Critically Teaching the Vietnam War in the United States

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I vividly recall sitting at my desk attentively listening to my middle school teacher speak about the Vietnam War, an historical event that contains immense significance for many Vietnamese-Americans sense of identity. My teacher portrayed U.S. intervention and the actions that followed having been rooted in altruism and claimed that Americans valiantly fought to save Vietnam and the rest of Southeast Asia from the domino effect of communism. I later asked my parents, who grew up in the Southern region of Vietnam, to give me their perspective on this war. Their response aligned with what I learned in class; the evils of communism decimated their homeland, and as a result of the ensuing war, they were uprooted and found themselves as refugees on American soil. Although I didn't know it at the time, my parents, like my middle school teacher, did not mention or address the many injustices of the U.S. military in Vietnam or the real driving force behind the War: liberation from French colonialism.

My perspective on the War has shifted as I've become aware of the numerous injustices perpetrated by the country I call home. I have undertaken this research on my own, outside of the confines of a lecture hall or seminar class. From the horrific fact that U.S. bombings in Vietnam "represented at least three times as much (by weight) as both European and Pacific theater World War II bombings combined, and about fifteen times total tonnage in the Korean War," to the destruction of lineages from chemical weapons like Agent Orange, to the murdering of innocent civilians during the Mỹ Lai Massacre, the United States' actions no longer seemed selfless, but instead were clearly aligned with a merciless and brutal form of imperialism. Although learning about these events contributed to my own intergenerational trauma, I have gained a more comprehensive understanding of the War, and thus placed myself in a privileged position relative to so many others who continue to live under delusions about American intentions in Southeast Asia.

As a result of what I've learned, I am now advocating for a more comprehensive pedagogy across American schools on the subject of the Vietnam War, one which would include descriptions of atrocities, particularly those committed by the U.S. military. Unless teachers create curricula that captures the views of all parties affected by the Vietnam War (directly and across generations), the United States will continue to perpetuate misinformation, itself a form of injustice, through an educational curricula that is nothing more than a simplistic representation of itself as a savior against the evils of communism. I will also attempt to understand why the Vietnamese-American community lacks a comprehensive interpretation of the War that would have otherwise yielded a unifying identity between the older and younger generations. I will then suggest that xenophobia and racism in regards to Asians are byproducts of the Vietnam War and the American propensity to promote U.S. aggression. I hope that by promoting a more adequate approach to the teaching of colonial and imperial wars, such as U.S. engagement in Vietnam, that I will also promote justice for those that not only perished but also continue to suffer generational trauma.

One of the most confusing aspects of the Vietnam War stems from the disparate views of older generation of refugees, versus the younger generation of American-born/raised Vietnamese citizens. The older generation that sought refuge in America from the late 70s to the late 90s tends to mitigate, or completely disregard, the injustices perpetrated by the U.S. military and instead focuses most, if not all, of their critiques on the horrific acts of the Communist Regime. It should be noted that these criticisms are valid, as critical events like the Land Reforms and the Huế Massacre have solidified a justified bitterness against the dictatorial Communist Regime. Additionally, the older generation's resentment toward the Viet Cong (the National Liberation Front or NLF), should

not be undermined. And victims of other injustices, such as Jean Améry, a Holocaust survivor, agrees. He advocates for perpetual resentment toward Germany, no matter how much society deems it irrational or backward-looking: "I am more entitled to judge, not only more than the culprit but also more than society... my resentments are there in order that the crime becomes a moral reality for the criminal, in order that he be swept into the truth of his atrocity."

The older generation that fled the cataclysmic devastation of the Vietnam War deserve this same entitlement, and we can thereby understand their disproportionate condemnation of the NLF's actions when compared to the United States' bombings, use of chemical weapons, and unjust massacres of civilians. On the other side of the coin, the younger generation, including myself, have made themselves aware of the injustices carried out by U.S. militarism. Still, we should acknowledge that the younger generation has the privilege of studying these facts ex post facto with the aid of modern research tools like the Internet.

Moreover, after careful reflection on the circumstances of the War, I have sought out some explanations for the vast divide between the older and younger generations, beginning with the issue of trauma. The older generation who endured the atrocities and life-threatening escape from a dictatorial regime may not want to revisit the horrific experience of abandoning their homeland. This hinders the group's ability to account for the U.S.'s unjust actions, since it would only intensify the trauma caused by the NLF. Additionally, many of these refugees eventually had children in the U.S. By minimizing the profound injustices of one side, particularly the side that has historically been deemed the American "heroes," they can circumvent the risk that their children will inherit their own trauma. This may explain why the older generation places a significant portion of the blame on communism and the Viet Cong, rather than the French and, moreover, the Americans. Ultimately, the retelling of traumatic events or researching of these instances via the Internet inevitably preserves this disturbing history, leading to a form of generational trauma that one may wish for their children to avoid.

A second hypothesis concerning the disparate interpretations of the War points to preserving the "elephant in the room," which pertains to the immense resentment toward the Viet Cong and the NLF. To further develop this hypothesis, I will align the attitudes of those justified in hatefulness with another quote from Jean Améry's *At the Mind's Limits*: "My resentment— ... is my personal protest against the anti-moral natural process of healing that time brings about." By ignoring the "elephant in the room," that is, a critical discussion of the War with those that directly experienced its traumas, we function against the "natural process of healing;" this may allow for traumatized refugees to better cope with their resentments as it did for Améry albeit at the cost of a comprehensive interpretation. By failing to address the injustices of the U.S. military in relation to the overbearing hatred for the NLF, the Vietnamese community has allowed for this "elephant" to be preserved in a way that creates disparate interpretations between the older generation and the younger generation who have critically studied and discovered the American cruelties of the War for themselves.

Nevertheless, without a uniform interpretation of the Vietnam War that could be taught in high schools, the United States will continue to place the responsibility of remembering their atrocious acts on the victims, which further perpetuates the injustices of the War by reinforcing generational traumas. I believe that schools across the U.S. should teach their students to examine U.S. militarism critically. We cannot rely upon the Internet, with its wildly divergent interpretations of this War, to determine who was responsible for the abominations of the War.

It's worth asking why must we need to create an all-encompassing perspective on the War in Vietnam for schools in the United States? What good does this endeavor make for our society? To

answer these questions, we'll have to establish the premise that the United States was a wrongdoer in this conflict by connecting their militaristic actions to the implications of further injustices that are felt to this day. The injustices of that war continue today, but in the form of the unacknowledged war crimes and the staggering effects thereof in classrooms. These implications include the heightened sense of xenophobia and racism toward the Asian American and Pacific Islander identity group at large.

Huge numbers of Vietnamese fled to the U.S. after the war, many of them as so-called Boat People. Upon their arrival to America, the "Land of Opportunity," Vietnamese refugees were hardly met with open arms. A 1972 documentary titled "Winter Soldier" reported on the "systematic dehumanization of the Vietnamese people" in which "U.S. soldiers perpetuated a racial animus against the entire Vietnamese population, including those who opposed the Communist revolution." In fact, the view that all Vietnamese people were "beasts of prey" became ubiquitous among the U.S. military. This sentiment was pervasive on American soil, where the mistreatment of not only Vietnamese people but anyone that looked of East or Southeast Asian descent was prone to racial slurs and attacks. Unfortunately, this type of treatment has not dissipated into obsolescence. On the contrary, sinophobic statements during Donald J. Trump's presidency added more fuel to the hatred of Asians in the U.S., who had been made to feel like perpetual foreigners. Thus, it is essential to note that the recent spike in Asian hate crimes was not started by Trump, but rather rejuvenated as another residue of the Vietnam War. Nevertheless, the U.S. military created a new sect of racism toward AAPIs due to their involvement in the War, specifically stemming from the dehumanization of the Vietnamese (both living and dead), which eventually pervaded American society in the form of anti-Asian sentiments. In short, these actions mark the country directly responsible for the continued perpetuation of xenophobia and racism toward the Vietnamese community and AAPIs primarily due to the unshakable negligence of making these injustices known via educational curricula.

The U.S.'s responsibility for its injustice ventures beyond the bombings that resulted in the irreversible destruction of Vietnam's environment and agricultural systems, its use of chemical weapons that ended the bloodlines of Vietnamese families, and the massacres that resulted in the lives of innocent civilians. Not only do U.S. education systems fail to highlight the direct injustices, but they also continue to neglect the profound implications such as xenophobic and racist attitudes toward both Vietnamese and AAPIs at large. Thus, what remains is a task of justice and pedagogy that would create a more comprehensive view of the war to be taught in U.S. educational curricula, one that highlights the injustices as well as the subsequent implications.

As privileged members of the living, we must try to capture the full complexity of the Vietnam War, and teach the younger generations of the horrific implications on Vietnamese identity and AAPI identity as a whole. If we don't, then we allow the United States to continue committing an injustice against those that have not only died from the war but those that have and will continue to endure the generational traumas and anti-Asian sentiments. Furthermore, suppose the United States wants to posit itself as an arbiter of justice, an advocate for human rights, the altruistic world-police force that puts an end to tyrannical regimes as it supposedly aimed to do in Vietnam, Korea, Nicaragua, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Syria, etc. In that case, it must also take responsibility for the war crimes and injustices that also occur when America decides to dawn this role. For these reasons, it's imperative that the injustices and horrific implications perpetrated by the U.S. military during the Vietnam War be included in all interpretations of the War, especially during the younger generation's impressionable times in education. Only by making these aspects of the War known can America hope to live up to its pride on the geopolitical front. Finally, it must be noted that this

essay does not aim to delineate a well-detailed pedagogical agenda for the U.S. Department of Education to implement. Instead, I believe in the establishment of encapsulating interpretations that include not only the U.S.'s well-meaning intentions but also the actions that took the lives of millions and traumatized generations to come.