

RETURNS OF WAR: SOUTH VIETNAM AND THE PRICE OF REFUGEE
MEMORY

Long T. Bui (Author)

New York: New York University Press, 2018, pp. 251, ISBN 9781479871957

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For the cover of *Returns of War*, Long T. Bui chose an artwork by fine-arts photographer Dinh Q. Lê, *Untitled* (1997). In this montage—woven on linen tape utilizing a traditional Vietnamese technique for crafting grass mats—the face of the artist is indissolubly interwoven with a map of the Indochinese Peninsula. Lê’s eyes are shut, like the eyes of a corpse, or of someone who is trying to focus on distant memories of lost sounds, colors, and fragrances of a country that does not exist anymore. Indeed, the borders and the toponyms displayed in the polaroid prints clearly date back prior to April 30, 1975, when the North Vietnamese army entered Sài Gòn, concluding thirty years of continuous warfare and putting an end to the short-lived Republic of Vietnam, or South Vietnam, as it was commonly referred to.

The specter of this ill-fated lost nation is the focal point of Long T. Bui’s research. Subverting both the Communist national rhetoric about the inevitable collapse of a bygone client-state and the American self-indulgent narrative about the pitiful demise of an inept ally that just was not up to the task, Bui tries successfully to introduce a new critical perspective. Yet his focus is not on South Vietnam’s brief history, nor on its sudden ending. What chiefly interests him of South Vietnam is its “*absent presence*” in the collective memory, with the various forms that a national identity takes decades after the death of a nation.

Bui defines his critical approach as “Vietnamization,” a term commonly associated with Nixon’s policy of handing the war to the Vietnamese as a political façade, while simultaneously preparing the American withdrawal. His is a professed political re-appropriation: stripped of its original meaning—and of its implied neo-colonial and patronizing subtext—the word “Vietnamization” is resemantized. For Bui,

“vietnamizing” the memory of the Vietnam War is to patiently dismantle a collective narrative that since 1975 has been heavily “re-americanized” both in the fictional and non-fictional retellings of the conflict. A narrative that, in the American popular imagination, often reduces the complex alliances and divisions of a long fratricidal struggle to a simplistic confrontation between the GIs and the enemy, with the South Vietnamese usually sidelined and depicted as “helpless subjects and hapless allies.” As Viet Thanh Nguyen famously wrote in his 2016 essay *Nothing Ever Dies*, “[a]ll wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory” (4). Quoting Michel Foucault, Bui echoes Nguyen, stating that “the cultural politics of remembering the Vietnam War” and the forgotten South Vietnam are therefore “la guerre continuée par d’autres moyens” (1997, 16).

In the first chapter, “Archival Others,” Bui tries to make sense of the exclusion of this “ghost nation” from the American public memory, going back to the very foundation of any historical discourse, the archive. In the Vietnam War Center and Archive (VNCA) of Lubbock (TX), the scholar faces the paradox of struggling to find relevant documentation or photographic material under the keyword “Vietnamese,” having no problem, instead, finding such material when typing ethnic slurs such as “gook.” The policy adopted by the VNCA of filing the material without censoring or altering the original captions in any way allows Bui to see the South Vietnamese through the dehumanizing gaze of the American soldiers. The invisibility of the Vietnamese subjects in the American memory is thus made evident by the “hypervisibility” of their specular counterparts, the treacherous and faceless “gooks.”

However, as Bui argues, this archival invisibility is also partly due to the reluctance of many members of the Vietnamese American community in taking part to the activities of the VNCA: the fierce anti-communism widespread in the community prevents many Vietnamese Americans from visiting the archive, probably because of the VNCA’s policies regarding the inclusion of the North Vietnamese and NLF (Việt Cộng) perspective.

Throughout the book, Bui’s point of view is at the same time biased and objective. As he states in the very first page of the essay, he is definitely part of the story

he is telling. Born in the United States from a refugee family, he grew up without direct memories of South Vietnam. Therefore, in the second chapter, “Refugee Assets,” Bui is admittedly driven by his own family history to attempt an extensive reading of Aimee Phan’s refugee family saga *The Reeducation of Cherry Truong*, a staple of contemporary Vietnamese American literature. However, his deep sympathy for the “historical excesses of America’s involvement in Vietnam,” the Vietnamese refugees, does not prevent him from exposing the flaws and the internal divisions of his own community with impartial eyes. This emerges in his personal involvement in some political disputes that took place in the Californian Vietnamese community during the early 2010s, that he reconstructs comprehensively in the third chapter, “Dismembered Lives.” In this chapter, Bui looks in detail at the Vietnamese American tendency to exclude themselves from anything even remotely associated with Communism.

Bui reports the case of an art exhibition in Santa Ana (CA) in 2009, in which one of his own artworks was also included. He remarks how the simple inclusion of a Communist flag next to a bust of the late North Vietnamese leader Hồ Chí Minh in a provocative and thought-provoking photographic work elicited a fierce and violent reaction in the local community. Likewise, Bui reports the case of the contested inclusion of LGBTQ representatives in the annual Tết Parades held in the Little Saigon of Westminster (CA). According to him, the outcry that followed this inclusion showed clearly how wide the generational divides and the political rifts are within the Vietnamese American community. More importantly, in this chapter Bui suggests that the wounded masculinity of ARVN veterans (defeated on the battleground but proudly marching in uniform with the insignia of a defunct army) possibly played a role in the controversy.

In the fourth chapter, “Militarized Freedoms,” Bui shows how the shame of the 1975 defeat drove many second generation (or 1.5 generation) Vietnamese Americans to enlist in the American Army, so as to recover somehow the lost pride of their fathers. Bui reports the symbolic act of a Vietnamese American soldier that raised the golden flag of South Vietnam in Baghdad during the Second Gulf War, an event that provoked an official protest by the Vietnamese government. According to Bui, the soldier

intended that gesture as a silent and implicit comparison between the Iraqi insurgents and the NLF guerrillas fought by his forefathers thirty years before. A significant comparison, considering the repeated allusions to the Vietnam War (and to the “Vietnam Syndrome”) made by politicians and journalists during both the Gulf Wars. According to Bui, the stories of these soldiers show the paradoxes underlying the mainstream “re-americanized” memory of the Vietnam War.

In the fifth chapter, “Empire’s Residuals,” Bui concludes his research in the tree-lined avenues of Sài Gòn/Hồ Chí Minh City, the city that embodied and symbolized the very spirit of South Vietnam. Rechristened by the Communists in the name of their founding father in the desperate attempt to purge it of its colonial and ‘western’ past, this ‘city with two names’ has recently recovered its role as the undisputed commercial hub of modern Vietnam. Sài Gòn is now a bustling Asian metropolis, in which the pastel-coloured walls of the old French villas are shadowed by towering glass skyscrapers, and where it is not rare to spot a McDonald’s or Starbucks logo next to a Communist propaganda billboard with the red face of Uncle Hồ. Sài Gòn, argues Bui, has come full circle: in this new era of “Vietnamized Capitalism,” the formerly reviled trading expertise of the Saigonese people is now celebrated and exploited by Hà Nội’s government. After a few decades, under the thin veneer of its new socialist façade, Sài Gòn is thus once more the rich and decadent city that once was. It has been like throwing a rock into an anthill: in the first moment, there’s panic and confusion; but after a while everything goes back to normal, readjusting quickly to the new order.

In this new scenario of changes and contradictions, Bui identifies a new Vietnamese figure, the “*returnee*.” In the final chapter, Bui tells the stories of some of these second or 1.5 generation Vietnamese Americans that have finally traced backwards the journey of their parents. Settling in modern Vietnam and remaking their lives thanks to their talents and their American dollars—now both welcomed by the socialist government—*returnees* like Dinh Q. Lê, Alex Hoa or Kynam Doan have truly reversed the South Vietnamese refugee paradigm. This is one of the last paradoxes of *Returns of War*: sons fleeing their country in order to seek their fortune, in the same city that their

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parents had to flee for their same reasons; finding Sài Gòn in Hồ Chí Minh City, and South Vietnam in southern Vietnam.

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