles about the returning veterans, and the vets contributed their own editorials and books about what they described as a kind of reverse homecoming. Most journalists contrasted Vietnam veterans with those who had fought in World War II, men who had “come home heroes” and later had “the opportunity to return to battle sites to reflect on the war or mourn fallen friends.”³⁶ The veterans of the war in Southeast Asia, they wrote, had been unable to return to postwar Vietnam, where they could gather “replacement images” to substitute for memories of death and destruction.³⁷ They were haunted by yet alienated from Vietnam.

The returning veterans recounted with amazement how Vietnamese showed no signs of resentment toward them. A forty-one-year-old ex-marine, who admitted to having killed more than twenty Vietnamese children in 1968, “found that the open arms and smiling faces of the Vietnamese [restored] his sense of self-worth,” and he left Southeast Asia believing that “if they could forgive, then we could forgive ourselves.” He and others even suggested that their former enemies had treated them with the kind of warmth and brotherhood that their fellow Americans had denied them years earlier. Remembering how he had been welcomed by a former Viet Cong soldier, an army veteran reflected, “You know how nice it was to hear that [welcome] after not hearing it from Americans? You have to go over there twenty-three years later and have one of them say it to you. That was the most moving thing that happened.”³⁸ The veterans found that they shared more in common with former Vietnamese soldiers than with American civilians, who, they felt, could never understand what they had been through. With hundreds of thousands of Southeast Asian refugees resettling in San Jose, Houston, and San Diego, journalists turned their attention instead to American veterans who could at last “come home” to Vietnam. If the reporting on Operation Homecoming in the 1970s treated returned prisoners of war as exiles from a pre-civil rights America, then the stories of vets returning to Southeast Asia in the 1980s stressed their dislocation from postwar Vietnam as a place that could heal them if they could only return. Their journey home had been reversed.

William Broyles, a former marine officer and editor of *Newsweek*, returned to Vietnam in late 1984 and wrote one of the first return-to-Vietnam memoirs, *Brothers in Arms: A Journey from War to Peace* (1986). His book set the tone for what became a full-fledged genre of postwar travel writing. In 1983, Broyles met with Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach at the Vietnamese mission to the United Nations in Manhattan. He told Thach that he wished to return to Southeast Asia to write about the Vietnamese he had fought as a young man. Thach was intrigued, and a year later Broyles flew to Hanoi as the foreign minister’s guest. The war was “still in me, like a buried piece of shrapnel working its way to the surface,” Broyles writes. “I went back to find a man I never knew—my enemy. I went back to find the pieces of myself I had left there, and to try to put the war behind me.” In Hanoi, Broyles found that Vietnamese veterans had made peace with the past. “For them the war was long, bitter, terrible—and over.”³⁹ It was not an enduring trauma for them as it was for American veterans, who, he suggests, could not move forward with their lives because they had been barred from what Pierre Nora calls “sites of memory” and what Hue-Tam Ho Tai identifies as the “geographies of memory”

that blanket late-socialist Vietnam with monuments and museums.⁴⁰ Broyles overlooks the years of war and economic crisis faced by Vietnamese after the American withdrawal and attributes his and other Vietnam vets' postwar struggles to having been refugeeed from Southeast Asia, unable to return to the places that held their war memories and something of their past selves. His 1985 *Atlantic* article "The Road to Hill 10: A Veteran's Return to Vietnam" and his 1986 book modeled the emerging return-to-Vietnam narrative by recounting his personal path from sorrow to reconciliation.⁴¹ Going back allowed him to recognize the war as a settled past rather than a haunting present, to see it as "only a memory."⁴² Broyles, a lifelong liberal, argued for the Reagan administration to normalize relations with Vietnam so that other American vets could, like him, heal themselves through tourism. Unlike Southeast Asian refugees, who endured a permanent displacement, the white vet could put the past behind him with a round-trip ticket to Vietnam.

Some of the first veterans to return to Southeast Asia were novelists and poets. In December 1985, W. D. Ehrhart, a poet and former marine, returned to Vietnam on assignment for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. He traveled to Hanoi with two fellow writers, John Balaban and Bruce Weigl, and later penned two books about their weeklong tour, the memoir *Going Back: An Ex-Marine Returns to Vietnam* (1987) and the chapbook *Winter Bells* (1988). In *Going Back*, Ehrhart describes Southeast Asia as a kind of alien homeland for him, Balaban, Weigl, and other vets. "Vietnam has remained a permanent condition of my life—as much a state of mind as a geographic location, the turning point, the place where I first began to see and think and learn and question," he writes. Ehrhart imagines Southeast Asia as a place that he had never left yet could never reclaim. Like Broyles, he could not put the war behind him until he could replace his memories of combat with images of a serene, forgiving Vietnam. "Now when I think of Vietnam, I will not see in my mind's eye the barbed wire and the grim patrols and the violent death [but rather] those graceful fishing boats gliding out of the late afternoon sun across the South China Sea toward safe harbor at Vung Tau."⁴³ In Vietnam, he found replacement images with which he could rewrite, and write over, the war. Five years later, Ehrhart and Weigl returned to Southeast Asia again with a delegation of American writers that included Philip Caputo, Larry Heinemann, and Yusef Komunyakaa. The Americans met with Vietnamese war writers at a conference that one delegate declared a true "meeting of hearts and minds." Caputo explained his return by quoting Rudyard Kipling: "We have but one virginity to lose, but where we lost it our hearts will always be."⁴⁴ The writers conference and the wave of veteran-authored return-to-Vietnam books coincided with some of the first

Vietnamese American refugee memoirs. With Vietnamese Americans publishing accounts of their displacement and resettlement, white American veterans like Broyles and Ehrhart began to tell their own refugee stories.

While writers like Weigl and Ehrhart had been active in the antiwar movement, the return-to-Vietnam genre was not limited to liberal vets. Right-wing POW/MIA activists found a mainstream foothold in 1980 with the election of Reagan, who had allied himself with the National League of Families as governor of California and later set the POW/MIA myth at the center of his negotiations with the Vietnamese government. In 1987, the president appointed his former Joint Chiefs chairman John Vessey to serve as a humanitarian ambassador to Vietnam for POW/MIA affairs. Vessey, in turn, invited Frederick Downs, a conservative Veterans Administration official who had lost an arm in Vietnam, to be part of his delegation. Downs visited Vietnam five times between 1987 and 1989 and later recounted his travels in *No Longer Enemies, Not Yet Friends: An American Soldier Returns to Vietnam* (1991). Though less remorseful than Broyles and Ehrhart, Downs also imagines Vietnam as a lost home for the white vet. Reflecting on why he came back, he asks, "Would Vietnam ever let me go? Did I want it to? I thought not. Once a man has contributed his blood and his honor to a country, he is always part of what it becomes."⁴⁵ Downs's book literalizes the idea of recovering a part of oneself and one's nation in Southeast Asia through his reflections on losing an arm in combat and his search for the missing bodies of American soldiers. Even as he maintains the administration's hard-line toward Vietnam, Downs acknowledges a "sense of kinship" with his former enemies and a feeling of renewed "spiritual" freedom on the streets of Hanoi.⁴⁶ His book reflected a growing consensus among conservatives and liberals that, whatever one thought of the war, the American veteran had suffered a severe dislocation in Vietnam. While those vets were not all white, the return-to-Vietnam memoir made it look that way. So did most Hollywood films, rock songs, and mass-market fiction. The white veteran could not go home. He lived like a refugee.

Former American soldiers and marines were not alone in constructing the veteran-as-refugee. Some Vietnamese American writers themselves reinforced the parallel between veterans' stories and their own. In 1986, Le Ly Hayslip, a refugee of the war, returned to Vietnam sixteen years after resettling in California. That homecoming framed her first memoir, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (1989), on which Oliver Stone later based his film *Heaven and Earth* (1993). Echoing the title of Broyles's book, it is subtitled *A Vietnamese Woman's Journey from War to Peace*. Hayslip addresses her memoir to the

American veteran, whom she asks “to read this book and look into the heart of one you once called enemy,” to recognize what they share as “survivors” of the war. “The least you did—the least any of us did—was our duty,” she writes. “If you have not yet found peace at the end of your war, I hope you will find it here.” Hayslip’s memoir, the most popular by a Vietnamese refugee, may have received a warmer welcome from critics and readers because of her willingness to wed her story to that of white American vets like Broyles, Ehrhart, Weigl, and Downs. She established the charitable organization East Meets West in 1987 to “reenlist” American veterans as aid workers in Southeast Asia. Encouraging the boom in humanitarian tourism, she urged them to “sign on for another ‘tour of duty’ in service of humanity and yourself—to heal the wounds that may linger in your spirit and help the Vietnamese people, who, like war victims anywhere, are the spiritual partners of your journey.”⁴⁷ In interviews after the publication of her first book, Hayslip suggested that Vietnamese had been more successful than Americans at “coming to terms” with the war because they had been able to return to the site of violence. “No doctor, no hospital, no psychologist can heal [veterans] like going back to Vietnam,” she said.⁴⁸

Reconciliation through identification has its limits, though. Lisa Cacho has drawn attention to how the market-based valuation of human worth necessitates the recruitment of those deemed criminals, terrorists, and refugees as a kind of “‘negative resource’ to American value.”⁴⁹ The refugee forms the constitutive outside of legal being, making others’ civil value legible and meaningful. Cacho’s argument allows us to see how casting the white male veteran as a socioeconomic refugee—who had “come back home to the refinery” to hear, as Springsteen tells it, “Son, if it was up to me”⁵⁰—founds a hierarchical relation between him and the Vietnamese refugee, with the vet having been “misidentified” as someone without value. The refugee serves as a negative resource for the veteran, for whom being like a refugee signals less his identification with Vietnamese than his ill-treatment as someone less deserving than himself. That idea endured as the Clinton administration normalized relations with Vietnam in the mid-1990s and even more vets went back to reconcile their memories and heal their minds. The veteran-as-refugee stories of Broyles, Ehrhart, and Downs introduced a narrative framework for remembering the war that has defined US–Vietnam relations and the true war stories taught at high schools and universities ever since.

The False Equivalence of True War Stories

In 2017, the *New York Times* featured a yearlong series of editorials by historians, veterans, and journalists looking back on the Vietnam War. Maureen Ryan, an English professor at the University of Southern Mississippi, contributed a reflection on the war in American literature titled “The Long History of the Vietnam Novel.” She observed that fiction about the war had been slow to catch on until the 1980s, when a canon began to form around the work of such authors as Heinemann, O’Brien, and Michael Herr. Their writing gave rise to what Ryan called the “Vietnam novel,” a genre of “overwhelming ambiguity” built on an “avant-garde, postmodernist technique that echoes the characteristics of much late twentieth-century American literature: an ironic, even absurdist sensibility; a fragmented, discontinuous story line; a fundamental distrust of definable meaning.”⁵¹ Viet Nguyen had won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction a year earlier for his debut novel about a North Vietnamese mole living in California in the aftermath of the war. But Ryan did not mention Nguyen or other refugee writers, describing the Vietnam novel instead as the exclusive terrain of the American veteran. For years, high school and college educators taught veteran and refugee stories as mirror images of each other, with writers like O’Brien being read alongside books by Hayslip, Lan Cao, and Andrew Pham. Despite the fragmented, postmodern style adopted by some vet writers, that pairing, over time, created a false equivalence that allowed the veteran trauma narrative to stand in for and subsume refugee knowledge in the English classroom and among liberal book critics and readers. Imagined as like a refugee, the white male vet could, they assumed, write the Vietnam novel all by himself.

O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* (1990) has defined that genre. His book of interconnected short stories has become one of the most assigned titles at American high schools and universities. It is a regular selection for common-read programs and part of the standard curriculum for Advanced Placement English Literature courses. It is all some students will ever learn about the war in Southeast Asia. For more than a decade now, the National Endowment for the Arts has promoted O’Brien’s fiction through the Big Read, a program that sponsors local reading events and distributes instructional materials to local librarians and high school English teachers in towns and small cities from Ellensburg, Washington, to Fort Worth, Texas, to Binghamton, New York. The Vietnam novel, it seems, belongs to O’Brien and other vets, whose stories of combat and homecoming are received as unassailable, the truest of true war

stories. Nguyen himself has argued that the conflation of the soldier with the war in American cultural memory has meant that refugee stories get received as about something other than war. “While the refugee who becomes a writer is given the license to tell a refugee story, he or she is not seen as writing an actual war story, at least not one that is given the same weight as the soldier’s.” Making “the grade” as a refugee writer is more difficult, he writes, and that unevenness “is inseparable from the war that created the refugee in the first place and hence created the conditions for grading the refugee turned writer.”⁵² For American readers, Vietnam War fiction is, for the most part, a white genre, associated with the writing of Heinemann, O’Brien, Gustav Hasford, and Robert Stone. The white male vet gets to tell true war stories and—as songwriters, psychiatrists, and journalists reimagined him as dislocated from the nation—true *refugee* stories of his own.

Although O’Brien did not return to Southeast Asia until 1994, he had imagined that return years earlier in his short fiction. In “Field Trip,” O’Brien’s narrator, also named Tim O’Brien, tours Vietnam with his ten-year-old daughter Kathleen. Tim takes her to the marsh where his friend Kiowa had died twenty years earlier, sucked into the muck during a nighttime firefight. While Tim is wistful and reflective, his daughter is bored and bewildered by her father’s nostalgia. Like Broyles, Ehrhart, and Downs, Tim comes to terms with the war by returning to Vietnam, where he can substitute his traumatic memories with the knowledge that Vietnamese had moved on. Looking out on the field where Kiowa had died, Tim sees “birds and butterflies” and hears “the soft rustlings of rural-anywhere.” It is nothing like what he remembered. “I blamed this place for what I had become, and I blamed it for taking away the person I had once been. For twenty years this field had embodied all the waste that was Vietnam, all the vulgarity and horror.”⁵³ But now it is just a calm meadow. Struck by the disconnect between then and now, Tim wonders if, “maybe, I’d gone under with Kiowa, and now after two decades I’d finally worked my way out.” As he and Kathleen leave, Tim notices a farmer watching him, and Kathleen asks if the farmer is mad at him. Tim replies that, no, “all that’s finished.”⁵⁴ While Kathleen could never understand what her father has been through, the farmer, Tim believes, knows what he has seen and, in a wordless exchange, welcomes him home to Vietnam. The story invites an alternative reading, that the farmer may be communicating something other than a feeling of reconciliation with Tim, but that isn’t for the most part how it is taught. The Big Read even encourages teachers to use “Field Trip” to demonstrate and define a narrative denouement for their students.⁵⁵ It is where

O'Brien at last brings the war to an end, where Tim sheds his refugee status. Despite the postmodern bent of O'Brien's fiction—the irony and absurdity that Ryan and others celebrate—it never ventures too far from the seamless return-to-Vietnam narrative circulating at the time of its publication in news media and memoirs. The Big Read and other instructional programs have narrowed its meaning to the familiar themes of trauma and healing.

When O'Brien did, like his fictional narrator, return to Vietnam in middle age, he wrote an uncannily similar nonfiction account of his travels for the *New York Times Magazine* titled “The Vietnam in Me.” From his house in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in June 1994, he looks back on a battle-site tour he took with his then-girlfriend Kate four months earlier. The real Tim O'Brien does not have a daughter, but Kate, being twenty years younger than him, stands in for the post-Vietnam generation as Kathleen does in “Field Trip.” He and Kate visit Quang Ngai Province, where they travel to O'Brien's former firebase, LZ Gator, just outside Chu Lai, and to the village of Song My to meet with survivors of the My Lai massacre. Like Tim in “Field Trip,” O'Brien struggles to find evidence of the Vietnam he remembers. Visiting LZ Gator for the first time in twenty-five years and finding nothing but a harmless hamlet, he reflects, “I'm home, but the house is gone. Not a sandbag, not a nail or a scrap of wire.” He imagines LZ Gator—once a bustling base with a mess hall, a medical station, volleyball courts, and entertainment clubs—as a lost home, a refuge from the war that had vanished in the years since he left Vietnam. He takes Kate to a hillside where his unit had lost thirteen men in a brutal two-hour firefight. All that remains is a sunlit rice field. Thinking of Kate, he writes, “I hope she remembers how I fell silent after a time, just looking out at the golds and yellows, joining the peace, and how in those fine sunlit moments, which were ours, Vietnam took a little Vietnam out of me.”⁵⁶ He sees Vietnam as a condition and a cure, the source of his worst memories and a vehicle for revisiting them. It is an antidote for what he describes as a feeling of homesickness for a home that was never his. The return-to-Vietnam narrative had turned the veteran into a refugee, and O'Brien's real-life return imitated that fiction.

High school and college teachers often assign O'Brien's short stories with a refugee memoir or novel to give their reading list a sense of balance. But that parallel also surfaces in some refugee writing itself. In the mid-1990s, Andrew Pham, whose family fled Vietnam in 1976 when he was nine years old, left his job as an aeronautics engineer and undertook a months-long bicycle tour of California and Mexico and then Japan and Vietnam. That tour became the basis of his first memoir *Catfish and Mandala: A Two-Wheeled Voyage through the*

Landscape and Memory of Vietnam (1999), in which Andrew returns to Vietnam to, he hopes, reconcile his past Vietnamese self with his present American self and come to terms with the suicide of his transsexual brother Minh. Andrew shares his desire for reconciliation with the American veterans he meets on the road. Pham frames his memoir with an anecdote about meeting a hulking white vet named Tyle in Mexico. Tyle has never shaken his memories of the war and lives in self-imposed exile. He asks Andrew to, when he returns to Vietnam, “tell them about my life, the way I’m living. Tell them about the family I’ve lost. Tell them I’m sorry.” Andrew muses, “I am the rootless one, yet still the beneficiary of all of your and all [Vietnamese] sufferings. Then why, of us two, am I the savior, and you the sinner?”⁵⁷ Andrew sees himself, and not Tyle, as “the rootless one,” refugee from Vietnam and minoritized in the United States. But he acknowledges that he and Tyle share a parallel sense of dislocation as a 1.5-generation refugee and a wounded vet. Tyle may not be a refugee but he lives like one, and Andrew sees something of himself in the veteran, who was, like him, uprooted by the war.

In Vietnam, Andrew meets other self-searching vets, who, like Broyles, Ehrhart, Downs, and O’Brien, have gone back to confront unsettled memories. At the demilitarized zone, he meets a tour guide named Cao who informs him that most of his clients are American veterans who “get very emotional” and “just walk around as though they are lost. Lost their soul, you know.” Andrew asks the tour guide why Vietnamese have been more able to forget and move on than Americans. Cao answers that Vietnamese and Americans are like two men who fell in love with the same woman, with one winning her affection and one losing her forever. “After twenty years, all you have of her are memories, both the good and the bad. Me, I live with her for twenty years. I see her at her best and at her worst,” he explains, describing a kind of tragic imperial romance. “It is not the forgetting but the new history with the girl that is the difference between you and me.”⁵⁸ Andrew tells Cao about Tyle and a vet he met in California named Big Jake and realizes that he identifies with them as much as with Vietnamese. He has also come to the demilitarized zone to wrestle with a lost past. Yet, unlike return-to-Vietnam narratives by veterans, Pham’s memoir does not flatten the difference between veteran and refugee stories. Instead, his writing reflects what Eric Tang calls “refugee temporality,” a recognition that crossing the border is less a transition than a state of life for the refugee, who is enlisted as “one to be simultaneously saved and incidentally injured by the violence carried out in the name of human rights and freedom.”⁵⁹ Whereas the veteran-as-refugee narrative can end—when the veteran returns to Vietnam

and reconciles his past—the refugee narrative cannot. It reveals liberal war to be a self-perpetuating regime rather than a discrete event. Andrew finds that he can never be Vietnamese like Cao or claim America like Tyle and Big Jake.⁶⁰ Pham’s memoir cannot reach a denouement like O’Brien’s “Field Trip.” Refugee stories are war stories that are too true for a nation unwilling to acknowledge wartime as normal time. It has been easier for officials from Nixon to Trump to treat white male veterans as the real refugees of the post-Vietnam era than to reckon with those war stories that do not and cannot end.

Pro-Veteran Politics, Anti-Refugee Policies

On November 25, 2016, weeks after the presidential election, the conservative writer J. D. Vance argued in a *New York Times* editorial that Trump won the white working-class vote not by appealing to racial hatred but by advocating for veterans and their families. “In communities like mine [in southwestern Ohio], we send our best and brightest to our armed forces. Our culture’s elite, on the other hand, encourage their children to do just about anything else,” he wrote. “This division has also infected our political culture: One side loves our military and lives alongside it; the other party respects—even reveres—our men and women in uniform.”⁶¹ Trump secured the white working-class vote, he believed, by speaking to the white male vet’s sense of alienation from Washington elites who made life-and-death decisions on his behalf. But Vance overlooked how the figure of the wounded warrior had been marshaled by elites like Trump as the embodiment of white male grievance and a vessel for anti-Asian and anti-Muslim racism, how pro-veteran politics had become anti-refugee policies. Throughout his presidential campaign, Trump invoked the veteran-as-refugee to pit deserving white vets against undeserving refugees and undocumented immigrants. “The media and [Hillary Clinton] discuss one thing and only one thing, the needs of people living here illegally,” he declared at a campaign stop that August, before going off-script to add, “In many cases, by the way, they’re treated better than our vets.”⁶² Liberal news media sought to debunk Trump’s claim by fact-checking his words and declaring them “false,” “misleading,” and even “absurd.”⁶³ But his comparison resonated because psychiatrists, songwriters, and journalists had years earlier constructed the white male veteran of the Vietnam War as a refugee in his own land.

Vance, a veteran of the Iraq War, did not mention that Trump had never served in the armed forces, having received four student deferments between 1964 and 1968 and a 1-Y medical deferment for bad feet after graduating from the University of Pennsylvania. Trump had shocked pundits in the first months

of his campaign by declaring that Senator John McCain, a former naval aviator and one of the 591 prisoners of war who returned from Vietnam as part of Operation Homecoming, was not a hero because he had been shot down. “I like people that weren’t captured,” Trump said at a conservative forum in Ames, Iowa.⁶⁴ The following spring, he received an invitation to the Rolling Thunder motorcycle rally, the largest POW/MIA event of the year. How, journalists asked, could POW/MIA activists endorse a candidate who had ducked the draft and then insulted a senator who had spent six years in a North Vietnamese prison? The *idea* of the veteran, like the idea of the refugee, has become a loose signifier that can be marshaled by a nonveteran like Trump to greater effect than by a decorated combat vet like McCain. It has been detached from veteran bodies and made to stand for a form of aggrieved whiteness that encourages white men to see themselves as victims of refugee resettlement, transformed by liberal state governance into internal refugees. Even as young black, Latino, and American Indian men and women continue to serve in the armed forces at disproportionately high rates, as they did in Vietnam, the cultural figure of the morally injured warrior has remained overwhelmingly white, from the award-winning fiction of Matt Gallagher, Phil Klay, and Kevin Powers to films like *The Hurt Locker* (2008), *Lone Survivor* (2013), and *American Sniper* (2014). The wounded veteran has acted as a vessel for a new form of white identity politics that can be heard when now-president Trump sets Iraq vets against Syrian refugees fleeing military violence and black football players protesting police brutality. It is a story that mixes white supremacy with a belief in white oppression, allowing white men to see themselves as simultaneously the most deserving and the most vulnerable, embodiments of the nation and exiles from it. It is a powerful and poisonous story that first emerged from a selective remembrance of the war in Southeast Asia that remade the American veteran as, in Tom Petty’s words, like a refugee.

Notes

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