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Applestein Sweren Book Collecting Award 2020

Goucher College

Indochina to Vietnam: A (re-telling) search for identity through narratives

We are raised and familiarized ourselves with the narratives we are told, given and taught. So when those narratives are challenged, we are confused and forced to step out of our comfort zone. Or at least that what happened to me in my high school U.S History class where I first experienced an identity crisis at sixteen; that was the first time I heard stories from the “other side of the battlefield.” The narratives that I was used to were contradicted, denied and even persecuted by the textbooks of the American education. I was raised with the stories of my grandparents as proud Vietnamese fighting for the country’s independence. My American friend was accustomed to the stories of her grandparents as proud Americans fighting for democracy in a Communist-infected land. For the Americans, my grandfather must have been a sneaky and evil Vietcong but for my family, he was a protector of peace, a thoughtful husband and a caring father.

From that moment onwards, a question lingers in my mind as I slowly mature: whose narratives are we talking about when we look at History? During the course of my academic studies, this personal question (unbeknownst to me) has become the driving force behind my research papers, my interests and eventually to this collection. These narratives that I have chosen for this collection are often hidden by History (with the capital H) as they represent the untold, unseen and untouched part of a large and abstract concept. I build this collection with the desire that these authors can help me discover the identity of the land that nurtured my childhood and pivoted me into the person I am today.

Vietnam has always been a country ripe for conflicts, since the ancient battles with the China empire to the modern devastating Vietnam War with the US (or the American war as the Vietnamese call it). Influenced by these different cultures, the dynamic and integration of cultures and societies in Vietnam, which is still very much relevant today, become an interesting question and field of research. But probably, France and America were the main players in the identity formation of Indochina as a colony to modern day Vietnam. The occupation of French colonialism and American military intervention were the ones that solidified the country as a contingent political and cultural entity. Along with those atrocities emerged identity confusion and internal struggles of people who share two or even three national identities, a lot of whom become authors to channel their self-search through fictions, autobiographies, memoirs which I have (unconsciously) come to love and collect. Some of the books I bought in second-hand bookstores for recreational reading, some I ordered online out of curiosity or used for my research papers, and some were given to me as gifts. Each narrative is a precious addition to my life-long learning journey.

The majority of the books are written by Vietnamese descendant authors who are refugees and immigrants coming to France and the US after the Indochinese War and the Vietnam War. They use the beautiful language of poetry and powerful narratives to encapsulate the various spectrum of their adversities as refugees and immigrants. Inspired by their own life, these narratives are personal and often times heart-breaking. Despite sharing a common theme, all these narratives are yet so different, they reflect and raise new questions for me every time I read or re-read them. The desire of wanting to belong and the dilemma of supporting the “enemy” country while still having to keep your roots are just wonderfully expressed in *Nothing Ever Dies* (Viet Thanh Nguyen). Or the question that how can one remember a country which

they don't even know, speaks volume to second-generation immigrant Mia in *Listen, slowly* (Lai Thanhha), as Vietnam in her mind is a place of fairytale in her bed-time stories. Indochina and Vietnam are portrayed as both a place of happiness and a reminder of pain and sufferings.

In the construction of this collection, language is essential to me. I was born with Vietnamese, grew up with English and matured with French. This gift helps me foster a more genuine and authentic relationship with the authors and their narratives as reading a book in its original language is both a privilege and a valuable experience. This collection is also divided into three parts accordingly, English, French and Vietnamese. Most of the Vietnamese book I read when I was in Vietnam, around middle school and early high school. French books are still much of a challenge for me since I just started to formally learn French a year ago but wanting to connect to these narratives is one of my motivations to keep learning and improving my French. I believe the majority of the books in the collection are in English since it's easier to acquire English books due to the popularity of the language. Another element that can also contribute to this imbalance in my theory, is the migrant flow to the US after the Vietnam war was much larger than any other countries; thus foster a wider population of authors.

In the progress of acquiring and reading these works, I am also fascinated to realize that I am living in a post-colonial society where it is possible for me to get the necessary tools (language, travels, literature, etc.) to explore the euphony of cultural integration. I am, obviously, not a refugee nor an immigrant; therefore, I have no right to talk about anyone's experience. However, the psychological stress of being "a stranger" is something I am used to and these narratives, that I include in the collection, help me reflect a lot of those thoughts. I am grateful to be able to read and learn about these narratives since I think a lot of them aren't or won't be included in the big History we tell our children.

Intertwined with the narratives of these authors, my acquisition of these works also reflects the connection I have with the people I encountered throughout my life. From my high school History teacher who has changed my life or to my most recent supervisor during my internship in Vietnam, the books that they recommend motivate my understanding of History and continuation of my intellectual exploration.

Like a lot of my projects, my collection started out as a curiosity and it keeps growing into an interpersonal and valuable assess that shape the person I am today. Besides fictions and autobiographies, I hope to collect more biographies and history books since I think they will provide me with excellent context for the period and the background for these narratives. I also really want to get more works that focus on the French and American narratives instead of the usual stories that look at war as a collective. Although I don't include any films or movies here, I whole-heartedly believe they can also be valuable to the collection moving forward. I'm a visual person and there are a lot of great films, during and about the period that are wonderfully made and worth appreciated. There is also a rise in Vietnamese cinematic scene nowadays with a lot Vietnamese refugees and immigrants coming back to the country and working as directors. They are also exploring their own narrative of History and making their vision of the country more tangible. For me, it is eye-opening to see how a lot those narratives really parallel my personal growth.

As I move on with my life, I want to remind myself to always be critical of the stories that I am told. There is no right or one way to tell History. History is often looked as a collective: an event, a movement or a war. Rarely do we consider the individual narrative of people who actually live through those circumstances despite their experience can shed light on the multifaceted layers and contribute greatly to our understanding.

Annotated Bibliography

English

Greene, Graham. *The Quiet American*. Penguin Books, 2018. Originally published 1955.

I was debating whether to include this book in the collection because I was not entirely in love with it. It was one of those books where I made the mistake of watching the movie first before reading the book. Being influenced by my already-dislike for the movie and how the main plot is overlooked by the love triangle, I skipped a lot of the book. But I do think it is among the influential books that readily challenges a lot of the American assumptions about the Vietnam war since it's quite fascinating to see how Greene raised the question of legitimacy in the American intervention in Vietnam so early on in the period.

Hayslip, Le Ly. *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: A Vietnamese Woman's Journey from War to Peace*. Anchor Publisher, 2017. Originally published in 1989.

I got this book from a book fair in high school as I'm intrigued by its title. It wasn't an easy read, both for the content and the language. What really struck me is the ending where Ly plead for the end of the War between Vietnam and the US. The language is so poignant that it elevates her despair that breaks my heart every time.

Lai, Thanhha. *Inside out and back again*. HarperCollins Publisher, 2011.

I accidentally found the book in Goucher library, Juvenile section the second semester of my Freshman year. I was curious and surprised by the familiar Vietnamese name of the author on the spine of the book. I finished the book in one sitting. Despite telling a story of social disintegration, Hà (the name of the author and the protagonist) used such delightful prosed that remind me of my childhood in Vietnam.

Lai, Thanhha. *Listen, slowly*. HarperCollins Publisher. Reprinted in 2016.

Captivated by Lai's *Inside out and back again*, I sought after some of her other works. *Listen, slowly* offers a powerful and hilarious coming-of-age story of Mia/Mai as she reconnects with her Vietnamese roots through her "unwilling" journey with her grandmother back to the land where it all started. However, underneath the light-hearted language is a philosophical question

of identity for second-generation immigrants as their struggle to re-connect with the memory of the land they are not always familiar with.

Nguyen, Thanh Viet. *The Refugees*. Grove Press, 2017.

The book was one of my early introductions to Vietnamese-American authors who, though narrative, offer the readers to embark on a journey of internal struggle as a stranger in their own residence. I have read the book twice and I know that I will keep re-reading it as an act of meditation.

Nguyen, Thanh Viet. *The Sympathizer*. Grove Press, 2015.

This book forever holds a special place in my heart as it was the first stepping stone for this collection. Recommended and offered to me by the same History teacher who have encouraged me in my journey of both academic and personal growth, it is the first beacon that sheds light on my interest in the nuanced and different narratives of history and the legitimacy of those narratives in assessing the authenticity of History.

Nguyen, Thanh Viet. *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*. Grove Press, 2016.

Another book by Viet Thanh Nguyen that I cannot put down. His experience as a Vietnamese refugee migrated to the US is conveyed through the very first line of the book “I was born in Vietnam but made in America.” This juxtaposition becomes prominent as he navigates the internal uncertainties of being a man with the love for two countries, one that is his roots and one that has made him into the person he is. “All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, and the second time in memory” – this quote reminds me of the prevalence of war, even after its ending and the potent residue it has on the lives are disrupted by war and conflicts.

O’Brian, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. Houghton Mifflin Publisher. Originally published 1990.

I can’t remember when and where I first read *The Things They Carried* but I have gone back to the book a few times. This book reminds me of the fact that it is insufficient to look at war and conflicts as a binary. Everyone suffers to some extent and there is no winner, and everyone deserves to have their own stories told.

Pham, Andrew. X. *Catfish and Mandala: A Two-Wheeled Voyage Through the Landscape and Memory of Vietnam*. Picador Publisher, 2000.

Catfish and Mandala was recommended to me by one of my professors at Goucher, I believe it was also the summer read of the Freshman class at one point. It was relatable for me to see the cultural confusion of the author as both American and Vietnamese. His journey to find the pinpoint of the identity was really impactful when I read it.

Truong, Monique. *The Book of Salt*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publisher. 2003.

One detail that really struck me was when Binh finally receives and reflects upon the letter from his brother to whom he wrote 3 years ago, “no one else back there would have known where to find me, that 27 rue de Fleurus was my home. I sniffed the envelope before opening it. It smelled of a faraway city, pungent with anticipation for rain.” It reminds me of the uncertainty and loss of one’s stability when they are displaced from their family and the land that they have known their entire life.

Valverde, Kieu-Linh Caroline. *Transnationalizing Viet Nam: Community, Culture, and Politics in the Diaspora (Asian American History & Culture)*. Temple University Press, 2010.

This book was crucial to my one of my research papers on the postcolonial consequences in Vietnam and the Vietnamese diaspora. Reading this book solidifies my desire to discover and unfold the individual narratives of Vietnamese refugees.

Vuong, Ocean. *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*. Copper Canyon Press, 2016.

The first time I heard of Ocean Vuong and his works was from my supervisor during my internship in Vietnam summer 2018. Vuong’s poetry centers around the residue of the Vietnam War on his family as they migrate to the US after the war and how the memories “sneakily” come back to his parents in their dreams. There is also a mythical element to his poetry that I find really fascinating.

French

Guillebaud, Jean Claude. *La colline des anges : Retour au Vietnam, 1972-1992*. Originally published 1993.

Honestly, reading this book was a challenge for me and I am still much confused by the book. I think it's because due to the fact that this was a more history book than a fictional one like other French books that I have been reading. But it's never hurt to read a book twice!

Nguyen, Phan Long. *Le Roman de Mademoiselle Lys* (ed. by Davis, Kent and preface by Britto, Karl). DatASIA, Inc Publisher, 2014.

I found this gem of literature in one of the scholarly journals I read for my research paper on the French colonialism of Indochina. This is one of the rare specimens from the period of colonialism that ends up being re-published. The journey of Hải and her navigation between the modern French and traditional Vietnamese culture parallel the identity formation of colonial Vietnam as a nation.

Phillips, Carolin. *Made in Vietnam*. France: Bayard Jeunesse Publisher, 2012.

I was drawn to this book and continued to be mesmerized because of Philipps' beautiful rendition of family relationship in solidifying one's identity and its role in providing security and solace for people. The story of Lan tells the atrocity of war and how it disrupts her ties with her family members, leading to a lot of post-trauma experience.

Vietnamese

Duras, Margritte. *Người Tình (The Lover)*. Hanoi: Nha Xuất Bản Hội Nhà Văn (League of Writers Publisher), 1991.

This was the first book I ever read by Margritte Duras in 2016. *The Lover*, while can be considered unsuitable for the young audience due to its varied of explicit content, was a self-exploration of identity and femininity. Entangled in the personal journey was the formation of Indochina and its importance in cultivating the heroine's journey. Like other books by Duras, *The Lover* was much inspired by the tumultuous life of the author.

Duras, Margritte. *Người Tình Hoa Bắc (The North China Lover)*. Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Lao Động (Labour Party Publisher), 2015.

The story was a re-written of the *The Lover* by Duras after the success of the novel. One interesting aspect of *The North China Lover* that the characters have no names, them being referred to as “the girl” and “her Saigon lover.” I was experiencing an identity disintegration when I first came to the US and this book pulled me back to my roots as I continued to mature.

Ho, Chi Minh. *Nhật ký trong tù (The Prison Poems of Ho Chi Minh)*. Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Học (Literature Publisher), 2012. Originally published 1943)

This is a collection of poems written by Ho Chi Minh when he was imprisoned in China. While I'm not entirely a political fanatic, I do believe his writings and prose are beautifully crafted. He told stories that really resonated with the Vietnamese civilians at that time which absolutely added to his immense support from the people.

Kim, Thúy. *Ru*. Vintage Canada Publisher, 2009.

I can't complete this collection without Kim Thúy. Her book *Ru*, which I'm lucky enough to read in all three English, French and Vietnamese is probably the one that impresses me the most. Inspired by her own story, Thúy weaves the story in three narratives, each represents a stage of her life which was constructed from her experience as a “boat-people” fleeing Vietnam after the

withdraw of the French military. Reading her book in French and recognizing the different nuances in the story are one of my motivations to keep learning French at Goucher.

Lê, Minh Khuê. *Những Ngôi Sao Xa Xôi (Faraway stars)*. Short story.

Lê Minh Khuê was one of the few female Vietnamese writers that were included in the general education in Vietnam. This is actually her famous short story about the role of women during the Vietnam War. I was asked to analyze this story in my Vietnamese Literature class and I fell in love with every sentence. I recently got a new copy of the book but my old edition still had the notes and marks in the margins from when I was in high school. I always take a trip down memory lane when I read it.

Nguyễn, Ngọc Ngạn. *Những người đàn bà còn ở lại : truyện dài xã hội chủ nghĩa Việt Nam từ 1978 đến nay (The Woman Who Stay: a narrative of the Vietnamese Socialist Party from 1978 to now)*.

This is probably the oldest book that is in my possession, I got lucky during one my trip to the old book stores in Hanoi where I acquired one of probably very few copies of this book. The long and political title may throw a lot of people off but in truth, *The Woman Who Stay* offers Nguyễn Ngọc Ngạn a closure to the death of his wife and son on their escape to America as “boat-people.” In the shipwreck that killed 160 people, Ngạn was among the few survivors in the refugee camps in Malaysia. As he holds the body his dead son, he was reminded of the people that were left behind on the sea which motivated him to write this work.

Tố Hữu, *Collection of Poems*.

The book has followed me since middle school when I was in Vietnam. I still have it with me here in my dorm at Goucher as a reminder of the country that raises me. Tố Hữu was one the revolutionary poets that was essential to Vietnamese literature. His political poetry is not up my alley but his other works, mostly on the subject of the countryside (his hometown) and the reconstruction of Vietnam after the Vietnam war really resonates with me since it also reminds me of my childhood in the countryside with my grandparents.

Wish list

Bac Ky Tap Luc, translated by Pham Van Tuan (Varietes Tonkinoises). Hoi Nha Van (Writer Group Publisher), 2019.

My brother-in-law purchased this book when I was visiting my family in Vietnam during the summer, I read a couple of pages and was debating whether I should bring this in my luggage to Goucher because it was a very long and heavy book. I didn't do it obviously, only to end up needing the book as a material for my research paper couple months later. I had to go to the online French national archives to read the original copy of the book in old French which was even harder than modern French!

Bui Thi. *The Best We Could Do: An Illustrated Memoir*. Harry N. Abrams Publisher, 2017.

Another book with images, but *The Best We Could Do* is more of a graphic novel. Hailed as the Vietnam War counterpart of Maus, I would love to be able to read it. I also found a video on Youtube where she talked about the book and offered an interactive reading of the story, which I think is really reminiscent of the old Vietnam.

Collins, Suzanne (Author) & Proimos, James (Illustrator). *Year of the Jungle*. Scholastic Press, 2013.

I recently discovered the joy in reading Picture books after spending my J-term shelf-reading the Pictures book section in the library. The childish images offer a stark contrast to the inner dialogue and the heavy content of the book. I think it will be interesting to have the book in my collection.

Indochine : Un rêve d'Asie. Presses de la Cite, originally 1995.

During the research for my paper on French colonialism in Indochina, this book comes up several times and it is considered to be the first work that coined the term "Dream of Asia" which sparked the interest of French settlers about the "exotic country." The book is probably out of print but I would love to be able to read the original.

Kim, Thúy. *Le Secret des Vietnamiennes*. Trécarré Publisher, 2017.

Apart from being a successful author, Kim Thúy is also an owner of a Vietnamese restaurant in Montreal. She also published several other cookbooks, mostly on Vietnamese recipes. For me, I think food can contain a lot of memory and cultural diversity. One of the things that I remember the most about Vietnam is definitely my mother's cooking although she is not so good at it. Thuy tells her story through the recipes and the food which I personally find intriguing.

Kim, Thúy. *Vi*. Random House Canada Publisher, 2018.

This is another work by Thúy that is highly praised. I found an interview where she talked about this book and I haven't been able to find a place that sell it in the US yet.

Lai, Thanhha. *Butterfly Yellow*. HarperCollins Publisher, 2019.

This work by Lai Thanhha has a more serious tone than the whimsical voice of *Inside Out and Back again*. I saw this book in Barnes and Nobles down by Inner Harbor but I decided not to buy it since I already had three books in my cart but I hope to go back there and purchase it one day.

Nguyen, Ngọc The will of heaven: a story of one Vietnamese and the end of his world. Originally published 1982.

I don't think this book is in print actually but The Will of Heaven is actually written entirely in English unlike his previous works. I read a small excerpt from this book from an online source long time away. I am an International Relations Major and we learn and talk about foreign policy and conflicts, referring to the other countries as "enemies" but we don't consider the extent of sufferings that these events could have on the lives of civilians who are pulled into the fight despite their desire. And The Will of Heaven is one such work that really reminds me of that question.

Trach, Ba Vu. *A Journey of Body and Soul*. River Grove Books Publisher, 2013.

The main theme of this book is stereotype and prejudice. I was recommended by a friend of mine after a very long talk about our identity and how to cope with being away from family. I bought the book but I accidentally forgot it at the airport. I want to buy it again and finish it.

Truong, Monique. *The Sweetest Fruits*. Viking Publisher, 2019.

I believe Truong ventures out of her comfort zone to write this book so I am curious to see the different voice and style she experiments.

Vuong, Ocean. *Brunings*. Sibling Rivalry Press, 2010.

As one of my efforts to read more poems, I want to get this collection by Vuong. I got the chance to read one poem “The Touch” from the collection during a poetry event night that I went to not long ago. The poem speaks of the mother’s touch in calming the internal storm of a child (or at least that was my interpretation) and I just think that the prosed were both so personal and very universal.

Nguyen, Uyen. *Unknown*.

One of my desires in life is to be able tell my own story. I want to live a life that is worth telling and ruminating. Starting with this collection, I hope one day, I can add my voice to the various narratives presented here.