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Patch Work: Picturing Vietnam

Rebecca Blevins Faery

As Vietnam opens itself to the West, the foot soldiers of style are becoming intoxicated with its aroma.

“The Mist off Perfume River,”

New York Times Magazine,
Sunday, November 21, 1993.

1.

“Itself” is what is on the page, but I read it as “herself.” The photographs that carry much of the meaning in this article, that do much to accomplish its mission of seduction, confirm my intuitive gendering: nearly all are of women, beautiful women. They welcome the viewer’s gaze variously: with apparent indifference, or with inviting smiles, or with a frightening vulnerability. Above all and always, they are exotic; they are desirable. Vietnam opens herself up, and today’s foot-soldiers of what the *Times* calls “Indo-Chic” are intoxicated with her intimate aroma.

And then the other pictures, the old ones, resurface on the pool of memory, reconfigure themselves, forming and shifting like images in a kaleidoscope.

It is a chill November Sunday morning, bleak but bright, the steel-grey sky arching high overhead as if to draw itself away from all that transpires on earth. But the clouds could descend at any moment, bringing snow. I am curled on the sofa by the window, caressing a cup of good coffee, reading the paper. This article, though, these particular images, unsettle my pleasure in the moment; I both succumb to and deplore what I see and read. It is a startlingly neo-colonialist vision. Inevitably, this “take” on Vietnam recalls another one; these romantic pictures bump rudely against those others stored inside my head, pictures distinctly lacking anything I would be tempted to call romance. The article means to re-tool Vietnam’s image, recruiting readers of the *Times* to its project. The gentle watercolor “map” of Vietnam, surrounded by Laos, Cambodia, China, and by a soft blue wash of sea, is of a country unstained, unscarred, and undivided. Nothing awful could have happened there.

I am meant to want what I see, and in some shadowy, unregenerate part of my heart, I do: I want the beauty offered to me in the full-page photograph of Thuy Duong's exquisite face; I recognize the temptation to see in it the soul of the country itself, to imagine that in possessing the one, I could possess the other. This is easy for me to imagine because I am the inheritor of a colonialist culture, and such a move, in which desire for a woman who embodies a place gets conflated with desire to conquer and possess the place itself, is familiar to me. I also want the wispy mauve silk top Thuy Duong is wearing. It costs \$650, says the caption. Which also tells me that Thuy Duong is a waitress in Hanoi. I wonder if they gave her the silk top.

There is more. There is no end to my desire, and no end to the objects offered to gratify it: silk pajamas by Ralph Lauren, linen coat with mandarin collar by Armani, wool gabardine tank dress by Chanel, silk slip dress by Donna Karan. All adorn the slender bodies of Vietnamese women, photographed in Vietnamese settings. All of these clothes cost many hundreds, some several thousands, of dollars. Both the clothes and the bodies are vividly eroticized: women holding hands and walking in a rice paddy, women standing in a sampan on the Perfume River, a woman herding geese beside a field, a woman reclining in a hammock. In case I miss the point—which I am hardly likely to do—the article makes it plain, in large type: “Without revealing much skin, Eastern dress is subtly sexy. The slit on the side or up the back, the little mandarin collar and the frog closures are like erotic flash points.”

And food is there too. My senses are recruited—visual, olfactory, gustatory, sexual—and Vietnam is eager to sate all my appetites. In fantasy, I walk down a narrow alley in a crowded city, still deeply scarred but full of vitality and the declared will to forget, breathing the pungent aroma of shrimp sizzling on an open brazier, seasoned with lemon grass and small hot peppers. Rice simmers in a heavy black pot. Spring rolls filled with cold crabmeat spiked with lime are mounded on a platter in an open doorway. Fiery chili dipping sauce fills a bowl beside the platter. I could recreate it all in my own modern American (“transnational”) kitchen; the recipes, tested by the *Times*, are here for my pleasure. I could imagine myself in Vietnam.

Or, even better, I could go there. The article reassures me that “Americans who travel to Vietnam . . . find a gracious welcome.” Tourism is the country's newest growth industry. Many of the visitors are vets, returning

for another tryst with a country with whom the earlier affair turned decidedly sour. Was the U.S. impotent? Or not impotent enough? In any case, the Vietnamese have all but forgotten the war, the article says; it's time we did the same, and forgave ourselves (and, implicitly, them?) so we can return with open hearts and open wallets. Time we revised our memories, told ourselves it wasn't so bad. I'm okay, you're okay, Vietnam's okay. And now she is opening herself up, just for us.

But the single photograph of a man wearing clothes I'm supposed to want to buy, for myself or perhaps for the man in my life, reminds me of all that I sometimes wish I could forget but know I never will. The photograph is small and, in contrast to those of the women, in black and white; the elderly man modeling the clothes is bearded and looks faintly like Uncle Ho. He is wearing black pajamas. These are made of linen, not cheap cotton, and they aren't cheap. Designed by Isaac Mizrahi—or rather, borrowed, or appropriated. “Western designers are putting their own spin on the cheongsam, the sarong, and the pajama, adding slightly more structure and definition to what is essentially languid and simple,” says the article.

Black pajamas will always mean something else to me. And the mist—off Perfume River, or rolling in from the China Sea, or hovering over the Mekong Delta, or settling in the valleys of the Central Highlands—that mist which this article claims is now part of the erotic mystery of Vietnam, like the *ao dai*, the traditional Vietnamese costume for women that “hide[s] everything” and at the same time “hide[s] nothing,” that mist which embraces the “emerald banks of the Perfume River” where “young women pedal their bicycles . . . their long *ao dais* fluttering in the chill morning breeze, their fair skin [*fair skin!*] shielded from the early sun by elbow-length gloves and conical bamboo hats,” that mist which collects in sensuous beads on the beautiful face of Thuy Duong in the photograph, which appears in every film I've seen of the war—that mist was the very sign and symbol of the condition of *blindness* in which U.S. soldiers fought, unable to see when the “enemy” was there and when it was not, unable to tell “friend” from “foe,” as unable to read the landscape as the political scene. The mist threatens to blind us again as we are urged into another form of colonialism: not choppers, guns, napalm, land mines, and spilt blood this time, but venture capital, tourism, an avid and insatiable consumerism.

2.

The split, divided subjectivity of the postmodern self makes perfect sense to me. I've lived it; probably most of us have. Arguably, neo-colonialist wars like Vietnam helped to produce this divided self. As I hold in my hands in November of 1993 the *Sunday Times* article repackaging Vietnam, another, earlier self, another woman I once was, comes into focus. I am a woman with a past; she is part of that past. Now I am middle-aged, long single, mother of grown children, a politically-committed socialist-feminist writer and teacher, student and critic of American cultural history. The other woman was, roughly a quarter-century ago now, painfully young, a "waiting wife" married to a career infantry officer, a West Pointer who served two tours of duty with the First Air Cavalry Division in Vietnam, mother of two pre-school children, burgeoning feminist, secret war resister.

What is the right metaphor for these juxtapositions? I struggle with how to name this essay. "Collage" isn't quite right; it suggests a randomness as source of meaning, an accidental quality in the coming-together of images and discourses. I settle on "Patch Work." It's the pattern I want, and the spirit of recirculating, rehabilitating old materials: pieces from the fringed and tattered remnants of a fractured life, carefully placed so pattern appears—wagon wheel, log cabin, bear paw, wedding ring. What pattern emerges when I place my two selves, and the two Vietnams, side by side? What is the larger frame, or quilt, within which each of these pieces of narrative finds its place and its meanings? Re-membering is what I want to do. I don't want my pictures of Vietnam, the memories I carry like a weight inside my head, to be covered over or erased by pictures like those in this *Times* article.

Genres too blur on the postmodern landscape. That is plain in the cultural work (to borrow Jane Tompkins's apt phrase) of figurations of Vietnam in "The Mist off Perfume River": information becomes entertainment becomes advertisement. And in the essay I now write: memoir/re-membering/analysis/argument. Patch work.

3.

Picturing Vietnam. It's always an enterprise with a purpose. When I think about it, I realize that Vietnam has always been feminized for me. She was the woman for whom the man I had married left me, twice. I couldn't compete with her erotic attractions, the sexual pull that pointed toward the possibility of the ultimate orgasm: death and annihilation. And yet I identified with her. My life too was twisted and scarred by the masculine thrust of the U.S. military intervention that inserted itself with such violence into her very flesh.

Flashback. It is the autumn of 1966. I am sitting in my friend Joan's darkened living room—more accurately, her mother's darkened living room, because Joan and her small daughter, like many of the women in the room and our children, have returned to parental nests while our husbands are in Vietnam. My own daughter, not yet two, whenever she's asked "Where's Daddy?" runs to the globe in the corner of the room, spins it, then places the point of her small finger precisely on a tiny purple spot: "Daddy's gone to 'Nam," she says sadly, prefiguring in her baby speech what will later become part of the slang idiom of the war. My son is an infant, not yet a year old, too small to know, or care, I think, though I may be wrong. Tonight I've enlisted my parents to babysit while I enjoy one of the occasional nights out of the "Waiting Wives" group. Earlier, I fed and bathed and kissed the babies and settled them in their beds. In the absence of a real father, they kissed the photograph of a uniformed Daddy goodnight, as they do every night. Then I joined my friends, a dozen or so women who understand as no one else can do the conditions of my life, because they are living it too.

We have had dinner and wine in a restaurant, in a small room for private parties. Now we have adjourned to Joan's, where we will share the slides our men have sent us, pictures from Vietnam. We are eager to see this place, see what it is like. The beam of light from Joan's slide projector pierces the darkness and illumines the wall, and one by one, we watch the pictures of Vietnam: aerial views of endless jungle; men in camouflage fatigues; men standing in front of base buildings, smiling men standing next to blank-faced black-pajama-clad women who, the letters tell us, do their laundry, or next to smiling black-pajama-clad men who, the letters say, polish their boots and their brass, clean their quarters, negotiate for items not available through military channels in exchange for things that are, men whom, the

letters say, the husbands call their “boys.” There are countless pictures of monkeys, monkeys everywhere, in trees or perched in windows or above doorways. And, always, there are choppers, the ubiquitous choppers.

Joan clicks to advance the images. Her husband is a doctor with the Fourth Infantry Division. She’s my favorite among the women of the group; I like her because she’s wry and funny and resists easy pieties about the war. Later, her only brother will be killed in Vietnam, and she, like so many others of us, will be divorced from the husband for whom she now “waits.” But tonight she’s happy, providing the slide show that pictures Vietnam for us.

Then an image appears for which all of us (except Joan) are utterly unprepared. An enormous erect penis, vastly larger than life, appears on the wall, thrusting upward from the open fly of fatigue trousers. Silence, thick with startled surprise, falls on the room, on this gathering of women-without-men. It’s been a while since we’ve seen a penis, most of us, and we are arrested by a combination of pained embarrassment and desire. Then another penis, and another, and another, appear on the wall. Our silence gives way to nervous laughter, then to hysterical glee. We howl and wipe our eyes, lean and roll against each other in fits of merriment as penis after penis flashes in front of us.

The pictures are from Joan’s husband, who is studying penile lesions among American soldiers in Vietnam, lesions from exotic Asian venereal diseases, contracted in the flesh markets of Saigon, Bangkok, Hong Kong. Or in the dense jungles, at the edges of rice paddies, in the margins of search-and-destroy missions in Vietnamese villages. The penises—red and brown—are all immensely erect, iconic, looming, ready for action. Militarized phalluses, transcendental signifiers of male power in that mysterious, multiple, fluid, evasive, finally unknowable country which is a purple dot on my daughter’s globe.

Joan grins broadly at our initial nervousness and then at the eruptions of raucous laughter, the release in the room of a diffuse sexual energy and subversive irreverence. We sit and watch for an hour, recirculating the pictured penises, laughing loudly as we crudely note size, shape, potential. Eventually the pictures are no longer funny. The evening winds down, and one by one we leave, limp and drained, for home and bed, alone.

Recalling the evening now on the screen of memory, I wonder why all the penises were so erect. What was stirring their lust?

I remember a story I heard many times during the Vietnam years, told again and again in military circles by men who had been in the war, both trapped within and agents of its ideologies, and who lived to tell its stories. This one I have understood as a myth or legend with enormous symbolic and explanatory force, one that captures and condenses the energies at play in the war, driving the U.S.'s blind persistence and ultimate failure in Vietnam as well as the ferocity of the people's resistance.

The story goes like this: a small group of soldiers on patrol come upon a lone young Vietnamese woman. She is beautiful and desirable. Is she VC? As usual, they can't tell. But it doesn't matter; they want her, and she's willing. She smiles and gestures seductively, offering herself. She opens herself up to them, and they are intoxicated with her aroma.

The man who will go first is young and hot, tumescent, eager. His erect penis thrusts outward from the fly of his fatigue trousers. He bends over the woman, whose eyes cloud momentarily. He thrusts into her—and screams, withdraws, blood gushing from his sliced-open penis. The woman has concealed a single-edge razor blade inside her vagina.

What happened to her? I asked the first time I heard this story, my throat tightening with fear because I already knew the answer. For luring them into her ambush, for being not what they thought she was, for so precisely locating their vulnerability within the very sign of their power, of course, they killed her.

4.

But I've left something out here. In fact I belong in the picture too.

Flash forward four years. It is the spring of 1970, the spring of the peace march on Washington, of Kent State, of the American invasion of Cambodia. I am once again a "waiting wife," this time living on my own for the first time in my life, and loving it. No letters have arrived from my husband in several weeks. When the headlines in the *Washington Post* blare the news that the U.S. has invaded Cambodia, I immediately know why; I haven't heard from him because he's there. A week or so later, a letter arrives which confirms my fears that I am married to a man who has invaded Cambodia. The news is worse than I had imagined: he was the G3 or operations officer, in charge of planning and executing the invasion. Worse yet, when I tear open the envelope, a dull, dark square falls out and onto the floor. It is a photograph, black and white, taken from a helicopter,

of a clearing surrounded by thick jungle, a terrain that is about to be a landing zone for the helicopter-borne troops of the air cavalry division the man I married serves with. Across the bottom of the photograph, “LZ Rebecca” is scrawled in white ink. The letter explains how the man I married has given me the “honor” of having my name permanently inscribed in the military record of the topography and conduct of this war. I hold the photograph in my hand, and the blood drains from my head with a suddenness that leaves me faint. So vividly that even now I find it hard to describe, I understand at this moment and in my very flesh that I too am the terrain on which this war is being fought. I and Vietnam are one; I am the symbol of all the war pretends to defend. I am the token of exchange. I am the scarred and tortured landscape of the invaded country; I must receive the soldiers silently and with resignation as they leap from the hovering choppers. I am forced to open myself up to the piercing phallus of American military might.

Years later, I will read in Louise Erdrich’s novel *Love Medicine* about the Vietnamese woman prisoner who points first to her own Asian eyefold and then to that of Henry Lamartine, the Chippewa soldier in camouflage fatigues who is guarding her, holding a bayonet to her chest. She says to him, “You. Me. Same.” Now, seeing my name on the topo photograph, I understand my conflation with the landscape of Vietnam; I identify with the invaded country: You, me, same. But my skin is white. I am an American. And the other name I carry is the one the man I married wrapped me in, the man who blighted a Vietnamese rainforest clearing with my first, my true name. Him, me, same?

5.

So Vietnam opens herself to the West again, intoxicating us with her aroma. And we open—what? Our hearts? Our wallets? Either way, combat or commodification, Vietnam gets consumed. Again.

The *Times* article resurrects and repeats the old, aching question: “Why are we in Vietnam?” The answers are different now: because, the article says, we can “experience true glamour” there; because “there’s something otherworldly about the place.” But residues of that *other* “other world” of Vietnam, the one many of us remember, are evident even here. The *Times* quotes one U.S. visitor to Vietnam who says, “What exotic destination

isn't stained by conquest and a hint of something brutal?" It's part of Vietnam's allure.

My response is to re-member: to refuse the sadomasochistic overlay of this revival of colonialism, and instead to revive those older images and re-present them, to resist all the ways the deaths, destruction, environmental devastation, and appropriating interventions are eroticized. "Erotic flash points," the *Times* calls such glimpses into Vietnam. But I'm not buying. I won't be had again.