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BODY COUNTS: THE VIETNAM WAR AND MILITARIZED REFUGEES

BOOK REVIEW

Ngan Nguyen

"Vietnam is our past. We should live in the present. Our homeland is the United States" my father would say at every family dinner. But of course, I didn't listen. I constantly find myself drawn to the "past" that my father insists I forget about. I realized as I investigate more into the turning point in my family's life, the Vietnam War, that I have nothing to forget about. Rather, I wanted to collect the memories of my father in order to make sense of exactly why, what about the past, that I wouldn't want to know. In the midst of trying to find literature on the Vietnam War, I stumbled upon *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees*.

In *Body Counts*, Professor Yen Le Espiritu accomplishes the task of putting her own life into the sociological and historical context without making herself the center of the story. Espiritu's book touches upon not only the analysis of memory, but also the personal memories as a refugee herself. In the midst of research that often shies away from subjectivity, Espiritu's view is extremely valuable and unique as it has been shaped by a combination of self-reflection, investigation of family relationships, and scholarly research. For a daughter of a South Vietnamese soldier, I was emotionally invested in the stories Espiritu has to tell.

Memory is a framework that tends to be unique to the field of American Studies. When we think of research, we think of objective findings and neutral standpoints. However, memory as a research tool can disrupt that notion because of how personal memory can be. It is no surprise that memory is a framework most often associated with war. Stories from veterans, civilians, and those who are involved in a war are from their memory. While memory is valuable to delve deeper into the complexity of a certain identity, it can also be exclusive of certain voices

and narratives. In the context of the Vietnam War, much of its memories are from U.S veterans and their accounts of the war. As a daughter of a Vietnamese soldier during the Vietnam War, I also noticed stories of my father and his comrades missing from the wider narratives about the Vietnam War in the United States. Perhaps, the memory of the Vietnam War in the U.S is one that Americans would rather forget because it reminds them of their loss to that tiny country in Southeast Asia. As Espiritu said, "the public recollections of the U.S war in Vietnam was "the war with the difficult memory" (1). At one point, I started to wonder if maybe because stories like my father's have been missing from the greater narrative about the Vietnam War in the U.S, him believing that he needs to be loyal to the U.S that is now his homeland, that he came to believe that they aren't important.

Chapter 1-4 explores Espiritu's argument of military imperialism and refugee migration. Espiritu explains in depth the emerging theoretical frame of critical refugee studies, one she pioneered through her other works. Espiritu also wrestles with the idea of history and memory intertwined. "In the United States, public discussions of the Vietnam War often skip over the history of militarized violence inflicted on Vietnam and its people" (18). With this claim, Espiritu exposes the still hidden stories about the Vietnam War that hasn't been revealed. Although the Vietnam War "is the most chronicled, documented, reported, filmed, and taped, in all likelihood, narrated war in U.S History" (18). Yet this type of visibility can actually be a type of invisibility when we think about whose stories are being told and whose memories are being remembered. Espiritu reveals that on the surface is the image of thousands of Vietnamese risking death in order to escape "communism" and resettle in the U.S for a better life. Yet, Espiritu and

Body Counts

other Vietnamese American writers remind us that “not all Vietnamese came running through the door that the United States allegedly opened. Rather, many moved very slowly, with much confusion, ambivalence, and uncertainties (2).

The term “militarized refugee” (25) stuck with me the most because it offers a new perspective when looking at Vietnamese refugees. Militarized refugee exposes hidden violence behind the humanitarian term, “refugee” and challenges the powerful narrative of America rescuing and caring for Vietnam’s “runaways”. I thought of how my family would react to this analysis because throughout most of my life, I was taught to appreciate the fact that I am in America. My oldest brother came to the United States as a refugee. He stayed with a host family during his teenage years. His host family was white and in a way, my family has equate whiteness with goodness because those are the people who first helped my brother when he came alone as a refugee. Because of him, I am able to be in the United States. Because we must be grateful for this opportunity, I must appreciate that I am in America. I was encouraged to assimilate into the American culture while my Vietnamese culture can be maintained, but not shown in the professional life. I thought of how the Vietnam War was taught in history class during high school with the U.S being the “hero” for many Vietnamese trying to escape the country. Espiritu’s analysis of how evacuations contain a hidden message that refugee and immigrants don’t think about during the time of war is unique. I began to situate my family’s immigration history in Espiritu’s analyses and think about the question of private and public memories.

Chapter 5-7 then move toward a more personal reflection and memorialization of the Vietnam War. The shift is quite jarring as it moved towards such personal analyses, and I realized that it affected me more than I thought it would. The chapters before were mostly analyses comprised from scholarly research and evidences, while Chapter 5 begins with Espiritu discovering a picture of her old maternal uncle,

Ngan Nguyen

Colonel Ho Ngoc Can. She stumbled upon him while searching for anecdotes of Vietnamese soldiers online. Startled by the online and circulation of a photo she thought was a private photo, one that was on her aunt’s family altar in Saigon. As she dug deeper through the online memorial for Vietnamese soldiers, Espiritu discovered that wasn’t the only photograph of her uncle circulated online. The “other photograph” was of his public execution, “hands bound, surrounded by uniformed gunmen, standing on a chair with a banner behind him that announces his captors’ “resolve to punish” those like him who served the defeated Republic of South Vietnam” (116). Espiritu attributes how the grainy image becomes one that is used for all commemoration events on South Vietnam. A photo that Espiritu once thought was private, was actually a part of the public memory. Furthermore, it is of one that brings back painful memories. Throughout the rest of the chapters, Espiritu grapples with this discovery, presenting the facts, but also provided her own emotional reactions to it. She describes her position as writing from a “haunted position” (107).

In a way, I could sympathize with Espiritu’s ambiguous thoughts about the discovery of those haunted photographs. When I reached this part of the book, I began to feel myself grasping those emotions alongside Espiritu. I searched up Colonel Ho Ngoc Can on Google images and was shocked to find even more photographs than the two Espiritu wrote about. As a daughter of a South Vietnamese soldier and niece of six uncles who served for the South Vietnamese army, I put myself within the same circle of emotions as Espiritu. One of my uncles passed away on the battlefield and I only know him through stories told by my father and one surviving uncle who served. It would be just as a haunting of an experience that Espiritu went through I believe, if I ever come across a picture of that uncle circulating online. As I drown in own thoughts, I question why are images of these soldiers accessible in an informal place such as the internet, when they are missing from textbooks

Body Counts

that I was learning from. Does this make private memories of the heroes in *Espiritu* and my life less significant than the public memory created our "savior"?

As a 1.5 generation Vietnamese American, my interest in Vietnam and the Vietnam war stems from my family's involvement during the war. My father was a captain for the South Vietnamese army. Although he has never been in combat, he experienced the dehumanizing and harsh conditions of reeducation camp after the end of the Vietnam War. I grew up listening to stories of how the rest of my family struggled economically while my father was trapped in camp. My oldest brother was also a refugee at age 18 in 1986. While reading *Espiritu's* book, my family's stories and experiences came to life. The pain, loss, and terror the war created for Vietnamese Americans were real. They haunted me in a way that I never thought they would.

Reading *Espiritu's* book triggered an overwhelming amount of emotions for me. They cannot be explained fully, similar to how *Espiritu* was met with those emotions when she discovered her uncle's photographs. I felt uneasy. I was always excited to learn about the Vietnam War and talk about the Vietnam war during history class in high school because I thought I knew everything. I thought my mere personal connection to the war was everything. Therefore, emotions such as anger and uncomfortableness were unfamiliar. In a way, I was experiencing the same journey towards placing my own family experience into the sociological and historical context I've learned about.

I decided to immerse myself in this emotional experience while reading the book by digging through photographs my father has archived for the family. My father noted that the majority of the photographs were burned by Uncle Qui because he was afraid they would become evidence that the family sides with South Vietnam and would be punished by North Vietnamese soldiers. Images of my father and uncles in uniform were there. The majority of the photographs were unlike ones shown in *Espiritu's*

Ngan Nguyen

book, except for headshots of my father and uncles in their uniforms. Group photos showed their smiles despite the happenings during that time. These photos are private memories that made me yearn to include them in the public memory of the Vietnam War.

The Vietnam War may be over, but *Espiritu's* book reminds readers that the private memories of those who couldn't tell their stories are still haunting us today. The haunting is in forms of stories and photographs of the "other side", the South Vietnamese soldiers stories that are not included in the major discourse about the Vietnam War. For readers with personal connections to the war, *Espiritu's* book evokes the confusion, ambivalence, and uncertainties that differ from the dominant narrative that has been told about them. Her book inspires myself, a 1.5 Vietnamese American, to continue digging deeper into the history that was not as simple as I thought. I aim to extend *Espiritu's* project of placing personal memories into the sociological and historical contexts in order to reveal the contradictions hidden by dominant narratives about the Vietnam War.