DEFOLIATING THE MIND: A TRANSNATIONAL HISTORY OF WAR FICTION ON VIETNAM

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Abstract

This thesis offers a comparative analysis of select American and Vietnamese novels produced in the years following America’s war in Vietnam. Centering attention on two distinct styles of literature -- American metafiction and Vietnamese novels of the renovation period -- this thesis argues that each nation’s writers had difficulty reconciling personal memory with nationally constructed narratives of history. It also interrogates the ways that novelists have contributed to their nations’ reassessments of their own recent histories, and incorporates their work into a more inclusive and transnational historiography. Using the metaphor of “defoliation,” the thesis contends that a more complicated understanding of the conflict between the United States and Vietnam depends in part on an acknowledgment of how the war’s fiery devastation spread into the realm of the imaginary for both Americans and Vietnamese -- a process of destruction written into war stories.
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Introduction

Fiction as History: The Traumatic Landscapes of War

The Vietnam War left an enormous documentary record in both America and Vietnam, which has led to the production of a tremendous number of historical treatments of the conflict. Scholars have interrogated the massive military effort, tracing United States involvement from advisement to full-scale combat; diplomatic historians have evaluated American decision-making and the geopolitical circumstances that led to American escalation; and social and cultural historians have documented the anti-war movement and the vast, incalculable impact the war had on American society. Politicians and veterans have written countless memoirs and personal histories, and journalists have exposed atrocities and reflected on the war's reportage, leaving historians substantial sources for critical interpretation of the war and its place in American history. The recent opening of Vietnam's archives to western scholars also allows for a much-needed explication of the Vietnamese perspective, resulting in a fuller understanding of the war and its origins.

Despite its current depth and breadth, the historical record can be expanded further by considering sources that attempt to assess the impact of the war on popular culture in each society. Such sources can be a valuable way to examine more closely not just the deeply personal psychological impact of the war but also to illuminate the ways that political discourse is reflected in cultural sources. The connections between politics and culture are clearly different in the cases of America and Vietnam, one nation constitutionally committed to rights of free expression and the other a tightly regulated
one-party state that has established strict parameters for cultural production since its turn to communism. Despite these differences, a comparative study of select novels produced in the years following the conflict in Vietnam offers historians the benefit of analyzing political sentiment on a more localized level, providing a better understanding of the war's impact on all those affected. This type of analysis likewise demonstrates the ways that novelists have contributed to each nation's reassessment of its own recent history, incorporating their work into a more inclusive and transnational historiography of the war.

Although cultural sources such as magazines, novels, film, and television are increasingly accepted as valid sources for historical scholarship, studies that rely on such sources are often very self-consciously aware of the need to substantiate their use and argue for their legitimacy. Comparatively examining fiction written by both American and Vietnamese participant-observers offers a visceral texture and provides an accessible form of context for the war, but the novels also point to some of the problems of memory and history that are not exclusive to a study of fiction. Much of the historical writing about Vietnam considers the voices of those involved, and the profusion of memoirs written by American combatants seems to indicate that the consideration of individual voices has overwhelmed more academic analyses, sometimes shifting inquiries away from larger questions about the origins of American involvement and the ways the war was prosecuted. Literary scholar Renny Christopher argues that American literature on Vietnam and its subsequent scholarly criticism has focused so narrowly on the limited personal experience of American soldiers that the novels dehistoricize the war and create
a predominantly male, ethnocentric discourse. Consequently, Christopher believes that the literature mythologizes the conflict rather than analyzes its real-world origins and implications, distorting America’s historical role in Vietnam and completely ignoring or misrepresenting Vietnamese characters. The American novels reviewed in this thesis are admittedly written from such limited perspectives, making the comparative aspect of my analytic framework crucially important.

Most of the scholarship on Vietnam War novels has been literary criticism limited to identifying patterns in war novels, often linking them to earlier traditions in American war literature and creating the mythology that Christopher criticizes. Since most of the American literature accepted by scholars as canonical, including works by Tim O’Brien, Philip Caputo, Michael Herr, and James Webb, are largely written from participants’ perspectives, much of the criticism attempts to connect novels to the larger traumatic socio-cultural impact of the war and to the broader scope of American history. Although these literary analyses have put forth a number of provocative theses — from literary scholar John Hellmann’s contention that Vietnam War novels are a continuation of America’s frontier ethos to Philip Melling’s assertion that the novels reflect America’s Puritanical, hyper-religious colonial roots, these studies rarely place the novels in any historical context or consider the ways that the novels reimagine recent history.

This thesis does not evaluate the literary significance or achievement of the works examined, but rather ascertains how Vietnamese and American fiction participates in

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historical discourse, how novels produced under such vastly different economic and political circumstances converge and diverge. This thesis assesses how these novels gauge the cultural impact of the war, and it probes the ways each nation has shaped the popular imagination of its history. Thousands of novels thematically focused on the Vietnam War have been written in the past three decades by both American and Vietnamese authors, making it necessary to restrict an analysis to a more specific subcategory. In the case of American fiction, this thesis evaluates a group of novels that exhibit elements of “metafiction,” a term coined by American novelist William H. Gass in 1970.³ Metafiction has been described as a literary style that self-consciously examines the process of fictionalization, raising questions about the relationship between fact and fiction.⁴ Drawing heavily from elements of postmodern theory, a study of metafictional novels has relevance beyond simple literary analysis, pointing to important and relevant issues of memory and history that have become central questions in recent historical scholarship. To historicize the idea of metafiction, Linda Hutcheon’s A Poetics of Postmodernism identified a problematic, fundamentally contradictory form of postmodern literature known as “historiographic metafiction.” Included in the realm of historiographic metafiction are novels which are “both intensively self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages.”⁵

Using Hutcheon’s theoretical foundation, the American component of this thesis evaluates the works of Michael Herr, Tim O’Brien, and Stephen Wright, authors whose writings evince a metafictional, postmodern approach to relaying their personal

experience as journalists and soldiers in Vietnam. Herr, O’Brien, and Wright’s treatments of Vietnam are conscious fictionalizations of war stories, reflecting the subjectivity of author/participants and suggesting the problematic task of locating and identifying fact and fiction in Vietnam novels. In addition to analyzing the fragmented, fractured postmodern form of metafictional novels, an evaluation of the writings of Herr, O’Brien and Wright offers a unique perspective on the postwar psychology of American participants in the war and on the broader impact of the war on American society.

Analyzing historical discourse through the novel is perhaps an approach that flows more naturally from the context of Vietnam, a country that has long acknowledged the importance of literary culture to its national identity. Since the establishment of the communist party’s Ministry of Culture in 1955, relatively few novels that critically evaluate war experiences have been available for public consumption, as literary publishing has been subject to strict party censorship. This thesis centers on novels published as a result of the implementation of “đổi mới” or “renovation” policies in 1986, a set of economic provisions designed to reconcile increasingly capitalist economic activity with a socialist bureaucracy. The impact of renovation extended beyond economics into the realm of popular culture, allowing authors what would ultimately be a very brief period to publish works that critically examined the country and the party’s recent history.

Duong Thu Huong and Nguyen Huy Thiệp are two authors whose work has been identified as representative of the renovation movement in Vietnam, offering audiences in

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6 Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, although nominally a work of journalistic non-fiction, displays metafictive approaches akin to the novels of O’Brien and Wright and is considered here in this context. See the longer discussion in chapter 2, 48-52.
Vietnam and abroad a glimpse into the devastating impact of the war on the general population, focusing specifically on perspectives rarely included in party-approved literature dealing with the war, such as those of women and peasants. Although these authors rarely recount specific narratives of the war in their fictional works, they do present the aftermath of the conflict and the trajectory of communist policies after the war’s end. Attentive to the lives of everyday Vietnamese, these novels embody the theories of Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life*, which examines the role of everyday acts in constituting culture and assesses the ability of citizens to appropriate and alter social discourse. Renovation novels express largely unrepresented voices of the Vietnamese peasantry, the politically insignificant, and women, provoking strong reactions from party leaders and resonating with audiences in Vietnam and in Vietnamese communities around the world.

Focusing on American novels theoretically rooted in historiographic metafiction and Vietnamese novels that exhibit de Certeau’s notions of the everyday serves a dual purpose in this thesis. First, this approach imposes a specific taxonomy on the large body of Vietnam War fiction, establishing a more coherent analytical framework and permitting a tighter thematic focus. Secondly, these theoretical orientations in many ways are particularly suited to each nation’s respective experience and retrospective renderings of the conflict. Vietnam, its government and its society, is still dealing with the physical impact of the war in a way that America is not. Its landscape was devastated by bomb craters and defoliants; health issues that resulted from the use of chemical weapons still linger; and more than half of the 1999 population was born after 1975.

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suggesting the near decimation of an entire generation. In the past three decades, Vietnam has made huge, rapid strides in repairing and modernizing its economy and infrastructure, but the war’s legacy remains imprinted on the land and on its people. The use of everyday characters and settings followed renovation’s mandate to write about the state of modern life in Vietnam, but the constant attention to grief and hardship and to the complicity of the communist party took the novels beyond simple chronicles of modern life and into political debates on the ability of the party to ameliorate the people’s suffering.

In America, the Vietnam War novel has been described as one of the many ways soldiers and society have sought to come to terms with the “American experience” in Vietnam. Literary critic Kali Tal has argued that a useful way to analyze Vietnam War novels is to view them through a lens of trauma, suggesting that the works are part of a larger effort to measure and express the degree of psychological damage the war inflicted. Tal rejects the notion that Vietnam novels merely create or sustain American myths, and she excoriates literary critics for reducing war novels to metaphor. Although it is clear that trauma is at the core of the majority of American novels on Vietnam, and is certainly present in many of the American and Vietnamese works this thesis examines, it is unclear how productive this approach would ultimately be as far as offering a new perspective on the ways that the novels represent history. Trauma is useful, however, insofar as it refocuses analysis of war novels on actual historical events, provoking the

realization that the novels create an artificial, symbolic narrative landscape that ultimately flows from the author’s traumatic experience.

Trauma has been an enormous part of the national discourse on the Vietnam War, as references to returning soldiers’ post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, became a part of the popular American lexicon in the 1980s. The Vietnamese renovation novels often evaluate trauma by interrogating not only the devastation that resulted from battle but also by offering fictive yet conscious analyses of party policies, such as the 1950s land reform efforts and the prevalence of poverty from which most Vietnamese suffered in the wake of the war. The portrayal of trauma in renovation novels certainly threatened the communist party by questioning and destabilizing notions of the revolutionary past that the party propagated. Popular novels that were critical of socialist bureaucracy and cognizant of pervasive corruption challenged the government’s ability to reshape the recent past into a politically useful and socially unifying historical narrative.

While Vietnamese renovation novels address overtly political conditions in postwar Vietnam, the American metafictional novels express more the degree to which the Vietnam War has had a pervasive impact on the collective American imagination. The United States recovered from the Vietnam War economically and tried, with arguable success, to repair deep political and ideological divides, but the massive cultural impact of the war created an enduring legacy for America that has profoundly influenced the country’s approach to foreign policy and international military intervention. The metafictional novels of O’Brien and Wright demonstrate to some extent America’s problematic memory of the Vietnam War. Their inability to adopt traditional literary forms reflects the larger American inability to place Vietnam into a more traditional
paradigm as established by earlier wars, not only because of America’s eventual defeat but also because of the war’s previously unfamiliar tactics and the frequently misleading or fraudulent claims of American officials.

A comparative analysis of American metafictional novels and Vietnamese renovation fiction helps to address a void in American historiography of the conflict. Traditional scholarship has largely centered on national narratives that subsume or distort the roles of individuals and diminish the importance of local perspectives, especially the perspectives of Vietnamese. The value of these fictional works, however, goes beyond a simple insertion of discrepant or subaltern voices into the historical record. These novels participate in popular historical and political discourse, demonstrating each nation’s difficulty in reconciling personal memory with nationally constructed narratives of history.

In Vietnam, public intellectual debate has always been under the purview of artists, particularly journalists and authors. Historian Kim N.B. Ninh’s study of the close relationship between politicians and writers in revolutionary Vietnam speaks to the important role that writers have historically played in political culture and argues that literature in Vietnam has always been considered part of the political realm.¹⁰ Ninh focuses her analysis on the years before American involvement, but the communist party’s tightening of cultural policies following the war and its strict censorship of works produced before and after renovation’s brief liberation indicate that writers were still regarded as both politically useful and potentially damaging after the war ended. Dương Thu Hương and Nguyễn Huy Thiệp place the cultural impact of the war at the center of

their fiction, but the clear overtones in their writing of political corruption in the party and of general dissatisfaction among Vietnamese made their novels overtly political. In the years following the communist victories over the French in 1954 and the Americans in 1975, and even into the twenty-first century, Vietnam’s cultural and political identity is still being contested and negotiated despite the party’s rigid control. Ninh argues that the party’s attempts to define and control culture demonstrate a profound ambivalence toward the nation’s history, that unity between party officials and their intellectual or artistic mediators illustrated the party’s need not to preserve its past but rather to completely discard it in order to form an effective new communist state. On some levels, renovation writers seem to have recognized these motives, utilizing the fictional voices of the peasantry to refocus the public’s attention on the real conditions of postwar Vietnamese and to reassess the implications of communist victory.

In contrast, American metafictional novels have played a less overtly political role in the popular discourse of the United States, not seeking directly to redefine the nation or its experience in Vietnam. Instead, these authors adopt a fragmented, postmodern framework to deny the very possibility of writing a factual master narrative of the war. Considered in the context of other American novels on Vietnam, particularly those that seek to legitimize the presence of the American military, the metafictional works often serve as a barometer of social anxiety in the aftermath of the war, especially as experienced by the veteran soldier. The novels of O’Brien and Wright could be considered a reaction to the outpouring of historical analyses of the war in the 1970s and 1980s, many of which sought to extract lessons from the experience, to explain away contradictions, define the ambiguous, and distill a factually supported truth from
fragments of evidence. In many ways, metafictional novelists cling to this ambiguity and embrace disjointed and inconsistent memories. In this sense, metafiction does not provide a transcendent interpretation of history, but it exposes the ways that traditional histories have provided equally subjective versions of a constructed past.

Clearly American metafiction and Vietnamese renovation novels represent widely divergent styles of literature, produced in countries with differing forms of government, different economies, different readerships, and different levels of creative freedom and access to publishers. A comparative approach, however, goes beyond contrasting the production of literature under democratic and communist rule by offering for both sides a fuller, more nuanced portrayal of the war and its aftermath. Ascribing historical relevance to fictional documents based primarily on individual memory and experience is both profitable and ripe with potential problems. This thesis does not suggest that novels constitute a viable substitute for empirical history, but it does argue that such cultural artifacts are powerful testaments to the lasting cultural and psychological impact of the Vietnam War.
Chapter 1

Contested Terrain:
American Historiography of the Vietnam War

In the decades following America’s war in Vietnam, historians have offered myriad interpretations of American involvement in the conflict. This broad range of explanations for the war suggests deep divisions within the discipline on the subject of Vietnam; it highlights the contested nature of the historiography of the conflict and the resulting difficulty of establishing a single, widely accepted historical narrative of it. Despite the fact that this thesis focuses on the very problem of situating the Vietnam War within a traditional historical narrative and argues as a result that some novelists and journalists have presented more effective and evocative representations of Vietnam than historians, it may be helpful to establish a brief chronology of the signal historical events in the United States’ involvement in Vietnam as a means of contextualizing American historiography on the war, however contested the process of historical reconstruction.

During World War II, Japanese forces occupied Vietnam for four years and eventually overthrew the French colonial administration that had controlled the country since 1887. Japan surrendered to the Allies on 15 August 1945 and Japanese soldiers vacated Vietnam, among other previously occupied territories. Taking advantage of the resulting power vacuum, Hồ Chí Minh and his communist-led organization, the Vietnam Independence League or the Việt Minh (Việt Nam Độc Lập Đồng Minh Hội), seized power in the major cities. On 2 September 1945, Hồ Chí Minh declared Vietnam’s independence. Despite this proclamation and forceful Vietnamese resistance, the French
colonial regime returned to Vietnam. After a year of fruitless negotiations, the First Indochina War erupted in 1946. Although the United States was not militarily involved in the conflict, seven agents of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the precursor to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), had come to North Vietnam to liberate prisoners of war, to locate soldiers missing in action, and to gather intelligence. During World War II, the OSS offered assistance to the Việt Minh in their resistance to the Japanese, encouraging Việt Minh leaders to expect American support in their struggle for independence after the war -- a supposition only bolstered by broadcasts issued by the Office of War Information emphasizing America's dedication to liberating colonized nations.\(^1\) The agent in charge of the OSS in Vietnam, Lieutenant Colonel A. Peter Dewey, wrote in a report summarizing the deteriorating situation between the Việt Minh and the French in 1945 that "Cochinchina is burning, the French are finished here, and we [the United States] ought to clear out of Southeast Asia."\(^2\)

Hồ Chí Minh requested assistance from the Americans to free Vietnam from French colonialism. While President Harry S. Truman refused to commit American ground troops in Indochina under any circumstances, his administration did approve massive amounts of economic aid to the French and by 1950 the United States was bearing more than forty percent of the war's cost.\(^3\) In 1954, at the French garrison Điện Bien Phủ in the northwest highlands, the Việt Minh achieved a startlingly decisive victory, leading to France's surrender on 7 May 1954. The battle of Điện Bien Phủ tested America's official pledge not to intervene with military force, as French and American

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officers had drawn up a contingency plan that called for air strikes and even tactical atomic weapons to end the Việt Minh siege. The United States wanted to avoid a unilateral intervention, and ultimately its skepticism about the depth of France’s commitment to Indochina -- along with Great Britain’s opposition to military intervention in the region -- had prompted American officials to avoid a wider commitment in Vietnam, a decision that contributed to France’s defeat.

The 1954 Geneva Accords marked the official end of the First Indochina War. In addition to requiring the withdrawal of all French forces from Vietnam, the agreement partitioned the country at the seventeenth parallel, a condition to which the Việt Minh reluctantly agreed since the Geneva Agreement mandated national elections to be held in 1956. The partition resulted in a communist North Vietnam, led by Hồ Chí Minh, and a non-communist southern state. American officials committed themselves to building a strong non-communist southern regime to be led by Ngô Đình Diệm, a devout Catholic and fervent anti-communist who was supported by a number of prominent Americans, such as Francis Cardinal Spellman and Senator John F. Kennedy. American military advisers sought to shore up the Diệm government through psychological operations, propaganda campaigns, and the repression of powerful religious groups who opposed the American-backed government. Having secured control of the south by 1955, Diệm instituted a number of unpopular policies and programs that stirred a deep resentment among South Vietnamese.

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4 Ibid., 29.
One of the most disastrous was his "agroville" program, which would later form the basis of the American "strategic hamlet" program launched in 1962. While the Việt Minh struggled with its own unsuccessful land reform efforts in the north, Diệm in 1959 began to require rural villagers to build fortified communities or "agrovilles" that would enable the government to monitor residents' activities and discourage cooperation with the National Liberation Front (NLF), or the southern branch of the Việt Minh, formed in 1960. The communities, according to Nguyễn Thị Định, a member of the NLF who joined the organization partly in reaction to Diệm's harsh treatment of rural southerners, were "little better than concentration camps." Villagers were forced to abandon their agricultural duties and build the communities without pay, provoking significant resistance among South Vietnamese and fomenting widespread distrust of the southern government.

By 1961, American officials saw growing problems with Diệm's authoritarian rule, especially in his ruthless suppression of the Buddhist community. Despite a surge in American advisers, aid, and arms intended to bolster the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN), and despite increasing American participation in military operations throughout the country, Diệm's popularity dwindled and by 1963 American officials refused to intervene against a coup d'état planned by a group of southern generals that resulted in the murder of Diệm and his brother and Saigon's police chief Ngô Đình Nhu. Although American officials in South Vietnam maintained that the coup was planned and carried

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5 Karnow, 256.
6 Nguyễn Thị Định, No Other Road to Take: Memoir of Mrs. Nguyễn Thị Định (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1976), 26.
out by Vietnamese, Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge stated, "the coup would not have happened [as] it did without our preparation." \(^7\)

After President Kennedy's assassination three weeks later and President Lyndon B. Johnson's assumption of the presidency, the United States commitment in Vietnam transformed from limited advisement to what was by 1965 a full-scale ground war. In 1965 Johnson approved Operation Rolling Thunder, marking the beginning of sustained bombing campaigns that, despite periodic halts, continued until the end of the war. Operation Rolling Thunder provided the pretext for General William Westmoreland's aggressive introduction of ground troops into the war. By 1966, there were 450,000 United States soldiers in Vietnam. \(^8\)

In January 1968, the North Vietnamese Army and the NLF launched a surprise offensive on the first day of the Vietnamese lunar New Year celebration, or Têt, which had been declared a period of truce. The offensive, carried out in several cities, lasted nearly three weeks in the central city of Hue, home of the Nguyên Dynasty's imperial palace. The United States responded to the offensive with devastating force, scoring a clear military victory. The impact of the Têt Offensive, however, ultimately coalesced into an overwhelming psychological defeat for the United States. Yet it did not prove a clear victory for Hanoi either, since the offensive failed to spur pro-communist uprisings in South Vietnam or inspire mass desertions in the ARVN, as it had intended. Public support for the war in America plummeted after the Têt Offensive, descending to an all-time low of twenty six percent during the event and spurring the growth of an already

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\(^7\) Karnow, 295.  
\(^8\) Herring, 151.
significant anti-war movement. On 31 March 1968, President Johnson stated in a televised address that bombing of the north would be scaled back and he also revealed that he would not seek re-election.

By 1969, American forces in Vietnam focused efforts on pacification and “Vietnamization,” the plan to place more strategic responsibility on the Vietnamese, particularly the ARVN, in prosecuting the war -- despite the near universal acknowledgement that South Vietnamese forces were incapable of carrying this burden. President Richard M. Nixon and his National Security Adviser, Henry Kissinger, sought to end the divisive and costly war, but both persisted in their attempts to solidify a non-communist south and achieve peace without admitting American defeat. Kissinger stated, “whatever the judgment of our actions, ending the war honorably is essential for the peace of the world.” Nixon engaged in secret diplomatic talks with Hanoi beginning in 1969, while at the same time he expanded bombing and ground operations into Cambodia and Laos, campaigns that gave the United States an even weaker negotiating position. In 1972, the North Vietnamese increased their attacks on South Vietnam and Nixon responded with increased bombing of the north.

Despite military escalation on both sides and an apparent diplomatic stalemate, the United States and Hanoi in January 1973 signed the Paris Peace Agreement, which mandated American withdrawal from Vietnam while permitting Hanoi to keep troops in the south. Ultimately, ill-prepared southern forces led by President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu surrendered to the northern army, which had launched a campaign to liberate the south.

9 Ibid., 199.
10 Ibid., 219.
On 30 April 1975, the northern army took Saigon, leading to a chaotic evacuation at the American embassy. American frustration with the war had reached a breaking point, and as Saigon fell, the United States Congress refused further aid to South Vietnam and withdrew all American personnel.

A staggering number of historical treatments have analyzed these events, and almost all of them have been classified as either “orthodox” or “revisionist” histories. Despite the fact that dividing the vast corpus of Vietnam War scholarship along the lines of a binary system of classification runs the risk of oversimplification, and mirrors the larger problem of imposing a narrow, cold war framework on a complex event, most American histories of Vietnam have fallen into the orthodox or revisionist camps. This split has become increasingly evident in recent years. Historian Mark Moyar, whose history of the Vietnam conflict, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War 1954-1965*, lies squarely in the revisionist camp by his own admission, defines this historiographical dichotomy, stating that revisionist historians view the war as a noble, justifiable effort that was winnable but improperly executed by the American government and military.11 Orthodox historians, in contrast, argue that American involvement in Vietnam was not simply mishandled but that the war itself was decidedly misguided and unjust.12

Disagreement among historians regarding the causes and consequences of American wars is not in itself significant or new. Historians have sharply disagreed about the nature of the cold war, an event whose historiography has also been classified under the rubrics of orthodoxy or revisionism. Cold war scholarship deemed

traditionalist or orthodox typically supports the official United States narrative and defends the notion of containment, an approach that was predominant in the 1940s and 1950s.\textsuperscript{13} Revisionist accounts of the cold war, many of which emerged as American officials and the public began to question the legitimacy of American involvement in the Vietnam War in the late 1960s, critically evaluate the degree to which the United States and its aggressive foreign policy provoked or extended the cold war. Some revisionist cold war studies have argued that orthodox histories overestimated the Soviet threat, beginning with the contention that the United States used the atomic bombs on Japan or later threatened to use nuclear weapons for political purposes, as a way of bolstering its international position rather than out of military necessity.\textsuperscript{14} In the 1970s, a third approach to cold war history emerged, referred to as post-revisionism. Post-revisionism as an approach developed in large part as a reaction to the excesses of orthodoxy and revisionism, and offered a more measured assessment of each nation’s role in furthering the conflict.\textsuperscript{15}

The orthodox/revisionist split in Vietnam historiography fundamentally differs from the interpretive disparities of cold war scholarship. Whereas cold war orthodoxy is traditionally aligned with the righteousness of the American cause and with the official narrative of the United States, orthodox scholarship in Vietnam War historiography forwards the notion that the United States was wrong to enter and then escalate the war and challenges the officially-sanctioned anticommunist narrative of the war.

\textsuperscript{15} Kort, 12.
Revisionism, on the other hand, supports the official government narrative, interpreting the war as geopolitically necessary for the United States and attributing failure to tactical decisions. Revisionism does not offer a wholesale condemnation of American involvement. Historian Marilyn Young has argued that scholars have been unable to incorporate Vietnam into a standard, heroic American narrative, even as an aberrant episode, because “it came instead to threaten the integrity of the narrative itself.”

Young suggests that one of the reasons why historians, especially those writing in the 1960s, evinced such a profound skepticism about the standard, heroic American narrative and quickly presented the Vietnam War as the antithesis of the “good war” image of World War II was the fact that the war coincided with the civil rights movement in America. While United States foreign policy impelled military conflicts to preserve the rights of democracy abroad, black Americans fought for their own basic rights of democratic citizenship at home, a contradiction not lost on 1960s America or the historians writing in and of the era.

Since cold war scholarship evolved from two antagonistic interpretations to a more nuanced, balanced third approach, Vietnam historiography may eventually do the same, as archives in Vietnam continue to open and documents on the war are made available. The scholarly divisions that have persisted since the war ended, however, reflect what Marilyn Young calls the “fragmentation of national identity” that occurred during the Vietnam War. This fragmentation led historians to reverse the prior tendency of some scholars to mythologize conflicts by confirming or legitimizing the

17 Ibid., 208.
national narrative, choosing instead to demythologize Vietnam and to question the moral and political implications of the conflict, even during the conflict itself. The recent resurgence of revisionist scholarship on Vietnam is a phenomenon that historians have not yet discussed in depth, but it is indicative of the lingering debates over the war and its divisive legacies.

The fact that historians of the Vietnam War, who often examine the same primary and secondary sources, have fundamentally disagreed over the basic causes and consequences of American intervention in Vietnam speaks to the rich potential of broadening the scope of inquiry and considering sources such as novels and other fictional accounts based on soldiers’ experiences, texts that have rarely been incorporated into historical treatments. In many ways, the fiction written about the Vietnam War parallels the evolving historical scholarship on the event. Although much scholarship has been produced about the war, and some certainly resists categorization, historian David Anderson argues that most American scholarship on the Vietnam War can be placed into a specific pattern of analysis. The histories produced in the 1960s, while the war was still being fought, such as Joseph Buttinger’s *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled* and Bernard Fall’s *The Two Viet Nams*, questioned the American military strategy as well as the United States’ fundamental purpose in supporting South Vietnam and Diệm.¹⁸ As the commitment to Vietnam increased, so too did the negative assessments of America’s role in the war; many historians criticized the wisdom of American leadership, such as Robert

Shaplen's *The Lost Revolution: The U.S. in Vietnam, 1946–1966*.19 Most of the criticism subscribed to either “the quagmire theory that American leaders blundered into Vietnam or the stalemate theory that leaders lacked the political courage to end what they knew was a losing venture,” with some of the more radical interpretations criticizing American policies as imperialist.20

Regardless of the interpretations, it is important to note the diversity of historical criticism that emerged from the Vietnam War, many of the works having been written *in media res*. These differing evaluations resulted from the very subjective process of sifting through historical facts, examining ironies, and selecting information to achieve some rendering of past events. In addition, historians writing during the war also had to contend with a charged social and political climate in the United States, and many historians used their works as a way of publicizing their own views on the war's continuation.

In writing a history of the Vietnam War, whether during the conflict or in its aftermath, there was no dearth of facts, but there was a problem in reconciling a vast number of contradictions and locating or ascribing meaning. Historians of the Vietnam War, presumably confined to historical reality, sought to impose a structure or sense of coherence onto the war. Speaking to the possibilities of using fiction in historical analysis, novelist Stephen Wright contends that acts of literary imagination are often more historically illuminating than traditional history, “because in nonfiction all the data

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and raw facts impose inescapable patterns that you’re not bound by in fiction.\textsuperscript{21} Fiction, of course, is not free of ideological implications and can at times be likewise placed in either the orthodox or revisionist categories established by historians. The discipline of history has nonetheless remained most bound by orthodox and revisionist patterns of analysis, and a recent debate made this clear.

In 2005, aided by the profusion of internet discussion boards and academic journals devoted to Vietnam War studies, an increasingly contentious division between orthodox and revisionist historians came to light. Historian Keith Taylor wrote an article arguing that Vietnam scholarship had been unjustly dominated by orthodox academics who relied on three assumptions now entrenched in academia: “that there was never a legitimate non-communist government in Saigon, that the U.S. had no legitimate reason to be involved in Vietnamese affairs, and that the U.S. could not have won the war under any circumstances.”\textsuperscript{22} Taylor effectively summarized the basic foundation of revisionist scholarship recently resurgent in works by scholars such as Moyar, Michael Lind, and Philip Catton. Taylor argues that orthodox historians have established one-dimensional narratives of the war that cast the Americans as neo-imperialists and the Vietnamese as heroic nationalists, obscuring or ignoring specific tactical failures of Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson and their military leaders and misrepresenting those Vietnamese who did not support Hồ Chí Minh’s policies. Taylor’s analysis is pervaded by personal anecdote and individual memory based on his own experience as a soldier in Vietnam, a problematic subjectivity that hinders many works in the enormous canon of


Vietnam War historiography and literature. His argument is important, however, in pointing out the influence of an author's subjectivity in approaching the past and the highly contested terrain of Vietnam War histories.

In response to Taylor’s essay, historian Robert Buzzanco published an article that dismissed Taylor’s sentimental, ahistorical approach to the war, suggesting that Taylor is part of the “revival of Vietnam revisionism” precipitated by conservative academics and politicians seeking a way to justify American military intervention abroad.23 Although Buzzanco criticizes the political motivations of revisionist scholars, he argues that the most dangerous element of revisionism, evident in Taylor’s essay, is its reliance on emotion rather than on a dispassionate analysis of sources. Buzzanco suggests that Vietnam veterans who are now scholars too often base their conclusions on their own narrow experiences, on their sympathies for both American and ARVN soldiers, and on their contempt for scholars who criticize the war yet who did not participate in it. To suggest, however, that orthodox scholars of Vietnam have written about the event free from emotion is clearly false, since several orthodox historians, such as Gabriel Kolko and George McTurnan Kahin, were active members of the antiwar movement in the late 1960s and many others publicly denounced the war.

The essays by Taylor and Buzzanco demonstrate some of the most serious problems current in Vietnam scholarship and embody a certain amount of resistance to ideological difference that has come to characterize it. Buzzanco points out that the primary area of analysis for recent revisionist scholarship is the reevaluation of South

Vietnam and the presidency of Ngô Đình Diệm. While most orthodox historians have dismissed the Diệm regime as an abject failure and have contended that South Vietnam was not a real nation but an invention of American officials, revisionist scholars have portrayed Diệm as an effective leader who was constrained by weak and inconsistent American policy and ultimately discarded before a viable successor was in place. Although the radical suggestion made by Moyar and Lind, that Diệm’s policies may eventually have worked, is clearly anti-historical and of negligible value, historians like Buzzanco who dismiss any analysis of the Diệm government that acknowledges its success or even its potential for success undermine the process of historical research and perpetuate an overly emotional, unproductive historical discourse.

The Taylor-Buzzanco debate is one minor example of a larger rift evident in Vietnam War historiography, but it is important in the context of this thesis as it signifies the interpretive possibility of historical scholarship and the limitations of recent analytical frameworks. Whereas revisionist scholarship has been criticized for its attempts to resurrect the amorphous potential in failed policies, military historian Mackubin Thomas Owens contends that the primary weakness of orthodox historiography has been “its constricted historical horizon,” or its narrow use of traditional diplomatic sources that focus on Washington and Saigon.24 A number of recent histories, however, have effectively placed the conflict in an international framework, including an evaluation of crucial but long-neglected Vietnamese and French sources. Especially in the field of foreign relations, historians have realized the necessity of expanding analysis beyond Washington to examine the complex transnational exchanges that led to American

involvement and ultimately to escalation in Southeast Asia. Historian Mark Lawrence’s
*Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam*
considers the implications of France’s policy in the wake of the collapse of its colonial
project in Indochina, and he notes that American involvement in Vietnam was part of a
larger international debate about the future of colonized regions after World War II. He
further analyzes the political expedience of establishing Vietnam as a constituent element
of the cold war.25 Historian Mark Bradley also focuses on transnational discourse in the
1950s, investigating the cultural and political sources that shaped American and
Vietnamese perceptions of one another and that determined the very different ways that
Vietnamese revolutionaries and American policymakers envisioned a postcolonial
world.26

These two works demonstrate one way that historians can defuse the tensions
apparent in the approaches of Buzzanco and Taylor: by broadening the analytical
framework and considering the conflict on a global scale. Although both Lawrence and
Bradley center their work on the period before significant American military
involvement, their studies question the application of a traditional cold war paradigm to
the war in Vietnam and encourage a more nuanced view of the conflict that considers
new sources and that crosses orthodox and revisionist boundaries.

Incorporating fictional treatments of the Vietnam War into historical analysis
likewise attempts to avoid Manichean classification, instead investigating the

problematic, conflicted nature of America’s role in Vietnam. Since historians have not

25 Mark Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in
26 Mark Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-
undertaken extensive historical analysis of the literature of the Vietnam War, the major methodological and historiographical issues raised in analyzing metafictional novels have yet to be fully explored. A history that uses fictional texts as primary sources subjects itself to many of the debates at the center of postmodernism, including the relationship between fact and fiction as well as the ability or responsibility of fiction to reveal some kind of historical truth. Interrogating these fictional texts as historical artifacts not only fleshes out the soldiers' experiences of war and highlights the inadequacy of traditional historical representations in relaying these experiences, but also underscores the unique relationship between history and literature, pointing to the distinctive yet ultimately consonant ways that historians and novelists make sense of the past.

Certainly, metafictional novels are not viable alternatives to historical monographs, but they can be considered components of historical treatments of the war. These novels are profoundly subjective and one-sided; the author's experience penetrates the text and often reveals his personal feelings about the nature and purpose of the war. History, in metafictional novels, is not presented in a continuum, but in random episodes that collectively offer no grand unifying theses or explanations, but emphasize rather the problematic nature of the facts and their interpretations. Many oral histories written about the Vietnam War serve precisely the same purpose, seeking to expose a wide range of experiences and perspectives, presented in the words of the participants. But, as historian Christian Appy states, "everyone's memory is partial, selective, and sometimes faulty." Oral histories feature individual recollections that, when combined, offer a fuller, more complex vision of the past. Many of the traps that novelists and oral

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historians face are no different from those historians encounter. Hazy memories, personal beliefs, and limited perspectives are always present in oral history and fiction. Historians, however, are not immune to such influences.

What is clearly absent from American literary representations of the Vietnam War, in addition to any female perspective, is any acknowledgment or explication of the experience of the Vietnamese. Over the past three decades, Vietnam has experienced cycles of liberalization that have allowed many Vietnamese novelists to publish their fictional perspectives on the American war and its aftermath. These periods are usually short-lived and only marginally "liberal," and the works produced are rarely available to popular audiences in Vietnam. Many of the novels are, however, available in English translation and have found a fairly wide American readership. These works provide a fascinating contrast to the war novels produced by American authors on many levels, the most basic of which is the general Vietnamese adherence to realism and traditional literary conventions rather than the more experimental types of writing employed by Herr, O'Brien, and Wright. The American use of metafiction does not seem to have a direct counterpart in Vietnamese literature, although obvious differences in literary production can be attributed in large part to the amount of creative freedom available under the respective governments of Vietnam and the United States.

This analysis of American metafictional novels written about the Vietnam War suggests that metafiction can be viewed not as mere artifice but as an exploration of a new epistemology that reveals the discovery and conscious creation of meaning. Those American authors who employ metafictional techniques experiment with form as a means of sifting through historical memory and examining this memory for some panoptic
meaning that is then reflected in its unorthodox framework. This literature underscores the idea of the porousness of boundaries between literature and history that has been a topic of so much postmodern discourse. In keeping with the postmodernist disavowal of the possibility of a transcendent or absolute truth in historical renderings, and in accord with the acknowledged contingency between language and meaning, Vietnam War metafiction and its non-traditional portrayals offer a rich and powerful historical perspective.

Analyzing cultural representations of Vietnam demands as well an examination of the media and the unique role of print and television journalists in covering the war, particularly since media representations underscore the necessity of acknowledging the war’s fluidity. Historian Chester Pach states that despite the limited, uncontextualized and sometimes heavily subjective view television reportage offered, it was extremely effective in presenting the war “as it was – a confused, fragmented, and questionable endeavor.” Some scholars have argued that television, a medium whose impact on foreign policy was largely unknown before Vietnam, exerted too powerful an influence on its viewers, helping to forge and sustain a broad anti-war movement in America and influence global opinion on America’s role in the war.

The 1963 Buddhist crisis that occurred in southern and central Vietnam incited one the first major controversies over the nature of press coverage in the Vietnam War and revealed the potential power of print and television journalists and photographers covering the war. In the early 1960s, Kennedy administration officials already had an

appreciation for the potential damage that free press coverage of American activities in South Vietnam could cause. Anticipating problems, a 1962 directive known as Cable 1006 set out to standardize the way that the government would interact with journalists. The cable stated that it was not in the best interest of the United States for journalists to suggest in their stories that Americans in Saigon were directing any military missions. U.S. public affairs officials made it clear to Saigon correspondents that “frivolous, thoughtless criticism” of the Diệm regime in the press made it difficult to galvanize either American or Vietnamese support for policies in South Vietnam. Designed to encourage cooperation between officials and the press, Cable 1006 suggested that journalists would be kept as informed of the situation as security interests allowed.

Expecting interference from the press in Saigon, the cable acknowledged the right of the press to cover the war, but also stressed the need for military and political officials “to operate without the interference of newsman.” Not surprisingly, the official position on Vietnam in these years was optimistic. The military advisers seemed to be improving the capability of the ARVN to fight without the assistance of American soldiers, pacification efforts seemed to be encouraging more cooperation among Vietnamese peasants, and the incidence of Viet Cong infiltration in American-built strategic hamlets appeared to be stabilized or even declining. Much of the sparse coverage Vietnam received in American publications reflected this official optimism, although many reporters clearly sensed that this official line was tendentious. Journalist David Halberstam quickly learned after his arrival in Vietnam in 1962 of the antagonistic

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30 Ibid.
relationship between the American government and the American press in Saigon. As he stated, “In Vietnam there was a sharp and unfortunate polarization of the press reporting on the one hand, and the official position on the other.”

American officials used Cable 1006 to establish a precedent that led to the eventual withholding of vast amounts of information from the press and that created an atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust among American officials and journalists. The Buddhist movement created a far different relationship with western journalists than it did with American governmental officials. The general unrest among Vietnamese Buddhists in the early 1960s originated in Hue on 8 May 1963, during a commemoration of the 2527th anniversary of the birth of Buddha. The government of South Vietnam had banned the public display of religious flags, an order that had been ignored only a few weeks earlier at a Catholic celebration for the archbishop of Hue, Diệm’s brother Ngô Đình Thụy. The policy was, however, rigidly enforced for the Buddhists. In response, the Buddhists organized a protest demonstration and were met by South Vietnamese troops who attempted to break up the demonstration. Conflicting reports of the action emerged. Some versions stated that South Vietnamese soldiers threw grenades into the crowd or opened fire and crushed demonstrators under the wheels of their armored vehicles. Weeks after the incident, officials of the Saigon government suggested that Viet Cong terrorists had attacked the crowd. Nine Buddhists died in the incident, and fourteen received injuries.

After the May 8 demonstration in Hue, Buddhist leaders contacted the U.S. embassy in Saigon to appeal for help against Diệm’s abuses, but American officials were

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only concerned with stabilizing the Diệm regime and maintaining an image of a unified American and South Vietnamese effort. The Buddhists, who many otherwise regarded as sheltered and naïve about the outside world, shrewdly approached the press, recognizing its access to a worldwide audience. Buddhists hoped that publicizing their cause throughout Vietnam and the world would encourage sympathetic South Vietnamese to move against Diệm, or would so arouse international and American discontent that the Kennedy administration might support a coup.

On 11 June 1963, in Saigon, Buddhists held a public demonstration protesting their harsh treatment at the hands of the Diệm government. Such demonstrations had become common throughout Saigon and the central Vietnamese city of Hue, so common that few journalists felt compelled to cover them. For weeks, south and central Vietnamese Buddhists had intimated to members of the western press that if the United States-supported Diệm regime continued its repression of the Buddhist community, there would be “protest suicides.” Many journalists took the warning as an idle threat, recognizing the incompatibility of suicide with the Buddhist faith. Malcolm Browne, the Saigon bureau chief of the Associated Press and one of the first journalists to arrive in Vietnam in 1960, did attend the demonstration after a monk suggested that “something important might happen.” The procession began in ordinary fashion, with approximately 350 monks and nuns carrying signs and marching down Phan Đình Phung Street. Behind the demonstrators, four or five monks rode in a gray Austin sedan, which eventually came to a stop at a busy Saigon intersection. One of the monks placed a small

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brown cushion onto the pavement, and a sixty-seven year old Buddhist monk, Thích Quang Đúc, sat down on the cushion and assumed the lotus position. Two other monks doused his saffron robe with gasoline, and Quang Đúc calmly lit a match, instantly engulfing his body in flames. Aside from the muscular convulsions, his body remained still, his eyes closed, palms folded in his lap. His body burned for approximately ten minutes before he fell backward and the flames subsided.34

Malcolm Browne took the infamous photograph of the monk’s burning body; the photograph was published in numerous newspapers and magazines and shown on global television networks, and the spectacle was recounted on radio broadcasts throughout the world. The images of Quang Đúc’s immolation quickly became a powerful and vivid symbol of the violent and volatile situation in Vietnam. Not only were western journalists willing to publicize the Buddhists’ cause, they seized upon it. Correspondent Neil Sheehan stated that he and Halberstam felt this crisis was “proof that the regime was as bankrupt politically as it was militarily.”35 American officials responded to the coverage of the Buddhist crisis by claiming that the press was “shaping events rather than reporting them, wrecking American policy in the process.”36 American generals continued to opine that the Buddhist demonstrations had fomented discontent in Vietnamese cities but had had no appreciable effect on the prosecution of the war. Officials accused journalists of fabricating bad news, reflecting their own ill will toward American policy and the Diệm regime. Halberstam and Sheehan perceived the crisis as

34 Ibid., 30
reflective of the larger failure of American tactics in South Vietnam, and other reporters referred to the regime as incompetent and hostile.

Following Quàng Đúc’s immolation and the diffusion of Malcolm Browne’s photographs, American officials began to view the Buddhists’ cultivation of the press as manipulative. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge claimed that Buddhist leaders had tricked the press into publicizing their political aspirations through a “cynical campaign of hunger strikes, letters in blood, and suicides.”37 In the midst of the disputes between the press and American officials, the photograph of Quàng Đúc’s immolation remained tangible and emotional evidence that the situation in South Vietnam had become incendiary. Whether Buddhist leaders were framed as opportunists or sincere protesters, Quàng Đúc’s burning body offered no distortion.

The damage that Browne’s photo did to American and South Vietnamese policy resulted from the general public’s response. In Vietnam, Quàng Đúc began to take on the aura of a saint; he was mythologized even further after his heart failed to burn during cremation. Regarding it as a miracle, monks placed the heart in a glass case and permanently displayed it in Xa Loi Pagoda in Saigon. While westerners saw only the seeming illogic of immolation, Buddhists throughout Vietnam saw the immolation as proof that the Diệm regime was immoral, the flame-resistant organ a cosmic sign that the government of South Vietnam could not withstand the power of a pure heart.

The extensive coverage of the Buddhist crisis and Quàng Đúc’s immolation led to an intensified public debate in the United States about the stability and viability of the Diệm regime and of America’s role in supporting a South Vietnamese government.

Kennedy ruled out complete withdrawal by invoking conventional cold war rhetoric, suggesting that pulling out "would mean a collapse not only of South Vietnam, but Southeast Asia." There were some intimations of doubt among officials in Washington, however. In September 1963, Senator Frank Church introduced a Congressional resolution urging the American government to withhold all aid from Diệm as long as his regime continued enforcing its repressive and autocratic policies. Church desired not only to use some of the political leverage the Americans had over Diệm, since his regime was deeply dependent on American support, but also to encourage debate and remove "the ossification of opinion about our situation in South Vietnam" that had developed within the government. Additionally, Church hoped his resolution would prompt the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to hold public hearings inquiring into the actual nature and depth of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Senator Gaylord Nelson also believed the resolution would help gauge American popular sentiment on Vietnam. Ultimately, Church's resolution never came to a vote, but it portended an inevitably deeper inquiry into the state of affairs in Vietnam. Two years before major American troop commitments in 1965, this failed resolution revealed that only a few senators realized that the situation in South Vietnam could very quickly become politically untenable.

Although large-scale public opposition to the Vietnam War would not be evident in America until 1967, or be especially fervent until after the Tết Offensive in 1968, the foundation for dissent can in many ways be traced to the Buddhist crisis of 1963 and to the corresponding media coverage of that crisis. In print journalism, in radio broadcasts,

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39 Ibid., 172.
and on television, the American people confronted images and stories from Vietnam that were becoming more difficult to reconcile with stated American policy in South Vietnam. The visual imagery, especially photographs and television pictures, provided American viewers with a sense of immediacy and violent intimacy new to modern warfare and modern journalism. Streaming combat images into the living rooms of millions of Americans eventually contributed to the erosion of public support for the war. As early as the first years of the 1960s, the media explored the boundaries of wartime journalism and publicized incendiary images while the government came to realize the potential damage of virtually unlimited journalistic access to war.

The Buddhist crisis proved emblematic of the Diệm regime’s inability to forge a unified and representative polity in South Vietnam and exemplified its tendency toward exclusivity and autocratic rule. What began simply as a movement to assert religious freedom transformed into a political force that contributed mightily to the overthrow of the Diệm regime in November 1963, due in some part to the massive global influence of the press. From the Americans’ perspective, Buddhist demonstrations might not have evolved into a crisis had Diệm publicly acknowledged the rights of Buddhists to practice their religion and assured Buddhists that they would be included in the formation of South Vietnam’s government. American support of Diệm suggested to the world that the American government was less concerned with establishing a representative South Vietnam than with maintaining an anticomunist regime and successfully prosecuting the war against the National Liberation Front and North Vietnam. Press coverage of the Buddhist crisis threatened to upset the balance of power in South Vietnam, and by doing so raised the possibility of increasing public scrutiny of the American role in the region.
The Vietnam War ultimately produced many iconic images covered in newspapers and on television -- from immolations and burning villages to public executions -- that reached American, Vietnamese, and global audiences. These images shaped contemporary public opinion in both the United States and in Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s, but these incendiary images lingered in the collective American consciousness, inspiring ceaseless debates about the nature of war and the media's powerful role in covering it.

The 1963 Buddhist crisis and larger issues of the media's role in the war have been at the center of the orthodox/revisionist debate in Vietnam War historiography. Whereas many orthodox historians have argued that journalists played a critical role in exposing the American government's dishonesty and revealing the full extent of American involvement, revisionist scholars have generally focused on the factual errors and "defeatist" attitude of reporters who overemphasized the weaknesses of the southern regime and contributed to Diệm's fatal overthrow in 1963.⁴⁰ These vastly differing interpretations of the media in Vietnam exemplify the contested nature of historical writing on the war, demonstrating historians' inability to craft a master narrative of it.

Literary scholar William V. Spanos has analyzed the shifting representations of the Vietnam War in historical scholarship and in the media, concluding that "the history of the representation of the Vietnam War has been an amnesiac and...a banalizing history."⁴¹ Spanos interrogates the idea of the "Vietnam syndrome," or the problematic and radically contradictory memory of the Vietnam War, a notion that frequently appears

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⁴⁰ Moyar, 242.
in both historical treatments of the war and fictional literature. Spanos argues that the end of the cold war and the implied global victory of liberal capitalism marked the end of the phase when America was still “healing the wound” of the war in Vietnam and resulted in a triumphalist historical narrative that required “the custodians of the American cultural memory, not least the media, to obliterate the memory of the decades-long event we call ‘Vietnam.’” Spanos suggests that the national “project of forgetting” is largely a product of historians’ failure to restore some measure of historical specificity to the discourse, a failure that has resulted in heavily ideological or otherwise one-sided or insufficient histories of the war.

In many ways, writing a history of Vietnam using metafictional literature seems to be precisely what Spanos warns against: extrapolating a cultural impact based on the problematic and contradictory memories of individuals. The fictional portrayals of the war, although complex and chaotic like the war itself, do not lie outside of history. Despite their divergence from more conventional war narratives and histories, American metafictional novels do foster a sense of understanding that, though devastated, broken, and dissonant, offers a fuller account of the war experience. Rather than viewing these novels as ahistorical retreats from meaning, works such as Herr’s Dispatches, O’Brien’s Going After Cacciato, and Wright’s Meditations in Green should be re-read with an eye not to distilling one transcendent meaning but to acknowledging and reconciling the existence and conveyance of multiple meanings – defoliating the ideological divides and impasses evident in American historiography.

42 Ibid., 158
Chapter 2

Postmodern Dispatches: American Metafiction and the Constituted Meaning of the Vietnam War

Since the fall of Saigon in 1975, the Vietnam War has been considered and re-considered by scholars, journalists, and participants in the war. Despite the vast amount of attention it has received, the war remains a contested event in the collective American consciousness. While historians have constructed traditional narratives of the conflict, journalists, poets, and novelists have produced a flood of literary works, recollections, and reflections that seek to convey in various forms American experiences in the Vietnam War. In the immediate aftermath of the conflict, the most common form for communicating the reminiscences of American participants was the autobiographical narrative of soldiers, which offered perspectives on the American combatant, the United States government and military, and the Vietnamese enemy. As the distance from the war’s end increased, many authors rejected the possibility of a master narrative of Vietnam that presented a linear, chronological view of the war. Some writers began to employ new conceptual and artistic tools, transmitting their experiences through more imaginative means, including fiction, drama, poetry, and film.

The broad diversity of Vietnam War literature provides a unique and illuminating historical filter through which scholars can extract both personal and historical knowledge of the Vietnam War. Beyond its capacity to relay individual visions of war, Vietnam literature should be considered a vital part of the historiography of the war, especially given its frequent suggestion that traditional historical representations are
insufficient in conveying Vietnam War experiences. Historian Gabriel Kolko suggests, “poetry and fiction have flourished precisely because of the inadequacies of historical narrative in capturing the subtle textures of the human experience,” indicating the need for literature, not just for its aesthetic and literary invention but also for its place as a constituent element in the history of the Vietnam War.¹

Many of the fictional texts plunge readers into a chaotic, surreal, hallucinatory world that, though contrived, is nonetheless rooted in historical actuality. Through careful analysis of these works, it becomes apparent that rather than privileging one form of representation over the other, scholars should seek to contextualize and intertextualize — and perhaps synthesize - both traditional history and experimental fiction. As much as some Vietnam War novelists or historians may resist it, grounding postmodern fiction in historical circumstances illuminates the novels themselves and facilitates a deeper literary comprehension of the war, while analyzing the production of these novels sheds much light on the processes of historical memory and narrative conveyance.

Conveying the distinctiveness and surrealism of the Vietnam War experience prompted some fiction writers to adopt innovative and unusual literary approaches. One of these approaches is what has come to be known as “metafiction.” Literary scholar Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as “a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality.”² Metafictional novels are self-reflexive, simultaneously creating a fictive literary work while making overt

² Patricia Waugh, Metafiction (London: Methuen, 1984), 2.
commentary on the creation of the fiction and the implications of a fictive rendering of an event. In other words, to identify those American novels of the Vietnam War that could be categorized on some levels as metafictive, the texts must make their status as fiction patently apparent, sometimes even making the fictionalization of a topic part of the subject matter itself. For Patricia Waugh, "the lowest common denominator of metafiction is simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction." A product of postmodern discourse, metafiction is attached in many ways to the interrogation of history as a text, as a literary and discursive construct that does not aspire to relay empirical facts but to question epistemological notions of an intrinsic connection between language and historical reality. This relationship between events and their textual representations points to postmodern difficulties with the authenticity of events and with the accessibility of these events to the historian/author. In many ways, the literary and journalistic interpretations of the American involvement in Vietnam can be viewed as case studies in this fact/fiction conflict. Literary theorist Linda Hutcheon suggests in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* that "the Vietnam War created a real distrust of official ‘facts’ as presented by the military and the media, and in addition, the ideology of the 1960s had licensed a revolt against homogenized forms of experience." The 1960s witnessed a torrent of social upheaval and American writers and intellectuals expressed an increasing sense of disorientation and collective confusion that became apparent in the

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3 Ibid.  
4 Ibid.  
6 Hutcheon, 115.
literature produced. Waugh suggests that metafiction is most likely to emerge during
“crisis” periods within a society and that the production of metafictive novels reflects the
questioning and breakdown of traditional values. The literature of the post-Vietnam War
era, particularly the novels that specifically addressed the war, evinces a heightened
awareness of the fictitiousness and contrived nature of literary reconstruction,
underscoring the postmodernist repudiation of a mimetic connection between art and
reality. As a result of this schism, many writers dealing with the Vietnam experience
explored the ways that fictional texts construct and communicate historical information
and highlighted the limitations in form and scope of more traditional means of writing.
This exploration resulted in works that challenged traditional notions of genre much in
the way postmodernism as a discourse suggested the porousness of genre and the
problematic nature of historical knowledge.

Historicizing the concept of metafiction, Hutcheon identified “historiographic
metafiction” as a postmodern variant of the historical novel, reflective of the desire to
blur and deconstruct traditional boundaries and hierarchies of genre. Emphasizing the
mutual influence of the work of novelists and historians, historiographic metafiction
questions the idea of positivism and empiricism and problematizes the notion of a reality
that can be conveyed in writing. Historiographic metafiction, Hutcheon suggests, “is
overtly and resolutely historical – though, admittedly in an ironic and problematic way
that acknowledges that history is not the transparent record of any sure ‘truth’.”

Hutcheon goes further, maintaining that such metafiction makes no pretense at relaying
“truth,” but rather questions who determines this “truth” and asks whose “truth” is being

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7 Hutcheon, 128.
told. Further, as Hutcheon states, "facts are not given but are constructed by the kinds of questions we ask of events."

This problematic dialectic between fact and fiction becomes visible in the writings of several authors who deal with the topic of the American experience in Vietnam. Vietnam War metafiction functionally and purposely dislocates historical reality in its text, which is not intended as a criticism of the work but as an indication of the need to consider these novels in their historical contexts.

Beyond the fact/ fiction dialectic, postmodernism addresses a host of other problematic literary and historical relationships, subjectivity and ideology being two examples. Both Hutcheon and Hayden White agree that the process of narrativization is the crucial issue in postmodern fiction and it is one that bears heavily on the literature of the Vietnam War. As the process of imposing meaning and coherence on events, narrative "is what translates knowing into telling." This translation, according to postmodernism, is fundamentally problematic, artificial, and linguistic, and it emphasizes the limitations of the narrator and his or her unavoidable biases. Rather than subjecting these works to semantic or semiotic evisceration, however, these novels should perhaps be read in a simpler, less paradigmatic, and yet more useful way.

Although it seems clear that Vietnam War novels such as Michael Herr's ostensibly journalistic Dispatches (1977), Tim O'Brien's Going After Cacciato (1978), and Stephen Wright's Meditations in Green (1983) exhibit many of the principal characteristics of postmodernism, it is not clear that the authors are suggesting that the experiences and characters they write about are meaningless in any way. Experimental

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8 Ibid., 123.
9 Ibid., 121.
novels are fragmented, episodic, and sometimes quite ridiculous or simply confusing, so on some level writers must have a conscious apprehension of the idea that linear, traditional forms of writing are inadequate. Literary scholar Gordon Taylor suggests that when constructing a war narrative, the process of choosing a form commensurate with the subject is less deliberate than inevitable, that art is essentially inapplicable to war in any traditional sense. Ultimately, the metafictive novel seems simply to be, as Taylor suggests, an inevitability, a consequence of the attempt to constitute meaning and consolidate documentary and imaginative purpose rather than a self-conscious artistic choice.

Some critics of Vietnam War-era writing have contended that because the Vietnam War consistently broke down traditional notions of warfare, the literature produced about the conflict is necessarily formless and the writer (as witness to the war) is forced to evaluate the stability of his text and experiment with the form of the fictive construction. The implication is that conventional types of writing are inappropriate in capturing an authentic Vietnam experience, just as conventional tactics were useless in fighting the unconventional war. Literary scholar Thomas Myers suggests that Vietnam cannot be conveyed or understood through traditional narratives or historical representations, and that any meaning a writer ascribes to the event at first resides in the personal imagination of the author. For Myers, Vietnam is an event of aesthetic possibility rather than a discrete historical occurrence. In his claim, Myers at once denies the Vietnam War any easy historical context and suggests that, since the literature

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of the conflict has been unique when compared to that of World War I or World War II, then the Vietnam War itself was an exceptional event or an aberration in American history. Many scholars have responded to the notion that Vietnam is somehow anomalous as erroneous and simplistic, situating it amidst a continuation of national mythology or a "psychosis of uniqueness" that allows the United States to deny or sentimentalize its history – or to impose an impossible order and somehow make sense of the chaos of the Vietnam War.  

Spurning frequent references to the idea of "sense-making" in Vietnam War literature offered by scholars like Philip Beidler, Don Ringnalda's *Fighting and Writing the Vietnam War* suggests that scholars should abandon any attempt to derive meaning from the war novels. Ringnalda insists that focus should instead be placed on the "nonsense" of the war, and he rejects the need to find textual stability and cull meaning from imaginative works rather than appreciating their chaotic form as mimetic of the absurdity and inscrutability of the actual experience. Although it is tempting to conclude that the collective Vietnam experience was incoherent and bewildering, and that the literature that seeks to transmit it is consequently meaningless, this would diminish the validity of the writing process, strip the fiction of its historical resonance, and devalue the works themselves. Through a close reading of a few of the most exemplary fictional works on the Vietnam War that display the characteristics of historiographic metafiction, it becomes clear that, despite the unique construction of the narrative, it is possible not only to locate meaning within the text but to analyze its constitution. Contextualizing

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12 Don Ringnalda, *Fighting and Writing the Vietnam War* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1994), 2.

13 Ibid., 160.
novels within the traditional historiography of the war should have a mutually illuminating effect, by giving shape and depth to historians’ renderings of the past and by placing fictional works within the historical milieu of the Vietnam War.

Literary theorists have clearly encouraged debate about the production of meaning in Vietnam War literature and about the relationship of this literature to a historical reality. Studying these works from a historical perspective does not resolve the contested relationship between historical facts and literary fiction, but it does serve the dual purpose of offering a richer understanding of the lived experience in Vietnam and suggesting a historical context for abstract novels that seemingly exist only in the imagination. An analysis of American novels about the Vietnam War in a historical context demands an evaluation of the nature of the fictional works and a discussion of how historians can approach novels as primary historical sources. Literary critics have provided a useful starting point for evaluation, but an historical approach begs the question of how fiction writers are acting as historians, which naturally leads to the problem of establishing a methodological approach.

One of the seminal historiographical texts that addresses issues of textual meaning and historical method is Hayden White’s *Metahistory*. White identifies the “metahistorical” structure of all historical narratives in terms of argument, ideological implication, and emplotment, sketching out a conceptual and linguistic framework within which all histories necessarily are written.¹⁴ A work of history therefore combines historical data with a narrative structure that organizes and explains the data. The

¹⁴ White, 3.
"historiographical style" of a particular historian is based on the modes of articulation and combinations of narrative strategies.

Focusing his study on nineteenth-century historical consciousness, White attempts to "establish the ineluctably poetic nature of the historical work and to specify the prefigurative element in a historical account by which its theoretical concepts were tacitly sanctioned." This "prefigurative element" for White is language as well as the strategies of emplotment, argument, and ideological implication. What is not stressed in *Metahistory* is the idea that historical facts themselves might place limitations on a historical narrative. In other words, *Metahistory* seems to confirm on some levels the postmodern contention that reality is relative by suggesting that meaning simply resides in the mind of the perceiver and that works of history are less bound by reality than by a pre-existing set of narrative options available to the author.

Although the conceptual framework offered in White's *Metahistory* refers only to historical writing, his ideas about the fixity of narrative structure and the relationship between history and fiction can be extended to an analysis of Vietnam War novels. *Metahistory* is concerned with the problem of choosing the appropriate mode of representation in history and portraying that reality by framing it in linguistic and narrative terms. In metafictional Vietnam War novels, authors choose to represent experiences with historical correlatives through imaginative and hallucinatory frameworks. This is, in some ways, the inverse of the poet's task, according to Hegel, which is "to reconcile the world existing in thought with that of concrete things by figuring the universal in terms of the particular, and the abstract in terms of the

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15 Ibid., xi.
Metafictional authors on some levels attempt to reconcile events existing in historical reality in terms of the fantastic and abstract, not in order to purge the events of meaning but to stress the multiplicity and diversity of the experience.

Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* clearly demonstrates this multiplicity of experience and also exemplifies the postmodern difficulty with genre and the blurred lines between fiction, journalism, memoir, and history. Herr went to Vietnam to report on the war as a correspondent for *Esquire*, saying about his experience, “I went to cover the war and the war covered me.”

Ostensibly a journalistic rendering, Herr’s book displays many metafictional devices, fusing memory with highly artistic and hallucinatory artifice. *Dispatches* abandons traditional chronological narrative, and instead presents the author’s war experience through a series of episodic, discrete images and events. Herr consciously interrogates the methods by which he transmits history, recognizing his portrayal as highly subjective and fragmentary. Herr contends, “you couldn’t use standard methods to date the doom,” and suggests that standard journalistic methods of conveying the experience are equally futile, that “it would be as impossible to know what Vietnam looked like from reading most newspaper stories as it would be to know how it smelled.”

*Dispatches* experiments with language and contrivance, creating a cacophonous narrative that suggests a historical analogue to the Vietnam War itself. As a journalist, Herr is required to deal in facts, to gather and synthesize information, but his close proximity to combat and his difficulty relaying the experience in clear language left Herr

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16 Ibid., 87.
18 Ibid., 49.
questioning the adequacy of journalism. As he stated, “all it could do was take the most profound event of the American decade and turn it into a communications pudding, taking its most obvious, undeniable history and making it into a secret history.”\textsuperscript{19} As a result of his skepticism about traditional journalism, Herr crafted his own unique form of literary journalism, “capable of allowing him to cover the war, or perhaps...recover the war.”\textsuperscript{20} Not only had the rules that bound traditional journalists become irrelevant, “at times they were active forces for falsification.”\textsuperscript{21}

In many ways, \textit{Dispatches} is concerned with the ways that Vietnam War correspondents used information, the ways that writers and photographers served as witnesses, and then distilled images and transmitted them to a public audience. In seeking out information, Herr clearly preferred to interact with soldiers, or “grunts,” rather than relying on verbose and often boring official press conferences. Official responses were established and well-known and any questions the press could pose would inevitably be answered to no satisfaction. Herr’s sources were among the grunts, most of whom knew that journalists were not telling their stories to the public. Although Herr mined most of his material from the soldiers, he was constantly aware of his difference, of the journalist’s unavoidable distance from the war’s action. When asked to salute officers, Herr’s friend, photographer Tim Page, asserted their dissociation, responding, “We’re not men...We’re correspondents.”\textsuperscript{22} Soldiers discussed the true object of the war, discounting the lofty communist-containing rhetoric of politicians as “just a load man”

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 219.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} Herr, 7.
and identifying the sole purpose as “to kill gooks.” Herr contended, “that was not at all true of me. I was there to watch.”

Imposing order and continuity onto a war in which a correspondent had but a small, limited view demanded that “individual sensibility must become intimate with the facts, remain respectful of them, but not be controlled by them.”

Dispatches thus reinscribes historical facts into new forms, questioning notions of objective truth and the possibility of a single war narrative.

Although a work of non-fiction, Dispatches, perhaps even more than the fictional Going After Cacciato or Meditations in Green, demonstrates a number of essentially metafictive techniques. Throughout the narrative, Herr reflects on the role of journalists as mediators of public information, an extraordinarily complex task in a conflict like Vietnam where public information was often limited and abstruse. Journalists, volunteers among sizable groups of conscripted men, were supposed to exist concomitantly in the world of the soldier, or grunt, and that of the detached observer. Detachment was for Herr, and for many journalists who reported on Vietnam, virtually impossible. After spending a year in Vietnam, Herr “felt so plugged in to all the stories and the images and the fear that even the dead started telling me stories.”

Recognizing its own subjectivity, Herr’s work does not claim to record a transparent reality but rather, in the tradition of historiographic metafiction, to emphasize narrativity and question the various ways that documentary sources are manipulated.

Many scholars have discussed Herr’s failure to include the Vietnamese perspective in Dispatches. Literary scholar Philip Melling posits that “what Dispatches

23 Ibid., 20.
lacks is a sense of social inquiry.” Melling cites the “stylized and featureless” quality of those Vietnamese who are portrayed, and suggests that Herr’s perspective is representative of the journalist who extrapolates generalities from particular, albeit personal, experiences and who frames the war around his own limited and very ethnocentric Western experience. Although it is certain that Dispatches is a work deeply rooted in an American sensibility, Melling criticizes Herr’s work for its failure to attain the status of a grand, omnipotent narrative of Vietnam when Herr himself acknowledges the very impossibility of creating such a work. For Melling, Herr suggests in Dispatches that he alone was able to avoid the pitfalls of conventional journalism and recognize its inadequacy in Vietnam, but that through this bravado, Herr created an ultimately self-centered and tendentious portrait of the war.

Melling’s criticism, however, seems to ignore Herr’s own admission that Vietnam War journalism, or more generally literature, is unavoidably one-sided and perspectival. Melling contends that Herr’s failure to render a more complete picture of the situation in Vietnam is due to his own limited experience, a limitation to which Herr concedes. In his repeated admonishments of conventional journalism, Herr argues that the very attempt to create a holistic view of the war is impossible, instead choosing to focus on the individual experiences of American soldiers. Literary critic Matthew Stewart echoes this point, stating that “Herr’s truths about Vietnam are inextricably linked with self-discovery” and that those truths “unadulterated, unambiguous truths – may be in short supply even when they are assiduously striven for.”

26 Melling, 80.
27 Stewart, 190.
Dispatches clearly bears very little resemblance to traditional American war reporting. Historically, journalists played an important role in the increasing debates about American involvement in Vietnam that occurred across the United States. As the legitimacy of American actions in Vietnam came under scrutiny, first-person reportage provided one of the only sources of direct information not propagated by the United States government. By 1967, a complex anti-war movement had emerged, and despite the varying ideologies of the protesters, calls for the removal of American troops became near universal. The movement was in part galvanized by the immediacy of television images as well by the unfiltered accounts from in-country reporters.

Dispatches is undoubtedly a narrative about the realities of combat, but its self-conscious construction shifts the focus from moral judgment to epistemological questions about the ways that morality is formed, the ways that soldiers, government officials, witnesses, and journalists obtain and transmute information to an utterly unwitting public audience. Herr admits, “we knew that the uses of most information were flexible, different pieces of ground told different stories to different people,” underscoring the tenuousness between fact and fiction and the intersection of the real and the imaginary.28 A novel that places this intersection at the heart of its story and, like Herr’s Dispatches, asserts the impossibility of a single historical narrative of Vietnam, is Tim O’Brien’s celebrated Going After Cacciato.

Going After Cacciato is centrally concerned with the parity of memory and imagination as viewed through the lens of a literary myth.29 Cacciato is a seventeens-

28 Ibid., 1.
year-old American soldier who decides in the midst of the war to abandon his post and walk to Paris. Sent in pursuit of Cacciato is a group of soldiers that includes Paul Berlin, a young soldier recently arrived in Vietnam, who uses the search as a way of living out his fantasy of leaving the war behind. Like most metafictional novels on Vietnam, Cacciato does not follow a linear novelistic trajectory but relays the narrative through a series of flashbacks, fantasies, and perspective shifts. Throughout the novel, O'Brien seems to acknowledge a belief in the capriciousness of facts and reality, and the multiple uses and manipulations of information, an undercurrent that runs through most American fictional literature about Vietnam. The pursuing group’s acting philosopher, Doc Peret, articulates this, advising his fellow soldiers to be conscious of motives, to “search out the place where fact ended and imagination took over.”

Berlin also interrogates the lack of reliable facts, stating that he “didn’t know who really started the war, or why, or when, or with what motives; he didn’t know if it mattered; he saw sense in both sides of the debate, but he did not know where truth lay.” The inability to locate unassailable truth is the real focus of the novel, pointing to the creation of the novel itself as a force for not only transmitting experience but also reshaping it, a quintessentially metafictive notion.

O’Brien’s novel is considered experimental given the stylistic nature of the narrative. O’Brien, however, has resisted the common interpretations of his work as simply postmodern experimentation. He suggests that he plays with form in order to “explore meaning and themes and dramatic discovery,” rather than to create artifice for

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31 Ibid.
the sake of literary ingenuity. O’Brien nonetheless relies heavily on metafictional techniques, including his use of intermittent chapters called “Observation Post,” where Berlin consciously reflects on the creation of the story of Cacciato’s journey. These chapters serve to remind the reader of the text’s fictionality, and bring the reader’s focus back to the act of storytelling in the midst of the story itself. Cacciato consists of layers of narratives and perspectives, pointing to the notion of the multiplicity of meaning and truth as well as the modernist and postmodernist emphasis on the importance of subjectivity and perspective.

O’Brien examines the nature of a soldier’s limited perspective in war and the multiple meanings ascribed, hinting that the events of war are open to varying interpretations, even among those who share the same experiences:

“Each soldier, he has a different war. Even if it is the same war, it is a different war. Do you see this?”
“Perceptual set,” Doc Peret said.
The captain nodded. He was leaning forward over the table. His eyes were brilliant black. “Perceptual set! Yes, that is it. In battle, in a war, a soldier sees only a tiny fragment of what is available to be seen. The soldier is not a photographic machine. He is not a camera. He registers, so to speak, only those few items that he is predisposed to register and not a single thing more. Do you understand this? So I am saying to you that after a battle each soldier will have different stories to tell, vastly different stories, and that when a war is ended it is as if there have been a million wars, or as many wars as there were soldiers.”

O’Brien’s novel does not attempt to reconcile the various perceptions of its characters, it focuses instead on acknowledging the fragmented, conflicting nature of the soldiers’ collective experience.

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32 Taylor, 300.
33 O’Brien, 196.
Despite its fantastic premise, *Going After Cacciato* does not reflect just absurdity or unreality, a notion that has been largely discredited by literary critics and discarded by O'Brien. Thomas Myers suggests “by extending rather than abandoning the reality of the Vietnam War, O’Brien simultaneously speaks more fully of it as he enfolds that experience with larger issues.” Cacciato fuses elements of fantasy with those clearly born of experience and memory. In the chapter “The Things They Didn’t Know,” Berlin and his compatriots ponder the position of the American soldier in Vietnam and the cultural divide that separated them from the Vietnamese, wondering “who were these skinny, blank-eyed people? What did they want?” After treating the wounds of a young girl, Berlin asks “could she somehow separate him from the war? Even for an instant?” In this sense, *Going After Cacciato* is, as literary scholar Phillip Beidler argues, a work in which “elements of surreal fantasy are more authoritatively interfused with a sense of close realistic observation; evidence of having considered Vietnam on its own terms as experience.”

Although Beidler acknowledges that much of the metafictional literature of the Vietnam War is rooted in historical reality and personal observation, he contends that authors’ juxtaposition of historical fact and fictional fantasy serves only to consciously make reality and unreality “as undistinguishable as possible.” For Beidler, Vietnam was “a place with no real points of reference, then or now,” suggesting that the literature of Vietnam is significant only in its exploration of the conflict as an aesthetic event or as

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34 Myers, 172.
35 O’Brien, 262.
36 Ibid., 263.
37 Beidler, 54.
38 Ibid., 5.
a postmodern miasma. In distancing metafictional Vietnam literature from more traditional renderings of American wars, scholars such as Beidler perpetuate the notion that Vietnam was anomalous in American history, requiring new forms of representation that self-consciously examine the act of writing. This contention at once denies the conflict any specific historical context and reduces the body of literature to an exercise in postmodern invention. Rooting metafictional novels in history, however, rejects the simplistic notion that the works are useful only in terms of artistic achievement and helps to discard the equally simplistic assertion that Vietnam was an historical aberration.

*Cacciato*, while indulging Berlin’s unrelenting desertion fantasy, further exposes the conflicted nature of the soldier and the difficulty of reconciling military obligations with the brutal consequences the soldiers witnessed. Berlin acknowledges the American military’s ignorance of Vietnamese culture, conceding that “not knowing the language, they did not know the people. They did not know what the people loved or respected or feared or hated…. Emotions and beliefs and attitudes, motives and aims, hopes – these were unknown to the men of Alpha Company.”39 This cultural alienation and disregard certainly have a historical correlative. Historian Gabriel Kolko suggests that the Vietnam War “has to be regarded as a struggle not only between armies, competing societies, and visions of change, but also between men and women committed to alternative strategies who had profoundly different images of human existence and their roles as actors in history.”40

39 O’Brien, 261.
40 Kolko, 19.
The disorientation Berlin, and by extension many American soldiers, experienced in Vietnam was the result of several historical factors. In addition to the military’s disinterest in or ignorance of Vietnamese people, their history, and their culture, the ambiguity of the American cause in Vietnam contributed to the sense of dislocation that Berlin exhibits. The military policy of one-year tours of duty for soldiers largely prevented solidarity among units and had a profoundly divisive psychological impact on soldiers. This lack of coherence and abundance of individual isolation naturally led to thoughts of desertion, already at epidemic levels among the South Vietnamese soldiers of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) with whom the Americans were ostensibly fighting. Gabriel Kolko claims that between 1965 and 1972, nearly one million South Vietnamese soldiers deserted, noting that desertions as well as casualties were extensively underreported. When considered in this context, Berlin’s mythic journey is not antithetical to reality but a product of it. For American soldiers, unfamiliar with the people, the language, and the culture of Vietnam, desertion was rarely a feasible option while serving in country, but witnessing the mass desertions of ARVN soldiers and often questioning their own participation in the war, many soldiers undoubtedly contemplated leaving the war.

Nearing the end of the journey to Paris, Berlin concedes, “even in imagination we must obey the logic of what we started. Even in imagination we must be true to our obligations, for, even in imagination, obligation cannot be outrun. Imagination, like reality, has its limits.” Going After Cacciato attempts to locate the limits of imagination.

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41 Ibid., 260.
42 O’Brien, 321.
and reality, fiction and historical experience, and in doing so exposes their liminality. Through a soldier's imaginings in the midst of combat, Cacciato raises questions that are profoundly moral and ideological. The ways that Berlin interprets the war, combining observation and fabulation, weaving a narrative that is rooted in lived experience, suggests that imagination is not intrinsically antagonistic to memory, but in fact is a deeper exploration of it.43

Offering an equally eccentric premise, Stephen Wright's Meditations in Green explores the postwar psychology of the Vietnam veteran and the ways that gravely wounded and traumatized veterans reconcile their experience with their imaginings of it. Wright's novel is considered by many to be the most identifiably postmodern treatment of the Vietnam War in American war literature. Structurally, the novel lacks a sustained plot or linear character development, and is rather a chaotic and tangled collection of individual impressions and memories of experiences in the Vietnam War. The novel's protagonist, Griffin, narrates the war through a series of flashbacks as he attempts to recover from his postwar heroin addiction. Griffin's therapist, Arden, has developed a method of treatment that uses plant cultivation as a way of breaking down the western psyche and purging it of war memories and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The "messiah of the advent of vegetable consciousness," Arden gives each sufferer a copy of his book, The Psychology of the Plant, and encourages the transcendence of the burdens of the mind through psychic gardening, urging his patients to visualize themselves as plants.44 He administers advice such as, "a consideration of phlox would reduce the

43 Lucas Carpenter, "It Don't Mean Nothin': Vietnam War Fiction and Postmodernism," College Literature, Spring 2003, 35.
miserly in the spirit or ... an equal time pondering bluebells would tend to elevate one's pain threshold..."^{45}

Wright’s plant metaphor proves to be apt on a number of levels when applied to Griffin’s experience in the war and by extension to American involvement in Vietnam. Pondering the relationship of humans to other forms of life through gardening or visualizing oneself as inanimate seems to be a gross abstraction of war experience, but the novel is most successful in its attempts to examine the psychological dynamics of human interaction and the relationship to life in general that comes under scrutiny during the destruction of war. Through the plant metaphor, Wright deconstructs the idea of domination and mastery, the physical environment soldiers faced in the jungles of Southeast Asia, and the impact of the massive use of defoliants on the physical landscape of Vietnam.

Although on the surface Griffin’s experiences with “plant therapy” represent a kind of atavistic psychological treatment, or an attempt to return a battered and traumatized mind to a state of organic purity, the use of the plant as the object of Griffin’s visualization is telling. One of the recurring themes in American literature on Vietnam is the combatants’ memory of the landscape, often describing the country, and indeed the conflict itself in terms of its impenetrable jungle, which was for many American soldiers a dangerous “heart of darkness.”^{46} American novels and memoirs often give the land in Vietnam extended analysis, and the physical landscape itself can be seen as a metaphor for the war and the uncertainty of American objectives in Vietnam. The dense jungle

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 87.
obscured the vision of soldiers -- one of many reasons it was difficult for soldiers to identify the enemy -- and for many American soldiers and citizens the reasons the United States was engaged in the war were equally impenetrable and elusive. The war's cultural divide was symbolized by the vast green jungle so frequently referenced in American war novels like *Meditations in Green*, with many authors suggesting that the American military attempted to close the divide by incinerating the land and its people, leaving a barren, unambiguous landscape.

Despite the somewhat overwrought and highly stylistic nature of Wright's *Meditations in Green*, it does have historiographic value in addition to its already lauded literary achievement and innovation. Don Ringnalda contends that Wright's novel avoids any attempt to make sense of Vietnam or to provide clarification or retrospective exegesis, but rather defies western rationalism and portrays a chaotic event by reflecting its fractured nature in a fractured, incomprehensible form. Although this argument can be supported by the text, Wright's work should be accorded some historical meaning in the way that it juxtaposes allegory with the realities of American involvement in Vietnam. The plant metaphor becomes increasingly potent when considered next to the historical fact that between 1965 and 1970 over 42 million liters of Agent Orange saturated South Vietnam, incinerating a vast number of Vietnamese noncombatants along with their land. Approximately 700,000 American veterans were exposed to the defoliant, afflicting many with cancer, skin diseases, breathing disorders, and a legacy of birth defects for their children.47 Although Wright's experimental form, or formlessness as Ringnalda defines it, exhibits a level of chaos that may reduce to nothingness, to

suggest that a reading of *Meditations in Green* is merely an exercise in entropic mimesis is to oversimplify that work and the process of constructing it.

Wright uses metafictional devices both to place himself outside the story that unfolds and to acknowledge his presence as narrator. Scattered throughout the novel are short interludes titled “Meditations in Green,” which are free-associations, often nonsensical poems that function in ways similar to the “Observation Posts” in *Going After Cacciato*. Both forms return a reader’s attention to the act of narration and to the inherently postmodern fragmentation of character. In addition to unique narrative forms, metafiction and postmodernism are most clearly demonstrated by repeated references to the war as a film and by the character of Wendell, an aspiring movie director/soldier who uses the company’s battle engagements as scenes in his film. Collecting footage, viewing Vietnam as an enormous movie set, Wendell develops a rough cut of his movie, simply titled “The Movie,” lasting four and a half hours. After screening Wendell’s film, Griffin comments and reveals his own thoughts about the messiness of war and the impossibility of locating its meaning. By extension, Griffin points to the author’s acceptance of a chaotic representation of war, saying, “I don’t know, maybe it’s me, but I couldn’t make any sense out of it at all. I mean, there’s no beginning, no middle, no end. There’s no coherence. It just kind of settles over you. Like a musty tent.”

Like Wendell’s film, Griffin acknowledges his own inability to impose a linear narrative on his war experience or to craft a satisfying representation of it. Referring to his early experiences in country, Griffin describes his disorientation as “a dreary film

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48 Wright, 266.
buff's satisfaction" and calls Vietnam "their B-war." Griffin sees his fellow soldiers as actors in a film, reducing them to stock characters in a scripted plot:

The single character lacking from their B-war had finally arrived: The Kid. His past, his future were as clear, defined, and predictable as the freckles on his smooth face. He had never left home, would write his family once a day, sob himself to sleep each night. He becomes an abused mascot of the company, is kidded relentlessly until the brusque hero (Griffin?), brimming with manly tenderness, takes pity and shelters him from an apparently good-natured but actually quite cruel reality. Friendship cemented, acceptance complete, the next morning The Kid trips a land mine and blows his guts out, anointing his new buddies with a moist spew of panchromatic gore, his large colon, floating in a nearby lotus pond, spelling out good-bye among the fronds.  

Meditations in Green embraces the difficulty of narrative representation, both in film and literature, and seeks not to condense war memories down to one seamless story, but to reflect on the chaotic nature of memory and the participant's attempts to make sense of them. The idea of soldiers representing their war experiences through the medium of film clearly references postmodern notions of a fractured, subjective reality, evincing what literary scholar Lucas Carpenter refers to as a "Baudrillardian hyperreality where 'the images of war substituted for the events of the war itself and appeared realer than real...'" In addition to questioning the relationship between experience and representation, Griffin's retrospective analysis of Wendell's film suggests the unreliability of individual memory and the confusion of seeing individual experiences filtered through others' memories in film.

49 Ibid., 26.
50 Ibid., 26.
51 Carpenter, 41.
The novel's film imagery is also another way of discussing the problematic lack of facts in the Vietnam War, an idea that Wright, Herr, and O'Brien evaluate extensively. *Meditations in Green* emphasizes the subjectivity of experience in Vietnam, using Wendell's film as a way of metafictionally analyzing the way that meaning is constituted and then considering the process of imposing narrative order on memory. It is apparent that Wright did not set out to write a novel that clarifies or penetrates the meaning of the war; clearly, he focuses on the surrounding disarray and confusion, a common theme in the novels discussed in this chapter. By considering these American metafictional novels in a historical context, however, scholars can attempt to derive a meaning that is, if not orderly and sensical, historically profound and deeply experiential. The next chapter analyzes the very different historical circumstances surrounding literary production in Vietnam in the decade following the end of the war with America.
Economists, political scientists, and historians have posited a number of theories as to why the reforms that came to be known as “đổi mới” or “renovation” were instituted at the Vietnamese Communist Party’s (VCP) Sixth National Congress in December 1986. Comparisons with other socialist reform movements in countries like Czechoslovakia, East Germany, China, and the Soviet Union have suggested that Vietnam’s renovation movement differed in its attempt to balance economic and cultural reforms.1 Political scientist William S. Turley argues that economic damage caused by the war with America and the consequent trade embargo were clearly factors in the VCP’s need for reform, but Turley also demonstrates that Vietnam’s low level of development in the 1980s and the absence of economic or industrial bureaucracies mitigated internal divisions and allowed the party to implement sweeping reforms.

The policies of renovation were not explicitly based on the model of another country despite frequent comparisons to the Soviet Union’s glasnost, comparisons that were inevitable after Time magazine referred to General Secretary Nguyễn Văn Linh as “the Mikhail Gorbachev of Vietnam” in 1987.2 The fundamental reason that Secretary Linh advocated renovation was the need to reconcile capitalist activity with socialist rule.

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2 Dean Brellis, “An Interview with Viet Nam’s Nguyen Van Linh,” Time, September 21, 1987, vol. 130, number 12, http://www.time.com, accessed 2 December 2006. Although renovation policies may not have an explicit link to glasnost and Soviet economic policies, renovation-era writers may well have been influenced by Soviet literary trends, including those established by dissident writers in the U.S.S.R.
realizing that it was “an illusion to wish to advance directly to socialism without going through the stage of capitalist development.” Renovation policy attempted to respond to the economic failures in the socialist nations of eastern Europe, to engage in international commerce and foreign investment, and to improve the daily lives of Vietnamese and the functioning of the socialist bureaucracy.

Historian Gareth Porter has contended that the 1986 changes marked a “generational transition in leadership,” as a number of high-ranking political cadres central to the planning of the war with America had retired immediately prior to the Sixth Party Congress. Nguyễn Văn Linh accepted the position of Secretary General in 1986, following the retirement of Trương Chinh and the death of Lê Duẩn, two high-ranking leaders in the VCP. This change in leadership at the time of the introduction of renovation policy served as a significant symbolic shift toward a new economy and new society, replacing leaders whose political careers reached their height during the wars against the French and Americans. Prior to the 1986 changes, Vietnamese foreign relations had consisted primarily of resisting foreign powers, but with renovation and economic liberalization, the party’s interests had shifted toward integration into a global economy.

The most important reforms instituted by renovation related to agricultural production and the regulation of markets, but there was an immediate social and cultural reaction to the policies, specifically within the arenas of journalism and publishing. In the late 1980s, there were approximately 350 national and local newspapers, magazines,

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3 Turley, 9.
and journals published in Vietnam, and many journalists saw in renovation the opportunity to make the press more representative of public opinion. The VCP had never allowed members of the press to publish any articles without party approval, and the Ministry of Culture, established by the party in 1955, had created guidelines to be enforced by the Central Committee's Propaganda and Training Department. Workers in this department read each news story and determined where and when it would be published.5

In 1986, the VCP eased some of the restraints on writers and instituted a new press policy. The ministry encouraged journalists to write realistic stories about the negative aspects of life in Vietnam, and many publications responded by publishing investigative stories that revealed corruption among high-level party members.6 The new freedoms afforded the press were quickly reevaluated and within months the VCP resumed the process of approving and censoring all stories before publication.

Journalistic freedom has ebbed and flowed since the late 1980s and, although party censorship remains the law in Vietnam, many unauthorized presses publish subversive stories and many newspapers continue to expose corruption in print. Increasingly widespread access to the internet has also exposed Vietnamese to dissident and international media.

A similar set of circumstances applied to the publication of literary works in Vietnam in the 1980s. In 1987, a group of writers argued that party control over culture had been overbearing and called for severing cultural production from communist

6 Porter, 170.
control. Ceding some ground to the authors, Secretary Linh issued a resolution later that year stating that “creative freedom is the vital condition for the creation of genuine values in culture and literature.” 1987 and 1988 were important years in Vietnam’s literary history as the VCP removed many of the restrictions on publishing novels and short stories. Works by anti-communist revolutionaries were published as well as the works of authors who had been banned for several decades. However, by 1989, the party realized the potential political fallout of publishing anti-communist, anti-war literature and, as with its retraction of press freedom, reinstated much of the party’s control over literary publishing. 8 The brief period of freedom did, however, produce a few authors whose work would be associated with the renovation policy and would represent a new voice for Vietnamese society.

Historian Hue-Tam Ho Tai cautions that despite having created a more liberal space for authors to operate, Vietnamese leaders “retain a stake in promoting a version of the past that inscribes it [the party] as the legitimate inheritor of the Vietnamese patriotic tradition and the dominant force in the recent history of the country.” 9 Renovation did, however, encourage authors to insert discrepant assessments of the past into the public record, placing them alongside official versions and challenging more orthodox state interpretations. The Vietnamese have long venerated literature and its ability to convey social, political, and moral realities, dating back to Nguyên Du’s nineteenth-century epic poem, The Tale of Kieu (Truyện Kiều), which is often regarded as the masterpiece of Vietnamese literature and proof that Vietnam possesses a long and rich literary heritage.

7 Cited in Turley, 198.
8 Porter, 167.
Journalist Robert Templer, in his depiction of modern Vietnam, *Shadows and Wind*, highlights the reverence Vietnamese have for literature, noting that Vietnam "is a country that prides itself on its high literacy rate and its respect for the written word."\(^{10}\) The literature produced in the post-American War period, however, was often regarded as poor. The works were criticized for their passivity and simplicity, a product of the writers' inability to explore many aspects of their lives in print. Many literary characters of the pre-renovation period often appeared as mere caricatures, reduced to stereotypes such as the benevolent peasant, the greedy landlord, the diligent and wise party leaders, and the courageous and patriotic soldier.\(^{11}\) In the late 1980s, party leaders assumed a measure of responsibility, acknowledging that communist policies were partly to blame for the production of literature so unworthy of the country's history.

Of course, renovation did not completely reverse the literary tide and result in a flood of critical, subversive fiction, but it did create a discursive space for writers to explore new themes and re-interpretations, critically assessing a past that had up to this point been whitewashed by state censorship and harassment. In the environment of renovation, the fiction writers were imbued with a significant power in shaping perceptions of the past both in Vietnam and abroad, and they produced an alternative to the state's "authentic history" in a way that historians did not. It is no surprise that after thirty years of sustained war, the production of history was tightly regulated, with the party obviously favoring historians who fortified communist legitimacy with a heavily ideological approach to the past. Historian David Marr suggests that "some of Vietnam's

\(^{10}\) Templer, 178.

\(^{11}\) Ibid.
best historians avoided study of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries entirely, in favor of earlier eras where party scrutiny was less meticulous.”

Marr contends that the first signs of revision of the official past occurred in early 1980s fiction and filmmaking, preceding and coinciding with the renovation movement. The nature of fiction allows the author to suggest ideas that are patently subversive but on a more allegorical and less overtly political level. Where the quality of a Vietnamese historian’s work was determined by its utility in furthering party goals and sustaining Vietnam’s valiant past, fiction was held to a different standard, allowing the author the freedom to intertwine ideas of politics, family, economics, and the privations of a socialist system in a fictive context. During the renovation period, artistic freedom was clearly if briefly expanded, permitting authors to enter the historiographical debate.

Meeting with a group of authors in 1988, VCP General Secretary Linh stated that “sometimes we have had to use stories of ancient times as a vehicle for our message so as to make those who have committed wrong-doings realize their guilt.” Linh promised to “untie” writers from strict government regulations but he also noted that writers “must stand firm in the school of socialist realism,” meaning that the party expected authors to work within the ideological framework of the party. Socialist realism, a style advocated by the party since the 1945 August Revolution, urged the heroic portrayal of the Vietnamese military and the patriotic depiction of the peasant masses, discouraging

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14 Ibid., 3.
authors from creating characters that deviated from the disinterested and magnanimous renderings of prior literature.¹⁵

Although Linh suggested that adhering to socialist realism would not prevent criticism of the party, it would seem difficult to reconcile this invitation to broaden the thematic scope of literature with the idea that writers must remain within the bounds of socialist realism. The party, deeply disappointed with the cliché-ridden, perfunctory works that had been approved for mass consumption before renovation, must have been aware of the potential impact of an influx of caustic, emotional images by writers so devastated by generations of war. Before renovation, communist leaders allowed distribution only of fictive works determined to be “useful” to furthering party goals. After renovation, the government permitted literature that was not necessarily politically “useful” but was deemed “harmless,” despite straying far from the strictures of socialist realism.

Perhaps the government seriously misjudged the power of artistic freedom and thought Vietnamese authors incapable of producing works that were unflinchingly critical of the communist regime and that would have a mass appeal and exert broad influence, but this seems too simplistic. Since renovation was primarily an economic reform movement, economic factors leading to the relaxing of controls on the arts also seem to be of importance. As Vietnam attempted to open itself to a more liberal market economy, a substantial art and literary consumer market emerged. Book publishers and journal editors lost much state funding and became self-sufficient, requiring them to seek out quality literature that moved people to purchase. As was seen when the freedoms of

¹⁵ The August Revolution is briefly discussed in Chapter 1.
renovation eventually retreated, economic and literary liberalization were often related but not interdependent, but the impetus for growing literary freedom certainly developed out of policies that were initially intended to have a liberating economic impact.

Before renovation, the value of literature was judged by its compliance not only to socialist realism but also to the party view of historical legitimacy. Perpetuating the patriotic traditions the state encouraged during war, pre-renovation authors produced novels and short stories of heroism and unflagging adherence to communist ideology. Seeking to make sense of chaotic times, Vietnamese writers in the renovation era labored to expose the current state of Vietnam rather than to mythologize the past or romanticize the present. By humanizing history, renovation literature reflected on socialism itself and critically evaluated the success of party goals and the wisdom of their implementation. It also addressed elements of everyday life that were notably absent from political histories. Renovation’s fictional writings provided one of the only available glimpses into experiences that had been closed off to historians and facilitated a new assessment of political and social realities in contemporary Vietnam. However, the party scaled back significantly the relative liberalization of the press and literary publishing less than four years after its introduction. Many authors, including Dương Thu Hương and Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, were harassed or criminally charged. The party’s need to open up the economy to private investment and to international engagement represented the fiscal and political necessity of renovation to ensure development in Vietnam. Encouraging open public dialogue, however, threatened to undermine the social unity required for party loyalty.
The renovation fiction examined in this thesis involves in most cases a discussion of identity. Politics and history are sometimes explicitly absent from the works of this period, but the characters are clearly shaped by the aftermath of war and party policies. Through its rejection of state-approved socialist realism and its exploration of everyday realities, Vietnamese literature written during the renovation period has often found unique and powerful ways of challenging state versions of history and presenting more localized, personal forms of remembrance. To further illustrate how renovation literature interrogates the notions of public and private memory, it is useful to consider the ways that scholars in other disciplines have addressed the issue. In many ways, renovation literature has similarities with the commemorations of signal war traumas that have appeared in communities devastated by war; both have privileged individual memory over national ideology.

This intersection of individual and national memory is at the center of anthropologist Heonik Kwon's *After the Massacre*, which analyzes the issue of public commemoration through an examination of rural sites of devastating massacres during the war with America. Kwon suggests that local commemoration practices have shifted from state management to private ritual and local control, and that recent reburial movements and memorial constructions in provinces such as Ha My and Mỹ Lai have complicated the orthodox narratives of war proposed by communist leaders and have instead privileged individual notions of memory. In many ways, Kwon’s argument,

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17 Ha My and Mỹ Lai were sites of two 1968 civilian massacres in Vietnam. The Ha My massacre was perpetrated by South Korean forces, the United States army carried out the massacre at Mỹ Lai. Details of both traumas were not released to the public until several months
that memory has shifted from state narrative to the level of everyday social life — parallels the practices of renovation’s fiction authors, who consciously shift the thematic focus of their works from loyal party unity to diverse private life. In doing so, the Ha My memorials and the renovation literature both embody Michel de Certeau’s theory regarding the political importance of pedestrian acts in *The Practice of Everyday Life.* Such localized forms of commemoration do not always uphold or coincide with notions of nationalism or party loyalty but rather relocate memories in a familial realm. By stripping public memorial and popular literature of its orthodox political rhetoric, new forms of commemoration are recast in a more populist, communicative vernacular, and are reinvested with a profoundly realistic power.18

Through his analysis of the postwar communities of Ha My and Mỹ Lai, sites of two brutal mass civilian executions by Korean and American military forces, Kwon illustrates that commemoration of war is shifting from what was once a state monopoly to private, communal sectors, mirroring the country’s economic shift from centralized control to an open market. Kwon contends that recent movements to rebury victims of massacres and erect or renovate official memorials are evidence of the cultural need to place the legacy of death in the fabric of everyday social life and to preserve the importance of retaining memories of the dead in the face of modernization and social change. Kwon argues that “the official approach to war death in contemporary Vietnam is to preserve heroic death and to transcend tragic death in the nation’s modified march after the events, and much about the Ha My massacre is still unknown. The events at Mỹ Lai have been documented as a result of the 1971 court martial and murder conviction of American Lieutenant William Calley. 18

toward a prosperous future,” an approach that echoes the strictures of socialist realism imposed on Vietnam’s literary community. This notion of preserving the heroism of the dead is rendered more difficult and complex by massacres like those at Ha My and Mỹ Lai, which epitomize the idea of tragic death. Both massacres resulted in bodies being buried in mass graves, often unidentified. In Vietnam, the location of death is significant in that dying at home with family (chết nhà) is considered a better death than dying outside the home or “in the street” (chết đường). Of similar importance is the ability to locate the remains of family members in order to perform rituals on anniversaries of deaths and to maintain altars for offerings to the dead.

The specific cultural practices associated with commemorating the dead in modern Vietnam are important in establishing differences between the often-conflicting nature of local and national memory as well as the complexity of the intersections between local and national loyalty. Out of political and military necessity, the lines between national and local interests were frequently conflated during the wars against the French and the Americans. One of the leading figures in the Indochinese Communist Party and later the VCP, Trương Chinh helped legitimate Vietnam’s wars of resistance and justify their destructiveness by invoking the idea of “total war,” or a war that is conducted for and by the people at all levels of society, not just those involved militarily. The integration of civilian interests with military actions becomes problematic, as Kwon argues, when one considers the shifting identities of villagers in times of war, their pragmatic application of loyalty depending on circumstance, and the

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19 Kwon, 19.
20 Ibid., 29.
priority of satisfying basic needs for survival. For the nation, appropriating the war dead is central to the creation of a collective national past, but for the individual, remembering the dead occurs in a ritualized domestic space that lies beyond the reach of party domination.

Underscoring the idea that commemoration is an intensely personal and intimate familial act in Vietnam, Kwon describes Mỹ Lai villagers' resistance to official commemoration ceremonies in the 1990s. The Department of Information and Culture built a museum, park, several monuments, and an archive of international press materials in Mỹ Lai as a tribute to victims of the massacre. Each year on the lunar anniversary of the massacre, the party organizes a ceremony of remembrance attended by high-ranking officials and members of the domestic and foreign press. The residents of Mỹ Lai are encouraged to attend but are perennially reluctant to do so, expressing embarrassment or offense that the party forbids villagers' from offering food to their dead ancestors or communicating with them privately. Kwon argues that this reluctance to participate in public memorials in Mỹ Lai is not an isolated phenomenon, that the profound connections that Vietnamese feel to their dead ancestors are often antithetical to state notions of memory. Rather than seeing the performance of death-anniversary rites as a private event, the state continuously seeks to mark the casualties of war in public ceremonies that reinforce the deaths as inexorably linked to the party and the nation.

Remembering the war dead in a familial context rather than a socialist milieu, both death-anniversary rites and literary renderings of wars would be examples of de Certeau's tactic in their attention to individual identity. They are also related to sociologist Maurice Halbwachs's theories of the social construction of memory.
Historian Hue-Tam Ho Tai engages Halbwach’s ideas in her analysis of the “commemorative fever” that swept Vietnam in the late twentieth century and resulted in dozens of museums, landmarks, and memorials devoted to Vietnam’s wars.\(^{21}\) Tai argues that the urge to commemorate is a “paradoxical by-product” of the policies of renovation, and that the transformation from a socialist to a market-driven economy has resulted in a political and cultural climate that inevitably produces new and discrepant versions of the nation’s history. With renovation, Tai contends, “history lost its capital H.”\(^{22}\) The unmooring of the state-sponsored version of the past from contemporary cultural representations of it have threatened socialist notions of the very usable history that it employed to mobilize the masses for war.

Just as After the Massacre illustrates the rupture between the state and the local that emerged regarding the treatment of war dead, historian Patricia Pelley’s Postcolonial Vietnam attempts to break down the outward presentation of unity among Vietnamese in the period between 1945 and 1975, and focuses rather on the internal divisions and tensions that arose among historians and Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) officials.\(^{23}\) Pelley analyzes the ways that the DRV encouraged the writing of a new national history of Vietnam, a history that when examined in the context of its creation reveals at once a fluid, antagonistic, and dialogic relationship to the nation’s colonial and pre-colonial past.

One of the most important issues facing Vietnamese historians was the DRV’s relentless need to create and adhere to one accepted periodization scheme that contributed

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\(^{21}\) Tai, 1.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 6.

to a seamless, continuous historical narrative. In the search for periodization, official historians debated the virtue of universal, normalizing evolutionary paradigms such as Stalin’s five stages or the Asiatic Mode of Production, paradigms that asserted Vietnam’s global significance, reworked its relationship to China, and allowed for a progressive, albeit undesirably positive portrayal of colonialism.

In terms of Vietnam’s post-1945 policies toward literature, Pelley contends that the DRV subscribed to the notion of a “national essence,” or the idea that literature should preserve what the author refers to as the “cult of antiquity.” As most Vietnamese saw literature as the province of the elite, the DRV encouraged and often appropriated folk culture as a way of defining the nature of the Vietnamese, an act that again affirmed and repeated some of the hierarchical colonial and dynastic precedents that the DRV sought to reverse. The “national essence” concept reflected the DRV and its historians’ quest to describe an archetypal-Vietnamese citizen, one who displays a “fighting spirit” toward foreign aggressors and an unflagging loyalty to the nation, qualities advocated by socialist realism. Additionally, the DRV made a number of largely unsuccessful attempts to redirect familial loyalties to nationalist ones. Vietnamese citizens were encouraged to reorient their loyalties from the family-state to the nation-state, evidenced by the government’s push to alter the Vietnamese language by changing the meaning of pronouns based on kinship, such as introducing a fixed “I” or changing the word for “grandfather” (ông) to the neutral “Mr.”24 The government’s efforts, most pronounced during periods such as the era of 1950s land reform that dismantled familial structures,

24 Ibid., 158.
were never completely successful, particularly since relationships are linguistically embedded in the Vietnamese language.

Since 1945, the DRV had sought to reshape collective memory, specifically memories of the August Revolution and the war with America, by encouraging textual and ritual commemoration that created a narrative placing primary importance on the nation-state. Pelley contends that in the 1970s, Vietnamese historians began to argue for a “much more teleological view of the revolution,” that the war with America was “simply the latest in a long line of national struggles to repel foreign aggressors.”25 By rooting the conflict with America in a tradition of Vietnamese national history, the DRV affirmed the importance of a national history, buttressed notions of national authority, and also proved that the production of history was fluid and malleable. Historian Kim N.B. Ninh in her study of cultural policy in revolutionary Vietnam, *A World Transformed*, has argued that this teleological notion, what she and historian David Marr have referred to as the “continuity thesis,” has pervaded western scholarship on Vietnam and has reinforced the assumption that socialism was inevitable.26 Ninh argues that the DRV’s “continuity thesis” and its reproduction in histories of Vietnam has resulted in an overwhelmingly Confucian interpretation of Vietnam’s revolution, has diminished the importance of profound regional ruptures in Vietnam, specifically by ignoring South Vietnam’s alternative notions of nationalism and the state, and has illuminated the DRV’s ambivalence toward history.

25 Ibid., 209.
26 Ninh, 24.
Ninh focuses her inquiry on the party's production of a national cultural policy after 1945, and she suggests that the unity between the DRV and the intellectual community in Vietnam did not result in the preservation of notions of the past inherent in the "continuity thesis," but in fact served to destroy the nation's history in order to create a new Vietnam in the postcolonial, postwar period. Pelley and Ninh would agree that the teleological view of Vietnamese history appealed to the DRV when it was faced with myriad problems of reunification. Ninh focuses primarily on the period after 1945 and Pelley on the 1970s, but both would concur that the "continuity thesis" was born out of the party's desire to establish a continuous national discourse on the country's history. Ninh, however, suggests that the DRV in fact showed a "profound ambivalence about the worth of national culture" that resulted in a strict top-down cultural policy in Vietnam. Rather than viewing the revolution as an inevitable product of an anti-colonialist, nationalist past, the DRV's cultural policies, according to Ninh, showed a disdain for Vietnam's past. Repressive cultural policies represented de facto weapons in the party's struggle for unification under socialism.

The idea that the DRV cultivated a conscious rhetorical shift in the nation's history proves crucial to evaluating the social and cultural impact of renovation literature in the period following the war with America. The attempts of renovation literature to place the individual within a larger national context severely complicated neat, teleological versions of the past. After establishing the Ministry of Culture in 1955, the party acknowledged the importance of artists and writers in disseminating party positions. In September 1955, the ministry elaborated the four roles and responsibilities of culture.

27 Ibid., 240.
that underlay the organizational structure of the ministry and provided fundamental
guidelines for party cadres responsible for monitoring cultural production:

1. To develop optimistic and healthy cultural activities so as to generate
the inspiration for productivity and the political struggle
2. To raise the cultural level of the masses
3. To raise the people’s political level (patriotism, love of labor, love of
class, the collective spirit, the internationalist spirit, and the will to
strive to fulfill immediate responsibilities)
4. To construct the national culture, make good use of past heritage and
eradicate vestiges of the enemy’s culture, and study the progressive
cultures of other countries

Ninh demonstrates that many cadres in the Ministry of Culture were inept,
unqualified, and often functionally illiterate, and she suggests that the ministry and its
general apathy toward culture resulted in a bloated and ineffective bureaucracy. It is
important to note the ways in which the list of responsibilities acknowledged the
important political role of culture in Vietnam and sustained the idea that art and literature
should incorporate notions of the country’s past, albeit in an “optimistic and healthy”
manner.

In late 1957, the party implemented a nationwide campaign of self-criticism,
providing a precedent for the 1986 renovation reforms. A 1958 assessment of the
Ministry of Culture concluded that the ministry encouraged entertainment over
ideological education and was too permissive in its publishing policy, but more
importantly stated that the ministry “must work to bring the masses to the point at which
they would become producers of culture” and that “the working class must be given the
central role in everyday life as ‘the primary characters in the content of culture and

28 Cited in Ninh, 169.
artistic and literary creations.  The essential message in the ministry’s assessment was that the organization lacked a firm stance on class struggle and was not attuned to the reality of its citizens. The party responded with a series of campaigns to engage rural Vietnamese in the cultural life of the nation but, as Ninh demonstrates, the clash between the optimism of socialist rhetoric and the harsh conditions in the countryside often resulted in increased hostility or cynicism toward the state and the further detachment of peasants from national culture.

Another event in the mid-1950s, known as the Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm affair, proved important to a consideration of the relationship between the party, Vietnamese artists and intellectuals, and the ways that each group engaged political issues. Nhân Văn (humanity) and Giai Phẩm (fine works of art) were two literary journals that in 1956 published literature and cartoons critical of the party. The party responded by organizing a campaign against “revisionism” that resulted in the exile of a number of prominent intellectuals and in redoubled efforts at party censorship in Vietnam’s publishing industry. Historian Shawn McHale argues that the affair, and its complicated and often contradictory historical record, illustrates the ways that post-revolutionary Vietnam and the DRV functioned as a ‘memory machine’ churning out an impressive array of texts, such as communist memoirs, novels, and histories, that re-present the past in approved ways.  In advocating new, usable forms of commemoration, the party encouraged writers to avoid certain events in the nation’s past and to remember others in specific, party-mandated interpretive frameworks. Renovation literature’s refusal to omit

29 Ibid., 186.
distressing or politically incendiary issues from cultural works represented a resistance to the party's efforts in controlling or containing public memory, however short-lived that resistance was. The next chapter illustrates some of the provocative questions raised by renovation novels about state interpretations of Vietnam's recent history by considering the works of two of the renovation movement's most recognizable authors.
In 1993, Dương Thu Huong became the first Vietnamese author to publish a novel in America that told of the social and political realities in postwar, postcolonial Vietnam. Prior to publishing in the United States, Dương had published several short stories and novels in Hanoi in the early 1980s and was a highly regarded screenwriter and documentary filmmaker, although none of her films have been screened publicly.¹ In the early 1980s Dương’s strident anti-communist views and criticism of party policies caught the attention of the Ministry of Culture, which issued in 1982 the first of several orders banning publication of her work in Vietnam. Dương’s works were banned from 1982 to 1985, but after the introduction of renovation policies in 1986, she published two inflammatory novels, *Beyond Illusions* (*Bến kia bò ao vong*) in 1987 and *Paradise of the Blind* (*Những thiện đường mù*) in 1988. Extremely popular with Vietnamese audiences, Dương’s first two novels collectively sold 140,000 copies before they were removed from circulation.²

Once the leader of a Communist Youth Brigade, Dương joined a propaganda team during the American War, working in Central Vietnam, where she observed “the suffering and the shortages that people experienced, which were simply unimaginable.”³

After the end of the conflict in 1975, Dương became an outspoken critic of party

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² Ibid., 82.
corruption and an advocate for democracy in Vietnam. Her disillusionment with communism and with the trajectory of economic development in Vietnam manifested itself in her fiction, works that featured characters who embodied the problems facing the communist party and allegorical plots that examined the real impact of party policies on everyday Vietnamese citizens. Both Beyond Illusions and Paradise of the Blind explicitly portray communist officials as malevolent and self-interested, characterizations not lost on leaders of the party. Dương was expelled from the communist party in 1990, after which she was refused permission to leave the country and was placed under continuous surveillance. In 1991, Dương was imprisoned on suspicion of leaking documents of national security to foreigners, but no charges were filed during her seven-month stay in prison. Although Dương’s novels are still legally banned in Vietnam, photocopied versions can be found relatively easily in the major cities in the country.

Dương has enjoyed considerable international success, finding publishers for her novels in many western countries and garnering significant media attention in France and the United States. In the later 1990s, Dương published two well-reviewed novels in America, Novel Without a Name in 1995 and Memories of a Pure Spring in 2000, making her the most widely published and critically acclaimed Vietnamese novelist outside of Vietnam. In 1994, Dương was awarded the Order of Culture and Arts by the French Ministry of Culture, prompting an acerbic response from the Vietnamese Writers Association (VWA), which called her work “preliminary” and “substandard.” Not only critical of the literary value of Dương’s work, the VWA warned that the award, a minor designation that was more representative of the author’s admiration by overseas

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Vietnamese in France rather than suggestive of governmental approval, would damage French-Vietnamese relations and cause suspicion about French cultural policies in Vietnam. General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh contributed to the flap by referring to Dương as the “dissident slut,” and he used the opportunity to remind Vietnamese of her disloyalty and utter lack of patriotism. The fact that the award and its relative insignificance stirred such a heated controversy in Hanoi spoke to the party’s profound fear of the social criticism in Dương’s fiction.

Before renovation, the communist party mandated that literature published in Vietnam must adhere to the prescriptions of socialist realism, a style that is characterized by an optimistic view of socialism and heroic characters that glorify the struggle of the common worker in a communist society. Dominating the Soviet Union for most of the twentieth century, socialist realism was adopted by the Vietnamese communist party after the August Revolution in 1945. One of the criticisms of socialist realism in Vietnamese literature was that it failed to reflect the opinions and the conditions of all levels of Vietnamese society and that adherence to communist rhetoric stifled the creativity and voice of the author in accurately reflecting the peasant milieu. After the brief liberalization of the renovation movement, everyday rural life became a major thematic focus for Dương, whose work tested the extent to which party officials would allow authors to criticize government policies publicly. She addressed the impact of the war on all levels of Vietnamese society, paying special attention to the long-neglected voices of peasants and women. Dương’s work draws from her own experiences in the American War, and her pro-democratic political viewpoints imbue her fiction with an activism.

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5 Templer, 184.
seldom seen, or at least seldom published, in Vietnam. Written from the perspective of combatant, observer, and Vietnamese woman, Duong’s novels offer a provocative contrast to the male-dominated American fiction about the Vietnam War.

In analyzing the nature of renovation literature, particularly the works of Duong Thu Huong and Nguyen Huy Thiep, a useful theoretical foundation can be found in Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life*, as mentioned in the previous chapter. De Certeau’s work is an influential text that moves everyday social activity, usually thought to be the product of an established authority, to the foreground of cultural analysis. De Certeau examines the ways that people unconsciously navigate social situations, the ways that some resist the pressures of powerful structures, and the ways that people manipulate circumstances to meet their own needs. Sometimes the manipulation occurs unknowingly in order to accomplish practical goals and sometimes the goal is to carve out a separate space for a culture to develop. De Certeau posits the importance of everyday practices in the constitution of culture and, by focusing on such practices, he reveals the ways that people can appropriate or alter social discourse.

Applying de Certeau’s theory to communist Vietnam has a number of potential benefits in that it recognizes the agency of individuals lacking political power. According to de Certeau, analyzing everyday practices, or “ways of operating,” requires an analysis of the manipulation of culture “by users who are not its makers,” focusing not on the apparatus or institutions that exercise power but on those who are subject to it.6 Additionally, de Certeau is concerned with a return to ordinary language, destroying the hierarchical nature of political rhetoric.

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6 De Certeau, 9.
The literature produced in the renovation period in Vietnam supports de Certeau's notion of the significance of the ordinary in its thematic focus on the mundane lives of postwar Vietnamese. One of the ostensible goals of the party in allowing more freedoms in literary publishing in the renovation period was to encourage the production of more authentic, recognizable characters that represented the practical problems facing the people of Vietnam. Party officials hoped to breathe new life into Vietnamese socialism, to help the country become economically and agriculturally productive, and to inject an air of optimism into a largely demoralized population. Renovation’s loosening of socialist control over cultural life allowed for conflicting and sometimes dissident interpretations of the past and for the contemporary lives of citizens to come into the public realm. The fact that many renovation authors chose to focus on characters and events that represented pedestrian acts upholds de Certeau’s contention that those without political power use their own experience in attempting to shift the focus of social, and possibly political, discourse.

De Certeau’s concepts of strategy and tactics are crucial to his theory in The Practice of Everyday Life. Strategy is associated with power, with “political, economic, and scientific rationality,” usually credited with constructing or mediating the structures that create and maintain social power. What de Certeau deems a tactic “belongs to the other,” or to those who are subordinate to the discourse and institutions of the powerful. Tactics are the acts of manipulation in which ordinary people engage to create their own identities and spaces but which ultimately have at best a marginal effect on the actual dynamics of power they are attempting to affect. Applied to renovation-era Vietnam, the
communist party exerted strategy while those literary acts that challenged the orthodox perspective may be deemed tactics.

Using the example of the ways that indigenous Indian cultures responded to Spanish colonization, de Certeau contends that Indians subverted the rule of their conquerors not by rejecting Spanish laws and practices but by using them in ways that served and furthered indigenous customs. De Certeau states, “they metaphorized the dominant order: they made it function in another register.” Similarly, some of the more critical literary works of the renovation era in Vietnam raised questions about the benefits of socialism by focusing on the privations and suffering of postwar life. Clearly the party felt threatened by the potential subversion of the authors since the freedoms of renovation were short-lived and ultimately resulted in a tighter regulation than existed before the renovation policies. De Certeau suggests that everyday acts can be tactics, or acts of resistance performed within a system of power relations. By drawing attention to the struggles of daily life in Vietnam, to the hunger and the trauma of loss, renovation authors revealed the potential for popular literature to galvanize dissent and dissatisfaction with life under socialism.

Thematically, one major focus of renovation literature concerns individual notions of identity, often related to personal memories of war. Duong’s novels frequently illuminate the real lives of urban dwellers and rural peasants who have been affected by the wars but excluded from the martyrdom or heroic memorial that the party has reserved for members of the military. In many ways, the literature of renovation serves as a powerful commemoration of Vietnam’s past that is often subversive of party strategy.

8 Ibid., 32.
emphasizing individual struggle, disunity, and political ambivalence or resistance. Historian Hue-Tam Ho Tai has contended that Duong’s strength as a writer “lies in recording the mundane and the quotidian, making the invisible visible.” By examining four of Duong’s novels, it becomes clear that the brief opportunity renovation offered for remembering, or re-considering, war experience in new ways led to the production of literature that countered party versions of Vietnam’s recent history and raised provocative questions about the ways that individual memory challenges official narratives.

*Beyond Illusions* offers perhaps the most blatant attack on communist party cadres, depicting them as incompetent opportunists who rise to prominence based solely on their revolutionary reputation and relationship to other high-ranking party members. The novel’s protagonist, Linh, is a young, optimistic teacher in Hanoi who married Nguyen, an equally idealistic college professor turned newspaper journalist. Shortly after the birth of their first child, Nguyen published a series of investigative articles on a central Vietnamese commune that falsely praised party policies and organization despite the obvious starvation and disaffection of the community’s residents and the incompetence and corruption of party leadership. Nguyen’s articles portray the district as a model of economic success and as an example of social progress, while Nguyen privately concedes that “it’s horrifying to see what happens when ambition and power bloom in the brain of an idiot.” Seeing that Nguyen has abandoned his youthful idealism, Linh berates Nguyen for his willing complicity and his abandonment of

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9 Hue-Tam Ho Tai, 90.
principles, and she leaves Nguyen and their daughter in order to preserve her own convictions.

Although still married, Linh moves out of her family's apartment and gives up the middle-class stability offered by Nguyen's job. Linh relocates to a small one-room apartment where she begins an affair with a famous and seductive composer, Tran Phuong. As her affair becomes public knowledge, Linh endures public ridicule despite her belief that leaving her husband was the only way to maintain her moral convictions. After the parents of one of her students complain to the school's administration about a woman of such low virtue teaching their children, Linh is transferred to a less visible position, a transfer later rescinded when it is discovered that the one of the complaining parents was herself embezzling government funds and selling products on the black market. Nguyen also enters into an extramarital affair with the plucky Ngoc Minh, a promiscuous and uninhibited young journalist who chides Nguyen for his conservative notions of relationships and gender roles. Linh and Nguyen's affairs ultimately end bitterly, and Ngoc Minh and Tran Phuong are depicted as base, one-dimensional communist loyalists. Tran Phuong openly supports the party in order to maintain his high position within the Musician's Union, and Linh comes to see him as a party puppet who betrays the bohemian and individualistic ideals he displayed while courting her. Tran Phuong clearly represents the party's ability to seduce and charm Vietnamese into loyalty only consequently to abandon the people and their ideals.

Although they never reconcile, Linh and Nguyen realize by the end of the novel that their affairs have led them to reassess their values and to question their blind loyalty to the communist party. Nguyen's editor asks him to publish a favorable article about
Hien, a well-known war veteran and prominent party member accused of raping several women. Nguyen had previously published such articles without questioning the motivations of the editor or the accuracy of the stories he published, but after Linh abandons him, Nguyen investigates the matter before following his editor's instructions. Nguyen substantiates the rape charges, finding proof that Hien had raped eighteen young girls, including a nine-year old, and he refuses to write a laudatory article. The editor of the newspaper confesses to Nguyen that Hien, who helped the editor survive injury during the war, was using his political connections to influence public opinion by planting complimentary albeit wildly inaccurate articles in the media.

Nguyen’s confrontation with his editor is the moment of his ideological redemption. He turns over the evidence he discovered to authorities and questions the editor as to why he was chosen to write this story. Nguyen acknowledges his past complicity and his inability to resist the pressures of party cadres and his own desires for material wealth. In Nguyen’s story, the author, in something of a metafictional turn, focuses on censorship in Vietnam and the use of the media to manipulate the public. Nguyen admits to himself and to Linh that he had previously published articles he knew were false or misleading only because he knew they would pass the censor and he would be paid. Through Nguyen’s complicity and eventual redemption, Dương Thu Hương clearly comments on censorship’s impact on journalism and the notion of artistic integrity.

Along with themes of corruption and greed among party members, Beyond Illusions also speaks to the dangers of personal complicity among unquestioning citizens. At one point in the novel, Nguyen’s editor discusses the differences between capitalist
countries and Vietnam, suggesting that capitalism rests on principles of meritocracy, where "everything is based on one supreme principle: individual performance." Conversely, according to the editor, in countries like Vietnam people are judged by their connections not their competence. Nguyen echoes this sentiment when he states that a "healthy" or functional society "has to depend on principles and laws, not the goodness of people's hearts." Throughout the novel characters express their doubt in the party's capacity to rule Vietnam in an honest manner, suggesting that a system dependent on corrupt and unqualified networks of party members rests on an unstable foundation that betrays the ideals of Vietnam's revolutionary past.

Party corruption is a theme present in all of Dương's novels, but *Beyond Illusions* offers one of the most brazen critiques of the individual flaws of communist party members. As it was Dương's first major novel to be published in Vietnam, she was perhaps testing the waters of renovation policies, attempting to assess exactly how far the government was willing to go with the self-criticism they advocated. Of course, a novel that portrays a war hero as a serial rapist would attract the attention of government censors, which *Beyond Illusions* quickly did. Before it was banned, however, the novel sold out in the first two weeks of its printing, selling over 60,000 copies and inciting broad public debate. *Beyond Illusions* offers nothing redemptive about socialism and expresses little optimism about the future of the Vietnamese nation-state. For the novel's protagonists, party membership involves a series of courtships and betrayals, analogues to their own extramarital affairs and personal deceits.

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11 Ibid., 202.
12 Ibid., 198.
One year after *Beyond Illusions* was released, Duong published *Paradise of the Blind*, shifting the narrative to a peasant community in the rural Vietnamese countryside. *Paradise of the Blind* is the story of Hang, a young Vietnamese girl who works as an "exported worker" in a Soviet Union factory in the 1980s. The narrative is relayed through Hang’s flashbacks to her childhood as she travels to Moscow to begin work. The novel focuses on the disastrous consequences of the Việt Minh’s 1950s land reform efforts, which resulted in widespread displacement and massive domestic disruption among villagers, consequences similar to the agrovillage program introduced in the south by the Diệm government. Land reform efforts began in North Vietnam in 1953, six years prior to efforts in the south, and were designed to dismantle the hierarchical village leadership, which was deemed backward and feudal. Reforms intended instead to consolidate power in the hands of party cadres. The party sought out landlords, confiscating their land and often expelling them from the party or executing them outright.

In *Paradise of the Blind*, land reform began a decade before Hang’s birth in her mother’s village. The process of redistributing land “ripped through the village like a squall, devastating fields and rice paddies, sowing only chaos and misery in its wake.”

One of the men responsible for land reform in Hang’s village was her Uncle Chinh, portrayed as a dedicated, sycophantic, and incompetent party cadre. Chinh deems Hang’s father a traitor to the party and places him on trial, where he was denounced and driven from the village. Hang’s Aunt Tam helps her father escape punishment but her mother, Que, loses her home and her rice paddy, and disappears for six months. After Que

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returns to the village, emaciated and penniless, the "Special Section for the Rectification of Errors" arrived in the village. In the late 1950s, the party publicly admitted the damage land reform had done to the countryside and implemented plans to assist the displaced and impoverished villagers and to rebuild the villages. After the destruction, it was impossible to reconstruct village life despite open calls to punish informers and restore land to previous owners. For Que, land reform and her family's complicity in the policies were too much to bear. Her husband died of malaria in exile and she was forced to move to Hanoi in order to raise her daughter.

Hang's Uncle Chinh, responsible for appropriating his sister Tam's land and driving Que from the village, is communist corruption personified. After land reform programs are abandoned, the party officially recognized the program as fundamentally flawed and ill-conceived. Chinh, who played a crucial role in carrying out land reform policies, is forced into exile as his family and the other villagers questioned the party's methods and doubted the party's ability to govern the country. For Hang and her mother, the party's efforts at indoctrination were hollow. Having grown up in a land of intense poverty and hunger, Hang comes to see ideology as empty, observing that after war "all that was left was the pure, thin air of ideals, too poor to sustain a human life, or its need for creativity and fulfillment."14

Paradise of the Blind explores the dynamics of familial relationships after decades of war. The focus on personal relationships is significant because in the years prior to the renovation movement, writers were encouraged to focus their criticism on social institutions and economic systems rather than interrogating individual

14 Ibid., 202.
relationships. In the 1930s, the literary trend in Vietnam was critical realism, influenced by literature produced in the Soviet Union. In this period, personal conflicts and love stories were seen as “bourgeois concerns of negligible relevance to a revolutionary situation,” and were to be avoided in literature. After the shift to socialist realism in 1945, male authors and protagonists dominated literature, offering a parallel to much of the traditional American literature about Vietnam and its attention to the American military experience. Although Duong was trained in the tradition of socialist realism, she belongs more to the earlier critical realist school, according to Hue-Tam Ho Tai. Rather than turning to postmodern literary conventions as other Vietnamese writers of the renovation period did, and as American metafictional authors did when they used fragmented narratives and experimental literary devices to portray the conflict, Duong’s work returns to an earlier style of Vietnamese literature to convey postwar realities in an emotionally engaging, realistic style.

The metaphor of blindness is applied broadly in the novel: Chinh and the communist elites are blind to the peasants’ struggle for subsistence; Hang’s mother Que is blind to the destructive obsession of her brother given her unflinching loyalty to her family; and Hang condemns many peasants for being bound to the mistakes and hardships of their pasts, myopic in their unflagging reverence and worship of ancestors. After her wealthy aunt falls ill, Hang returns to her village determined to break what she sees as a cycle of mistakes and free herself from the past rather than perpetuate subservience and mere subsistence. In the final passage of the book, Aunt Tam dies, leaving her possessions and land to Hang, who resolves to leave the countryside:

15 Hue-Tam Ho Tai, 89.
Comets extinguish themselves but memory refuses to die, and ‘hell’s money’ has no value in the market of life. Forgive me, my aunt: I’m going to sell this house and leave all this behind. We can honor the wishes of the dead with a few flowers on a grave somewhere. I can’t squander my life tending these faded flowers, these shadows, the legacy of past crimes.\textsuperscript{16}

\textit{Paradise of the Blind} explores the harsh realities of peasants’ lives in rural Vietnam, contrasting the idealism and high-mindedness of communist ideology with the human suffering of rural villagers. Duong’s novel challenges socialist realism by presenting characters whose lives are mundane and unheroic, whose outlooks are politically ignorant and impotent. The heroine, Hang, is individualistic and thoughtful, careful to approach Vietnam, its policies, and its future with pragmatism, a higher degree of self-interest, and cautious skepticism.

Duong’s third novel, \textit{Memories of a Pure Spring}, shifts her criticism to the role and function of literature in Vietnam. Never published in her home country, \textit{Memories of a Pure Spring} could be considered a rumination on the role of artists in communist societies and a harsh condemnation of the party’s reinstatement of censorship laws after the liberalizations of renovation had receded. Set after the end of the American War, the novel describes the confusion of postwar policy and the process of re-education in a country whose land and people were devastated by war and the uncertainty of its future.

The book’s protagonists, Suong and Hung, are members of a traveling theater troupe who tour Vietnam’s war-torn countryside and perform for demoralized villagers. Suong eventually becomes the country’s biggest vocal star and her husband Hung, an aging composer who grows increasingly envious of his wife’s success, gets drawn into a life of alcohol and drugs. Hung is arrested on a beach, suspected of attempting to flee the

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 258.
country, and he spends time in a re-education camp in northern Vietnam. After his release, Hung's work is deemed counter-revolutionary and unfit for public performance. The novel contains a litany of artist characters who often debate the contributions of art to society and the prerequisites for its production. Hung, after his incarceration, states that "artists aren't mere mortals; they rise above circumstance, transcend their times." In order to create transcendent art, however, certain needs must be met. "Art demands three fundamental conditions: freedom, leisure, and material comfort. Here, I don't see even one of those conditions." Hung goes on to claim, "on the whole, the Vietnamese people can't create art worthy of being called art because we've never been free." This complaint alludes to the conditions to which the author and other renovation-era artists were subjected. Asked to create works that inspire national unity, authors were very often treated poorly by the government, usually unable to support themselves financially from writing alone.

The tone of the novel suggests, like Paradise of the Blind, that Vietnamese have mired themselves in their pasts, unable to adjust to their conditions and the consequences of war. Life for most characters in Duong's novels is an intense struggle for survival, and the production of art is a luxury Vietnamese have not been afforded. Hung's eventual suicide in Memories of a Pure Spring reflects the country's troubled relationship with its past and a profound pessimism about its future.

The next novel Duong published in America was a scathing and derisive fictional account of war in Novel Without a Name (Tiếu thuyết vô dê). The only novel the author has written that takes place during the war with America, Novel Without a Name

18 Ibid, 204.
resembles another famous Vietnamese war novel written in the renovation period, Bao Ninh’s *The Sorrow of War* (*Thần phán của tình yêu*). Both novels examine postwar devastation and personal loss, viewing the war as a “miserable journey of endless drifting,” and questioning the simple binary of good and evil espoused in the communist party.\(^\text{19}\) The novel centers on Quan, a North Vietnamese soldier who had been fighting in jungles for nearly a decade. Offered the chance to return to his village, Quan begins his journey home and is reminded of the death he had seen and perpetrated.

Perhaps the most volatile topic raised in *Novel Without a Name* is the tenuous relationship Vietnamese soldiers have to the ideology they are ostensibly fighting to preserve. In *Novel Without a Name*, the soldiers grapple with and eventually reject the idea of ideology as sustenance, motivation, and inspiration in the face of brutal, visceral warfare. Despite the army’s efforts to motivate soldiers by touting the country’s hopeful future under communism, the physical hardships of the war were foremost in Quan’s mind, and he states that the war was “an existence steeped in mud and blood.”\(^\text{20}\) The party represented the war as an opportunity for Vietnamese resurrection, but the soldiers came to question the socialist cause as they became more and more consumed with their own survival:

> The more we were tortured by the consciousness of our appalling indifference, the more searing the memory of our mothers’ tears. We had renounced everything for glory. It was this guilt that bound us to one another as tightly as the memory of our days tending water buffalo together.\(^\text{21}\)

A profound disillusionment infuses the novel’s tone, with Quan realizing the insufficiency and futility of the socialist cause as perpetuated by “the ideologies,

\(^\text{21}\) Ibid., 32.
manifestos, and polemics by all the balding, bearded geniuses, with their resolutions adhered to by all the herds of dreamy, militant sheep.\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Novel Without a Name} is a mournful lament that ends with thoughts on the lives that follow the glory of war, and what, after most soldiers are dead, happens to those who survive. For Quan, the memory of death and its inconsequence to the state remains in his consciousness much longer than communist rhetoric, which Quan sees as simply “an endless settling of scores.”\textsuperscript{23}

Bao Ninh’s \textit{The Sorrow of War} was published against state wishes and was criticized for a non-heroic, non-ideological tone that was emblematic of renovation literature. The narrative structure of \textit{The Sorrow of War} is important to an understanding not only of the narrator’s psychological condition, but also of the constraints placed on renovation authors amidst an ostensible literary liberalization. The novel’s narrator, Kien, is writing a novel based on his war experiences as a way to acknowledge the past he attempts to avoid in his daily life. Writing only at night, usually in an alcohol-induced, subconscious trance, Kien regards the act of writing as cathartic: he “had written because he had to write, not because he had to publish.”\textsuperscript{24} Kien’s recognition of the difficulty in confronting his own past, along with his attempts to forge a postwar identity, formed the essence of the renovation movement. Like Kien, Bao Ninh and most renovation writers viewed writing as necessary to existence, as a crucial way to analyze and come to terms with their history.

\textit{The Sorrow of War} is often regarded as the archetypal Vietnamese postwar novel, garnering comparisons to Erich Maria Remarque’s classic \textit{All Quiet on the Western

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\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, 62.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, 286.
\textsuperscript{24} Bao Ninh, 230.
\end{flushright}
Aside from being well written, the novel resonates on an emotional level that many Vietnamese novels clearly aspire to emulate but rarely attain. Despite its forthright title, *The Sorrow of War* is not merely a meditation on the profound anguish caused by war but an analysis of the role of emotion, and sorrow especially, as useful in confronting a traumatic past. For Kien sorrow is “more sublime than happiness, and beyond suffering. It was thanks to our sorrow that we were able to escape the war, escape the continual killing and fighting, the terrible conditions of battle and the unhappiness of men in fierce and violent theaters of war.”25 By confronting sorrow, Vietnamese were able to reconstruct their pasts based on individual experience, and thus deconstruct the official state narrative that had dominated so much of earlier Vietnamese literature.

A salient reality and metaphor in so many fictional works of the period is intense and unceasing hunger. Certainly at its core a commentary on postwar economic conditions and communist policies, such as land reform, the constant focus on hunger among characters can be viewed as a metaphor for the state of Vietnamese postwar psychology – a topic that renovation writers explored. Empty, lacking sustenance, and mired in interminable poverty, Vietnamese peasants had surrendered basic needs to abstract ideology. A cyclo driver in Dương Thu Hương’s *Memories of a Pure Spring* succinctly captures the perspective of many poor peasants, saying “we’re liberated and that’s a great happiness, but we don’t have anything to eat, so I don’t know how to survive.”26 Much of renovation literature seems to hunt for alternatives to the emotional and cultural void engulfing Vietnam in the immediate postwar period. Whether through

their rejection of state-approved socialist realism, their discussions of the validity and usefulness of art and literature in society, or their honest rethinking of war memories, Duong’s novels offer unique and powerful ways of challenging state versions of history and inserting discrepant notions about the war’s legacy.

Despite their political power, Duong Thu Huong’s works may likely never be considered literary masterpieces. Activism often overwhelms the works, resulting in characters who are at times as one-dimensional as those of the school of socialist realism she derides. It is also apparent, however, that her novels take very seriously the notion of preserving peasant life and apprehending the perspectives of those who are rarely accounted for in history. In an essay published in 1999 on the French internet journal Diēn Dàn (Forum), Duong asserts that “the devastating wars throughout the unfortunate history of Vietnam seem to have exhausted its people of bravery.”

Arguing that peace has led the Vietnamese to rationalize injustice and indignity to a degree that devalues their own lives, Duong’s essay asks why the courage and independence that characterized Vietnam’s victory over America have not caused citizens to demand accountability from corrupt party leaders. Duong’s novels may never inspire Vietnamese to revolution, but they offer readers worldwide a portrait of contemporary Vietnam that works of history rarely relay.

Along with Duong Thu Huong, Hanoi author Nguyễn Huy Thiệp has incited an enormous amount of controversy about the potentially divisive and politically subversive potential of renovation fiction. Thiệp’s linguistically spare, starkly realistic short stories about postwar Vietnamese life are considered emblematic of the literary response to


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renovation. Although their subject matter is often similar, Thiệp’s literary style is markedly different from Dương’s, frequently demonstrating a more postmodern, less didactic rhetorical tone.

Thiệp was born in Hanoi in 1950, during the French occupation of the city. His early childhood witnessed the devastating land reform that Dương Thu Hương depicted in Paradise of the Blind. Thiệp and his mother were displaced in the mid-1950s and spent several years moving among various rural provinces in northern Vietnam. In 1970, Thiệp graduated from the Hanoi Teacher’s College with a degree in history and took a job teaching poetry and fiction in Tây Bác, a remote northwestern province. 28 Thiệp’s job was to train adult party cadres from poor backgrounds, teaching classes in literature, politics, and economics. Speaking of his time in Tây Bác, Thiệp stated that “we lived in near complete isolation,” inhabiting makeshift housing and having little communication with the outside world. He and the other teachers were forced to live on little food; as he testified, “we were so hungry that we felt our hunger every minute of the day.” 29

Thiệp’s thematic focus ranged from historical short stories about Vietnam’s Nguyễn Dynasty to allegorical renderings of post-American War urbanity. Frequently undermining notions of heroism or blurring the lines between history and fiction, Thiệp’s work challenges readers to question the ways that literature has presented party-sponsored versions of Vietnamese history. He told an interviewer that “for too long Vietnamese writers produced oversimplified story lines, peopled by colorless,

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29 Ibid., 487.
monotonous, and one-dimensional characters." Historian Peter Zinoman has pointed out that historians in Vietnam have responded to the policies of renovation by reinterpreting historical figures, especially political reformers. Nguyễn Huy Thięp’s fiction offers new depictions of important Vietnamese leaders, such as emperor Gia Long, using literary devices that include shifting narrative voices or vague, anachronistic language to avoid censorship and charges of party disloyalty. Thięp’s efforts at evading party repression were only briefly successful, however, as Nguyễn Ngọc, his publisher and editor-in-chief of the publication of the Vietnamese Writers Association, was famously fired in 1988 for offering Thięp an open forum to present his stories. While his work is not officially banned in Vietnam, no journals or publishing houses in Vietnam have risked printing Thięp’s fiction since 1990. The author, although well known in Vietnam, has enjoyed little financial success from his writings.

Nguyễn Huy Thwięp has described the renovation movement as analogous to a society’s emergence from feudalism to capitalism. Despite his criticism of the corruption and greed that arose in the process, Thwięp has characterized renovation as a largely progressive movement to benefit Vietnam. Thwięp’s comments about his own writing suggest his willingness to challenge literary styles and themes that have been venerated in Vietnamese history. Thwięp stated that his work is concise and unadorned, a conscious contrast to the flowery and excessively refined styles of previous generations of Vietnamese authors. Considering his work an “experiment only,” Thwięp attributed the

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30 Ibid., 492.
32 Amanda Zinoman, 496.
controversy his fiction has stirred to the allegorical or interpretive possibilities of his very simple stories and to the tendencies of Vietnamese readers to search for symbolism in his characters. Set in ordinary situations, Thìệp’s stories and characters often resist binary characterizations as either good or evil, binaries that the party found to be useful social tools and thus advocated in the literature of socialist realism. By portraying Vietnamese as ordinary, flawed, multi-dimensional people struggling to survive in a changing society, Thìệp’s fiction represented the possibility that, as historian William Duiker has suggested, “Vietnamese literature has been released from the shackles of ideological orthodoxy,” and that the simplistic heroic message of socialist realism was a literary convention to which authors were no longer willing to adhere.33

In the short story “Lessons from the Country” (“Bài học nông thôn”), Thìệp explores three broad themes that occur in most of his fiction: the shock of modernity in Vietnam, the cultural divide between urban and rural communities, and the role of intellectuals in Vietnam’s past and future. The narrator, Hieu, is a seventeen-year old Hanoi native who visits the rural countryside with his schoolmate Lam during summer vacation. Hieu is unfamiliar with the back-breaking physical labor required to make a living in the country and is quickly exhausted by the various chores Lam’s family requires of him. Hieu befriends Lam’s twenty-year old sister Hien, who is married to a soldier who has been away for most of their marriage. Hien tells Hieu of the oppressive loneliness and boredom of the country and the lack of opportunities for people in her village, particularly for women. She questions the pressure women face to marry, given that many Vietnamese men leave home for extended periods in times of war. Hien

concludes that "women are worth nothing," an idea instilled in most of the villagers by the teacher, Mr. Trieu. Speaking of women's responsibilities and needs in education, Trieu states "women don't need noble ideas. They need understanding and caresses and lots of money. That's love."34

Trieu and Hieu discuss the role of literature and intellectualism in Vietnam and the value (or waste) of a literary education. Perhaps metafictionally reflecting Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's own feelings about his literary career, and his experience with the party, Trieu tells Hien to avoid studying literature, telling him that he would "be cut to pieces and covered by insults. Do nothing to expose the stupidity of the educated."35 Trieu goes further, saying "What our people are good at is fighting. I've never thought our literature is worth much. It lacks strong beliefs and beauty."36 In Hieu, an educated urban youth, Trieu saw the opportunity to rail against the inability of Vietnam's younger generation to change the material and intellectual conditions of Vietnamese, specifically those in the countryside. Trieu compares rural Vietnamese to ants, "multitudes moving in mindless circles, with most unable to make a living." He believes the Vietnamese masses lack control over their lives or the ability to think independently. Trieu tells Hieu that "only when the masses understand the futility of their dreams, only when they realize that no one will give them an easy life for nothing, will they perceive that they are plied with nothing but empty promises or see that what they do receive is little more than false hope against need."37

35 Ibid., 169.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid., 175.
Trieu acknowledges that Hieu is probably too young to care about the lives of the peasant masses, but he continues to tell the young man of the ways that the party has manipulated rural Vietnamese and offered little material or intellectual return. Hieu is clearly moved by Trieu’s lecture, despite Trieu’s admonition that he is just a peasant’s son and a child of the country, an assertion that proves to be untrue when Trieu is revealed to be the son of prominent Hanoi intellectuals. Hieu does not get the chance to question Trieu, however, as the teacher is gored by a charging buffalo minutes later. Hieu watches the buffalo kill Trieu and sees the animal calmly return to nibbling the grass.

Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s stories often contemplate death, the act of dying, the ways that Vietnamese remember death and worship the dead, and the idea of death as a merciful release. In “Lessons from the Country,” Lam’s sister Hien tells Hieu of her many failed suicide attempts, and she attributes her failure to fate’s determination that she is too young to die. Inversely, Trieu’s violent, unexpected death suggests that progressive or subversive thinking in Vietnam is punishable by death. Trieu’s death is a commentary on the passivity or backwardness of the Vietnamese masses and the dire consequences of questioning socialist conceptions of the country. Through Trieu’s death and Hien’s suffering, the implication is that release, or death, is not allowed for those who seek it, but is only imposed as punishment on those who challenge prevailing ideas.

Thiệp’s most famous and controversial short story is “The General Retires” (“Trưởng về hưu”), published in 1987 in the Hanoi-published literary journal Báo Văn Nghệ and in English translation in 1992. “The General Retires,” like many of Thiệp’s stories, deals with issues such as the reintegration of military personnel into postwar
society, the relationships among different generations, the power of superstition and custom, the shifting of gender roles, and the difficulty Vietnam’s older generations had in adjusting to the country’s rapid modernization.

“The General Retires” is narrated by Thuan, the son of a retiring seventy-year old Vietnamese major general who has just returned home to his family after devoting most of his adult life to the military. Thuan is a middle-class engineer who lives on the outskirts of Hanoi and is married to Thuy, a doctor who works at a maternity hospital in the city. Thuan describes his wife as a woman who is “well educated and lives the life of a modern woman.” The general returns home to live with Thuan and Thuy, a daughter-in-law he had not yet met, and he finds that his wife is senile, living alone in a small building near Thuan’s home. Despite the general’s absence during most of Thuan’s youth, Thuan says that since his mother is no longer coherent, he is the only one with any feelings about his father’s return. The general experiences a certain amount of alienation from his family as soon as he arrives. Thuan’s two daughters have little interest in getting to know their grandfather, as they are busy learning foreign languages and reading popular literature that the general “found difficult to appreciate.”

As the general attempts to readjust to civilian life and his own ambiguous role in it, he is shocked by many elements of modern life in Vietnam. Thuan states that despite his long absence, the general holds a position of honor and pride in the family and the village, but after the celebrations for his return have ended, the general ponders what to do with his time. The general rejects Thuan’s suggestion to write his memoirs and

38 Ibid., 117.
39 Ibid., 118.
Thuy’s idea that he raise parrots to sell, choosing instead to write letters to his fellow soldiers. Asked to give a speech at his niece’s wedding ceremony, the general confronts “a motley mob that milled around and was rudely indifferent to his speech.”40 Not only are the guests blatantly disrespectful of his rank, they publicly shamed him as the “band drowned everything out with happy songs from the Beatles and Abba.”41

The general is critical of Thuan’s marriage, suggesting that his wife is too strong-willed, insisting on controlling the family’s finances and maintaining a career. Thuy also makes money raising Alsatian dogs to sell at the market in Hanoi, a venture that is so profitable it becomes the family’s primary source of income. The general learns that the maternity hospital where Thuy works performs abortions, and that “every day, she put the aborted fetuses into a Thermos flask,” brought them home, and cooked them to feed to the Alsatians.42 The general is appalled at the lengths Thuan and Thuy go to make money, asserting “I don’t need wealth that’s made of this.”43

Despite his dissatisfaction with Thuan and Thuy’s capitalist ventures, the general is also shocked by the staggering poverty villagers faced, by the pregnancies of unwed girls in the village, and by the overall lack of respect shown to elders and members of the military. “The General Retires” repeatedly questions the utility of superstition and traditional Vietnamese ideas about death, wondering about the purpose of elaborate funeral ceremonies and customs, such as placing money in the mouths of the dead and moving the location of the grave if one is buried on an inauspicious date. Many of the

40 Ibid., 121.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid., 123.
43 Ibid., 122.
story’s characters suggest that a quick, even violent death is preferable to a life of overwhelming hardship and slow decline. Days after his return, the general’s wife dies, prompting the general to ask his brother, “do all old people die as wretchedly as this?” The general’s brother replies, “Everyday, thousands of people in our country die in shame and pain and sorrow. For you soldiers, its different: one-shot – “bang” – that’s a sweet way to go.”44 Less than a year after his return, the general leaves Thuan to pay a visit to his former unit and then dies before returning home. The general is given full military rites and is buried in the cemetery reserved for heroes. The ceremony is performed two hours before his family arrives, though, underscoring the unbridgeable divide that has emerged between the general and his son, and, by extension, the disjunction that has opened between military and civilian realms in Vietnam.

In a review of “The General Retires,” historian William J. Duiker suggested that Thiệp’s crime was not that he directly criticized the communist regime, but that he portrayed his characters as ordinary, recognizable people with strengths and frailties, people who “are not the faceless masses of the Vietnamese revolutionary mystique, but flesh-and-blood human beings struggling to survive while buffeted by the winds of a rapidly changing society.”45 Although many American literary scholars and historians applauded Thiệp’s attention to the ordinary, Vietnamese critics were considerably more hostile. “The General Retires” provoked an ongoing debate in Vietnam from 1987 to 1990, coinciding approximately with the literary liberalization of the renovation

44 Ibid., 126.
45 Duiker, 469.
movement. Much of the criticism of Thiệp’s work can be seen as a part of the larger debate about the literary response to renovation policies.

Vietnamese literary critic Phan Huy Dương, writing under the pseudonym Trần Đạo, expressed the outrage of more classically-minded Vietnamese literary scholars, arguing that Thiệp’s spare language and average characters should not be praised for their realism, but should be rejected for “reducing language to its technical dimension,” and for presenting a society that is devoid of humanity or hope for the future. 46 Trần Đạo suggests that to describe Thiệp’s writing style as realist would be an insult to contemporary Vietnamese society and to the nation’s literary heritage. The critic goes further in his assessment of Thiệp’s postmodern framework, stating that “to write in order to snuff out writing, to torture language with language, is to question the society which gave birth to this language, to call to account the men who use it or who have accommodated themselves to it.” 47 Trần Đạo’s vehement objections to Thiệp’s literary style plumbs a deeper concern about the threat that renovation literature posed not only to contemporary society but also to the notion of a classical literary heritage in Vietnam.

The moral ambiguity in Thiệp’s fiction and its focus on the anxieties of average Vietnamese prompted critics to reject it as base and insignificant. Trần Đạo was particularly concerned with the lack of human interaction in “The General Retires,” as he contended that Thiệp’s sparse physical description of characters and the story’s lack of dialogue were evidence of Thiệp’s pessimistic view of Vietnamese society as dissociated and self-interested.

47 Ibid., 52.
In considering the different ways that American and Vietnamese literary scholars have responded to Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s writing, specifically to “The General Retires,” it is clear that Thiệp’s assertion -- that his work has attracted controversy because of its interpretive possibilities -- was correct. Whereas many American critics applauded Thiệp and Drong’s attention to the mundane, Vietnamese intellectuals’ vigorous debate indicated the social consequences of renovation literature’s new focus on the prosaic acts of everyday life.
Conclusion

A Literary Defoliation of History

Since the beginning of America’s military presence in Vietnam, there has been a steady stream of scholarship and a vast production of cultural representations of the war documenting and analyzing seemingly every aspect of American involvement in that nation. Given the already existent breadth of the Vietnam War canon, it seems unnecessary to argue for its further broadening. However, a close examination of the novels written in the war’s aftermath, especially in a comparative framework, does more than simply illuminate the ways that each nation produces culture, and goes beyond comparing and contrasting the Vietnamese and American experiences of the war, experiences that on many levels were irreconcilably different. Highlighting individual experience in the war, even in a fictional context, affirms the importance of considering localized perspectives on both sides of the conflict in historical analyses.

American historians of the Vietnam War have begun to recognize the vital necessity of considering Vietnamese sources in new scholarship. Both nations still grapple with the meaning of the war, especially in terms of how it fits into each nation’s larger historical narrative. American participants are in many ways still coming to terms with what has been called the “Vietnam syndrome,” or the national malaise that traumatized soldiers, influenced the way the United States directed its foreign policy, and impacted the manner in which historians write about the war. In Vietnam, officials are still sorting through the complexities confronting a socialist government with a rapidly
growing economy that is increasingly connected to global markets and challenging its socialist foundation.

Novels written in the late 1970s and the 1980s in both nations attested to the profound political, economic, and cultural changes spurred by the war and served as valuable indices of the degree to which everyday citizens absorbed these changes. While this thesis has argued that novelistic interpretations of the Vietnam War can be beneficially intertextualized with more traditional histories, it does not do so simply to suggest the verisimilitude of the novels analyzed but rather to engage new types of sources in an effort to further assess the war's profound impact on the postwar cultures and historical imaginations of Vietnamese and Americans.

Focusing on the literature of the war, especially works that approach the event from an unconventional, non-linear perspective, runs the risk of reducing the historical event to an aesthetic experience. Literary critics have evaluated the extent to which American metafiction is simply an exercise in personal catharsis, but placing the works in the context of the historiography of the Vietnam War contributes to the growing discourse on historical memory, underscoring the problematic relationship between individual memories and national histories. Similarly, Vietnamese renovation novels often illustrate the war's broad and lingering impact on witnesses to the war; they reflect as well as reshape culture and politics in postwar Vietnam. Since many renovation novels focus their narratives on noncombatants, they are powerful testaments to the indiscriminate nature of the war and its destruction.

One clear example of indiscriminate destruction was the herbicidal warfare the United States employed. American bombs and chemical weapons defoliated Vietnam's
landscape throughout the 1960s, killing millions of people and physically scarring the land for generations. As Frances Fitzgerald noted in her 1972 history of the Vietnam conflict, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam*, the military purpose of massive defoliation in Vietnam was to destroy crops and deny food to the northern army and the NLF, but the defoliants overwhelmingly and almost exclusively affected civilians, especially women and children. The mobility of troops allowed them to find other food, but many rural villagers, tied to their land and their relatives, could not. A vast number among the Vietnamese population suffered the impact of chemical weapons, as did many of the American soldiers who handled them.

The issue of defoliation and its morality evokes the famous statement an anonymous American officer gave to an Associated Press reporter in 1968. Referring to the village Ben Tre, reduced to ruins in the Tet Offensive, the officer stated, "we had to destroy it in order to save it." The notion that total devastation was necessary to prosecute the war in Vietnam is one of the uncomfortable legacies of the war for the United States. The physical damage to the Vietnamese and their land remains a lasting reminder of the war. More abstractly, the indiscriminate destruction caused by defoliation represents the sort of devastating psychological trauma that American metafictional authors and Vietnamese renovation writers explored in their novels. For many of the authors, literature was a way of re-cultivating what was on some levels destroyed or severely damaged in the conflict, illustrating the pervasive psychological

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2 Ibid., 492.
damage inflicted and suggesting participants’ inability to heal, forget, or fully make sense of their experiences in Vietnam.

In ways that historical treatments cannot, the war’s literature exemplified how participants and victims of the war on both sides have attempted to deal with trauma, have acknowledged the experience of devastation, and have ultimately recovered some semblance of meaning from it. Metafictional novels by American veterans of the war relayed the war’s chaos in a distinctly postmodern, fragmented form. The focus of Vietnamese novelists on everyday acts of life in a realistic style reflected the pragmatic necessity of moving on. Each nation’s literary approach, in markedly different ways, embodied historically significant efforts to engage conflicting and contested memories and to challenge each nation’s construction of its past.
Bibliography


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