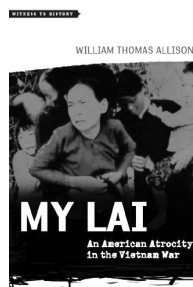
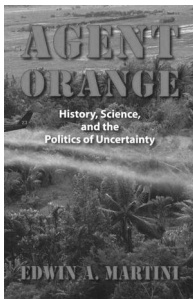


Review Essay

Confronting Trauma and Toxins, Rejecting Closure: Three Recent Investigations of America’s War on Vietnam

Ray Mizumura-Pence



AGENT ORANGE: History, Science, and the Politics of Uncertainty. By Edwin A. Martini. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press. 2012.

MY LAI: An American Atrocity in the Vietnam War. By William Thomas Allison. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 2012.

THE ORIENTAL OBSCENE: Violence and Racial Fantasies in the Vietnam Era. By Sylvia Shin Huey Chong. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2012.

In June 2013, Vietnam War veteran Sam Axelrad traveled from his Houston, Texas home to Hanoi, Vietnam to find what he and many of his peers call “closure.”²¹ Similar trips by former US military personnel have become common

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over the last three decades because of veterans like Axelrad, who were the first US citizens to visit Vietnam in significant numbers when the socialist republic began promoting tourism in the mid-1980s. Although these journeys still arouse some controversy in the US (especially among those who claim Vietnam holds prisoners of war and refuses to account for America's missing in action, despite no evidence of the former and in contradiction to Vietnam's record of assistance with the latter), they have lost most of their capacity to polarize and they rarely surprise.

However, Axelrad's quest for emotional resolution had an unusual physical relic at its center. This was a human arm, the skeletal remains of a limb belonging to Nguyen Quang Hung, whom US forces brought to a field hospital in Phu Cat, Vietnam, in 1966. At that time, Nguyen was a twenty-six-year-old soldier in the North Vietnamese Army, close to dying from infection. Axelrad, then a twenty-seven-year-old physician working at the hospital, amputated Nguyen's right arm and helped save his life. After Axelrad finished, medics boiled the severed limb down to bones and reassembled them into a souvenir for the doctor. Upon returning to Texas to pursue a career in urology, Axelrad locked the keepsake away and did not handle it again until 2011, when he started planning his reunion with Nguyen.

According to an Associated Press story appearing in several publications including *USA Today*, Nguyen and Axelrad enjoyed their time together after a nearly fifty-year gap. The latter found some closure; the former was as surprised by the return of his arm as he was when US personnel treated him in 1966. Nguyen also said he was "proud to have shed blood for my country's reunification. I consider myself very lucky compared with many of my comrades who were killed or remain unaccounted for." His statement brings *gravitas* to an article that could have wound up in "weird news" sections of US newspapers. Despite its headline's awful pun, Mike Ives's report has a serious tone Nguyen underscores with a speech act that does three things unfamiliar to many US readers. He affirms Vietnam's revolution, mourns its human toll, and points to lack of closure on the Vietnamese side.

As an illustration of dis/embodied remembering, "Humerus Reunion" helps introduce this discussion of three recent and important books on the Vietnam War. Like Nguyen, authors Edwin A. Martini, Sylvia Shin Huey Chong, and William Thomas Allison care about the war's impact on Vietnamese bodies and Vietnam, the country. This contrasts with the memory work of too many US citizens, who have learned to recall and resent how the Vietnam War traumatized their country and its soldiers, to the exclusion of Vietnam's people, what they endured, and their continuing struggles. By making space for Nguyen's trauma and the victory he helped achieve, Ives's account suggests different and perhaps better possibilities for remembering. An elderly man who fought for a unified, self-determined Vietnam is present in experience, perspective, and voice. Readers should acknowledge what Nguyen says and what was done to his body. Yes, Axelrad upheld his profession's ethics by operating on Nguyen in 1966 and

did the right thing by returning his arm bones in 2013. But should those bones have been his souvenir in the first place? Should Axelrad have waited so long to make amends? I hope most readers, regardless of their views on the war, will be uncomfortable with the post-surgery actions of Axelrad and his staff. I also hope that US citizens, known for revering their military veterans, will follow Axelrad's example and show respect to Nguyen and his peers.

Maybe I am asking too much. Even though almost forty years have passed since the Vietnam War's end, the bodies, hearts, and minds of people like Nguyen may not matter to most American audiences. These spectators would probably prefer a bigger yet lighter story—about the trade partnership between Vietnam and the US, a bond where neoliberalism vows to heal old antagonisms (e.g., the grand opening of Vietnam's first McDonalds franchise in early 2014, with the son of the country's prime minister as its manager).² In this atmosphere, Nguyen's statement may have lost power to challenge, to inflame, and perhaps that is why Ives's editors allowed the quote to stand. Perhaps Nguyen was playing it safe, catering to Vietnam's political leaders by following an ideological script in a country whose human rights record is problematic at best. The range of possible, often mutually incompatible readings Nguyen's words generate should not diminish his agency as a speaking subject, however. American studies conversations need to account for the experiences that Nguyen and similar narrators make available.

“Waste doesn't go away, because there is no real ‘away’ in nature. Rather, waste is displaced and relocated; it circulates within a social ecology in which those with the privilege to flush are able to re-site undesirable byproducts in the bodies, landscapes, and neighborhoods of those who are themselves marked as undesirable and disposable.” —Marisol Cortez³

Edwin A. Martini's research for *Agent Orange: History, Science, and the Politics of Uncertainty* took him to many places, Vietnam foremost among them. His priorities did not, however, include the closure Sam Axelrad desired. The result is a book that feels like a definitive statement on its topic in some respects. In others, *Agent Orange* is a preliminary effort at identifying and perhaps solving intellectual puzzles with profound implications for the bodies of people not just in Vietnam and the US, but also in South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, and the Philippines, all of which sent troops to help keep the domino of South Vietnam from falling.

US forces unleashed a spectrum of “rainbow herbicides” in Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries during a ten-year period starting in 1961. In use from 1965 to 1971, Agent Orange was the most notorious color of that chemical palette. Similar to awareness of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which emerged in the war's late stages and took on momentum after its end, public recognition of Agent Orange's possible links to disease and disability was mostly

the product of postwar action and advocacy. Today, the belief that Agent Orange caused harm to US veterans is widespread and often expressed with uncritical certainty. A historian at Western Michigan University, Martini reminds readers that such claims were and still are contested. This is his second major Vietnam War study in the University of Massachusetts Press series “Culture, Politics, and the Cold War.” The first was 2007’s *Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam, 1975–2000*, a revision of Martini’s doctoral dissertation that examines how the US punished Vietnam for achieving its revolution and sought to control the war’s cultural damage at home. The books put Martini in the front ranks of Vietnam War historians at a relatively early career stage.

Impressive as that achievement is, Martini has aspirations to go further. His new book contributes to historical literatures on science, technology, and environmentalism. He points to David Zierler’s *Invention of Ecocide: Agent Orange, Vietnam, and the Scientists Who Changed the Way We Think about the Environment* (2011) and similar works as influences. Martini’s text also has affinities with Greg Grandin’s *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford’s Forgotten Jungle City* (2010) and David Kinkela’s *DDT and the American Century: Global Health, Environmental Politics, and the Pesticide that Changed the World* (2013), both of which chronicle US-based efforts at shaping regions of the global south and east.

Conversely, Martini complains about otherwise notable historical works on the Vietnam War by George Herring and Marilyn Young that pay little or no attention to Agent Orange (249–250n3). As to authors who do concentrate on Agent Orange, Martini faults many of their approaches and points to flawed works that fall into two categories. In the first are books that serve military and other institutional interests by defending their actions relevant to Agent Orange and by dismissing criticism of those actions. Books in the second category are “advocacy” sources that put agendas of individuals and groups with Agent Orange-based grievances ahead of “historical context” (3). For Martini, prioritizing that context defines his duty and that of his colleagues. Historians are at their best when they try to “contextualize and understand historical problems based on the evidence at hand” (15) and embrace the kind of inquiry that eschews “closure” (147).

His promise to avoid taking sides is admirable, but Martini chooses a difficult path for himself. Even if Martini has no agenda, he does have positions, such as his belief that the US should not have fought the Vietnam War. Martini also holds US political leaders and policymakers and their legatees accountable for decisions about Agent Orange. However, the historical contextualization and understanding Martini achieves raises questions about this accountability. Did the use of rainbow herbicides constitute chemical warfare in Southeast Asia? Are all or even most of the military personnel who claim Agent Orange damages truly its victims? Which was the more damaging practice, the spraying of Agent Orange or its storage at sites in Vietnam? What about the claims of the Vietnamese people, who have always fought the hardest for recognition and

whose numbers include many children, some of them orphans with congenital disabilities? Martini's answers to these and other questions will surprise and challenge many readers. More than a few will be angry.

The evidence Martini uses is not just "at hand"; it is the product of his goals and choices. As an especially volatile topic from a war that connotes controversy, Agent Orange presents daunting obligations to anyone making decisions about evidence sources and their uses. While I am not an expert on Agent Orange scholarship, Martini impresses me as someone who performs his tasks responsibly and skillfully. Consider Martini's transparency about why and how he gathered information from interviewees such as former military official Alvin L. Young. Martini describes Young as a polarizing but unfairly maligned figure who has produced invaluable Agent Orange research. Although he takes some of Young's critics seriously, Martini dismisses others for making Young a "monster" (251). Since I do not know this work I cannot evaluate Martini's charges, but his interviews with Young and his use of Young's archives in *Agent Orange* are superb. Future Agent Orange historians who exclude Young may have more to answer for than Martini does for defending him.

Martini's epistemological principles match the integrity of his research methods. His use of the "politics of uncertainty" as a critical tool stands out. The concept drives his argument about participants in debates over how Agent Orange was used, to what extent it harmed people and their environments, and what must take place to achieve justice (if not closure) for those with valid claims of grievance. Martini reframes these debates and revises their assumptions. A key passage finds Martini objecting to how "all sides" have constructed Agent Orange dialogues "within a model that relied on clear distinctions between individual human bodies and the surrounding environment that had been rendered increasingly problematic, if not obsolete, by a world in which humans, chemicals, and environments have become largely inseparable" (150). Citing David Zierler, Ulrich Beck, Bruno Latour, and Donna Haraway, Martini proposes a new model that recognizes local, regional, and global interrelationships and could help minimize politicized motives and pressures.

Martini's persuasiveness in offering an alternative for actors in Agent Orange dramas should impress most readers, but many will resist his skepticism about core principles of the anti-Agent Orange case. According to Martini, many US veterans who receive or are eligible to receive Agent Orange benefits had little or no herbicide exposure. Martini makes that point with an introductory vignette about a US veteran who served during the Vietnam era and was awarded compensation even though he spent only a few hours in Saigon's airport. An equal-opportunity skeptic, Martini charges Vietnamese officials and advocacy groups with overstating numbers of Vietnam's herbicide casualties. There is no proof, Martini insists, "that most of these people are victims of the chemical war" before assuring readers that his problem is with those doing the overstating and their political motives (15). "Neither history nor science can supply the kind of certainty to support or reject these claims," he admits, "but without some demonstrable

base of evidence grounded in historical and scientific documentation, the fates of victims of Agent Orange, in Vietnam and around the world, are even more likely to be driven by the ebbs and flows of politics and the resource flows that accompany them” (246). This is a powerful conclusion for a powerful book that will reach a predominantly academic audience. Martini will need to find readers outside that group to have the most impact and to make the most difference.

The arguments of *The Oriental Obscene: Violence and Racial Fantasies in the Vietnam Era* begin with the confrontational art on its front cover.⁴ A reproduction of a 2006 mixed-media work by Dinh Q. Lê titled *Doi Moi (Napalmed Girl)*, the image is well suited to the book’s exploration of a “set of fantasies that reveal the relation between suffering and violation, activity and passivity, and victimhood and victory in the politics of the Vietnam War” (10). *Doi Moi* is a seemingly chaotic work in which reds, yellows, whites, and blacks dominate and dance. However, these multicolored fragments are actually logos and labels from the packages of junk snacks and drinks. Lê has arranged these to re/present one of the Vietnam War’s most appalling scenes: photojournalist Huynh Cong Ut’s 1972 black and white freeze-frame of a group of refugees fleeing their incinerated village in what was then South Vietnam.

Shortly before Ut captured the image, which many call “Napalm Girl,” South Vietnamese pilots accidentally dropped napalm on the village. The naked body of Phan Thi Kim Phuc, then a nine-year-old girl, is not quite in the photo’s foreground, but it is central. Napalm’s effects had burned all the clothing from Kim Phuc’s body. She is screaming and running down a section of highway, her arms and mouth open wide in pain and bewilderment. To her right and left are fellow villagers joining Kim Phuc in escape, the language of their bodies communicating shock, agony, rage. Ut’s original photo captured this with clarity and immediacy that remain undiluted after more than forty years. Motion picture photographers were at the scene too, but their footage has had less circulation and impact than Ut’s still.

Lê is after something different in his revision of the photo. In *Doi Moi*, clarity gives way to confusion, disembodiment replaces physical presence, and the vivid colors of the fragments take on the appearance of shrapnel—perhaps the detritus of globalization, all but obscuring the forms of Kim Phuc and the other refugees. Regarding the work’s title, *Doi Moi* is not, as one might assume, Vietnamese for “napalmed girl.” Rather, *Doi Moi* are economic reforms that Vietnam’s government imposed during the 1980s in a move toward what some people in that country call “red capitalism”: the introduction of market economy elements while the communist party retains political control.⁵ As their country struggled under the weight of Soviet decline, US sanctions, and grinding poverty, Vietnam’s leaders had little choice but to seek alternatives to their nationalized command economy.

What Francis Fukuyama and like-minded observers hailed as the “end of history” has had peculiar consequences for Vietnam. Its history of resisting invasion, exploitation, and colonization, of surviving on its own terms, is the source

of great national pride. As the Cold War wound down and the Soviet Union, its main benefactor, moved toward collapse, Vietnam moved toward rapprochement with the US. Neoliberalism helped bring a US embassy back to Vietnam in 1995 during President Bill Clinton's first term. Some Vietnamese have benefited, but gaps between their country's prospering few and disadvantaged many are widening. In *Doi Moi* and many of his other works, Lê suggests that economic change has come at the expense of Vietnam's historical agents, who have been demoted in favor of mass marketing, reproduction, and consumption of goods filled with empty neoliberal calories.

Similar to Lê, Chong takes critical interest in the Ut photo. Her analysis of the picture is a representative passage in *The Oriental Obscene*, a book obsessed with images and dedicated to breaking new theoretical paths for reading them. An American Studies and English professor at the University of Virginia, Chong uses a chronological frame encompassing the late 1960s to the mid-1980s to "read the optical unconscious of the American imagined community" by surveying scenes of embodiment and trauma from television documentaries, Hollywood and Hong Kong cinema, photojournalism, and more (8). She also draws from theories of psychoanalysis and film to identify and interrogate connections between visual cultural texts and discourses of race, nation, and politics. The "violence and racial fantasies" noted in the book's title have everything to do with identities—Asian, Asian American, African American, and white.

Throughout the book, Chong's command of theory is wide ranging and deft. Gilles Deleuze and Jean Laplanche stand out, as shown by Chong's use of their ideas to analyze a mass of texts featuring diverse casts of creators and actors. Many of these are Hollywood movies by commercially and critically successful directors with transnational careers. To her credit, Chong finds new, provocative angles on several widely seen, exhaustively critiqued pictures. She also accounts for numerous movies that are less well known and from genres that often are taken less seriously. She adds a wonderful touch by reproducing part of the tome in "flipbook" image form on the edges of chapter five's pages, so that readers can thumb through them and see "Bruce Lee Fight Again!" (219–33).

My familiarity with several movies discussed here helped tremendously, as did my Vietnam War knowledge. Without these reference points, I would have found *The Oriental Obscene*'s theoretical waters hard to navigate. I came to the book with enough knowledge of Deleuze to be a competent reader, but none of Laplanche other than his name and his ties to Jacques Lacan. Readers whose background in these and other thinkers is stronger than mine will probably find *The Oriental Obscene* even richer than I do. Those who lack such knowledge should find Chong an alternately engaging and daunting guide. This is not an introductory text for those new to theory, but it could work well as a bracing initiation. Like so many advanced multidisciplinary texts that interpret popular culture, *The Oriental Obscene* is a bringing together—or collision—of the pleasures of the many and the expertise of a few.

Whether or not the book reaches multitudes, those who are ready for *The Oriental Obscene*'s challenges will find its rewards substantial and worth sharing. Scholars and teachers who value knowledge of the Vietnam War and its cultural significance should know Chong's work and account for it in their own. As a member of that audience, I am most impressed with *The Oriental Obscene*'s first three chapters and their fluency with narrating history through the interplay of theories and images. Chapter one zeroes in on the year 1968 as a "primal scene" with conflicts between African Americans and whites in its foreground (37). Photojournalistic documents of trauma and their implications for Asians and Asian Americans dominate chapter two. For chapter three, Chong goes to the movies: five major Hollywood productions of the late 1970s, a volatile time when the Vietnam War's aftermath made cinematic depictions of that conflict both bankable and risky.⁶ *The Oriental Obscene*'s fourth and fifth chapters bring martial arts films to the fore. This emphasis helps Chong develop an argument about how trauma was displaced from Asian and Asian American bodies onto those of Euro-American white male action movie stars such as Chuck Norris, who visited an imaginary Vietnam with a vengeance in *Missing in Action* (Joseph Zito, 1984) and *Missing in Action 2: The Beginning* (Lance Hool, 1985).⁷

Their respective bases in Laplanche and Deleuze make Chong's first two chapters most representative of her book's methods and arguments, and perhaps of its strengths and problems. Recognizing the cultural salience of the year 1968 for the US domestically and transnationally (with Vietnam central to both), Chong anchors her analysis of how 1968 is a "primal scene" in the fiction of David Morrell, who wrote the novel *First Blood* (1972) and created the Rambo character Sylvester Stallone embodied. Referring to Morrell's statement about how 1968's turmoil drove him to "bring the Vietnam War home" to America, Chong focuses on how Morrell read/recalled that year in a way that made it a primal scene (35–36). This Laplanchean concept describes a site of "privileged fantasy" that links "historical reality" and the "cultural imaginary" and that is characterized by "belatedness" and "afterwardness" (or, *nachträglichkeit*, the term Laplanche and Chong favor) (37). According to Chong, Morrell simply or not so simply misremembered many events of 1968 and mixed events from other years into his recollection. Along with his version of 1968, the cultural and historical settings for Morrell's act of fathering Rambo made the character a figure of triangulation—the product of relationships among black, Asian, and white identities. Chong makes her case by moving from Morrell's reflections to media coverage of uprisings in Detroit, to Muhammad Ali's defiance of the military draft, to the Black Panther Party's affirmation of the National Liberation Front, to the Chicago police riots of 1968, and to many more events and agents, and back again to Morrell.

The chapter maintains chronological coherence and works as historicized narrative while fusing theory and method in ways that do not bind Chong to linearity. This is a reading of relationships between and within texts and histories, traumas and memories, spectacles and witnesses, documentary and fiction, and

racialized and politicized subject positions. I have used *First Blood* in a course on the Vietnam War (along with oral histories in print and video forms, but with little attention to the Rambo movies, a deliberate choice of mine). Like Chong, I take keen interest in Morrell's story of why and how he told Rambo's story. Her use of the novel and its introduction (which Morrell added to a later edition of *First Blood*, after the movie series all but eclipsed the novel) as a platform for larger analyses is fascinating and persuasive and will help my research and teaching. Regardless of whether one wants to go as far with Laplanche as Chong does, chapter one's exploration of *nachträglichkeit* is more than appropriate to Vietnam war inquiry, and is especially relevant to constructions of US veterans' identities. In myriad ways and for better and worse, PTSD and Agent Orange have become default reference points in discussions of those identities.

Chong's interrogation of Morrell and his misreading of 1968 is strong, but her web of relationships connecting *First Blood* with various historical-cultural texts, events, and agents has weaknesses. Positioning herself in dialogue with other scholars who have evaluated Morrell's book and the Rambo phenomenon would help, but Chong does little of this. Although she considers audience reactions to African American public activism before and after the March on Washington with sharp attention to changing perceptions by white television viewers, Chong has nothing to say about initial receptions of *First Blood* or the reasons for and implications of its bestseller status. Her scrutiny of Morrell as someone whose interpretation of media coverage of 1968's turmoil had far-reaching cultural consequences leads to some of Chong's best analysis in chapter one. However, a corresponding effort to show whether or not Morrell's reactions resembled, differed from, or were even relevant to the reactions of larger audiences is lacking. Chong can also be problematic when referring to certain historical events. Her cursory look at Project 100,000, a program that took shape in the late months of John Kennedy's presidency and was overseen by Robert McNamara during the Lyndon Johnson years, is an example. Project 100,000 has been the subject of sporadic interest from scholars; in recent years, that interest has grown, leading to valuable studies. The program's goals and implementation reveal much about roles of race, class, disability, and standardized testing in the US military. While it is encouraging that Chong mentions Project 100,000 in her comments on Muhammad Ali, she should have given readers more—if not in the main text, then at least in her endnotes, which refer to very little of the literature on the program (65, 294n85).

A pattern of overstatement and generalization also hurts some parts of the chapter. Describing early network news video footage of southern civil rights demonstrations, Chong states that the bodies of black people exhibit a "complete visual passivity . . . before the camera" (56, my emphasis). Later, Chong calls public opinion backlashes against black power activists and members of the mostly white anti-Vietnam War movement "the same." The judgment is dubious at best. First, readers cannot be sure whether Chong is describing the backlash in qualitative or quantitative terms. Second, it is unlikely there could have been

backlashes against these groups, unless there is evidence that a critical mass of US citizens backed black power and the radical antiwar movement in the first place. Third, Chong falls short of fairness (and perhaps facts) when asserting that desires to be “saviors” led whites to get involved in the civil rights movement. I am sure this was true for some (probably too many) whites, but I need to know how Chong knows it was true. Even so, whites with that attitude must have found themselves disabused of their sanctimony when training with organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. The need for a critical memory of white participation in the African American freedom struggle is vital and the same goes for the struggle itself. But sweeping generalizations are no way to achieve that goal, especially when they are more cynical than critical.

With her Deleuzian analysis of three photojournalistic texts known for their global reproduction and circulation, their harrowing depictions of war’s violence, and their foregrounding of Vietnamese bodies, Chong shifts her focus from black-white to Asian/Asian-American-white conflict. This is her occasion for introducing the “conjunction [that] epitomizes the oriental obscene” (77). Many spectators inside and beyond the US geographic borders will recognize these pictures, which exist in still and motion forms, as images that sum up the Vietnam War. That recognition crosses many generational, experiential, ideological, and educational boundaries. First, there is Eddie Adams’s “Saigon Execution,” in which Nguyen Ngoc Loan, onetime South Vietnamese police official and later a restaurant owner in Virginia, shoots a still-unnamed National Liberation Front prisoner in the head during the 1968 Tet Offensive. Next comes one of many photos that Ronald Haeberle took while covering the My Lai massacre, also in 1968: a heap of entangled civilian corpses, just a few of the villagers US soldiers exterminated *en masse*. Last is “Napalm Girl,” the 1972 image discussed earlier.

What could be left to say about this “trptych of iconic images” (77)? Chong pushes us to consider that the race of the depicted victims makes the violence in the photos visible, and that violence does the same thing for the victims’ race. These are not, Chong contends, the “photos that lost the war,” as some observers who blame media organizations and individual journalists for the US debacle in Vietnam charge. She goes further with an incisive point—no photos of wartime violence are inherently antiwar—and rejects the idea that the photos are typical visual documentations of the Vietnam War (76). Citing Marita Sturken, Chong explains that the “foregrounding of race and violence” in the three images was rare (77). This leads into an argument about what the photos do and do not do, and about relationships between the photos and their viewers. I will limit my discussion to Chong’s observations on “Napalm Girl,” which became the focus of “healing” responses that “prematurely and falsely [suture] a historical wound that ought to remain open to the larger implications of our culpability in the violence of war” (113).

Chong does not really defend this point; rather, she illustrates it with references to a wide range of other texts and contexts, an approach similar to her method in chapter one. Again, the results are mixed. Parallels that Chong finds

between the content of “Napalm Girl” and photos of Thich Quang Duc’s ritual public suicide in 1963 in Saigon are not adequately explained. Yes, both events involved fire and trauma in Vietnam, but their images are separated by nine years, by the depiction of a meticulously planned suicide versus the depiction of a botched bombing raid’s aftermath, by the victims’ gender and age differences, and by more. Chong seems to be on firmer footing when calling attention to how Ngo Dinh Nhu (better known as “Madame Nhu” and often as South Vietnam’s “Dragon Lady”) responded to the 1963 photo and what General William Westmoreland said about the 1972 image. However, even though their remarks were similarly childish and cruel, they are not what these visual texts represent.

The bulk of Chong’s case is devoted to showing how four would-be agents—three of them US veterans who served in Vietnam, and Kim Phuc herself as the fourth—interact with the photo. Their relationships to “Napalm Girl” lend credence to Deleuze’s “critique of the action-image [that] warns us of the inadequacy of action-based narratives to account for these traumatic events” (125). These viewers personalize (or try to personalize) the trauma that “Napalm Girl” depicts, but their efforts are misguided. Instead, Chong calls for that trauma to be historicized and politicized so it will become part of a “more complex story about collective responsibility for the dispersed actions of modern warfare” (123). Although Chong does not suggest ways of pursuing this goal, and while the probability of achieving it does not seem high, it is a worthy alternative. As to the problems of “personalizing” the “Napalm Girl” text, I see Kim Phuc’s relationship with the picture differently and more positively than Chong does. I also want to separate it from what the veterans do and say. However, this reservation and others do not keep me from recognizing Chong’s case as a formidable one, or from valuing her book as a contribution to scholarship on the Vietnam War’s visual cultural texts, as a stimulus for American and Asian American studies, and as a potentially transformative achievement in critical theory and practice.

“By God, we’ve finally kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all.” —George H. W. Bush⁸

“Something called ‘The Vietnam War’ (more accurately, ‘The Indochina War’) approaches the state of permanent national affliction.” —Robert Jay Lifton⁹

With his declaration of a double victory over Iraq and the foreign policy legacies of Vietnam in the waning days of 1991’s Operation Desert Storm, George H. W. Bush failed to erase other definitions of “Vietnam syndrome.” For political leaders like Bush and Henry Kissinger, who may have been the first to use the term, the Vietnam syndrome was about remembering the war in ways that would discourage future acts of US militarism. By contrast, counselors working with US veterans of the Vietnam–US war in the late 1960s and early 1970s used “Vietnam syndrome” and then “post-Vietnam syndrome” in reference to

symptoms now known as PTSD. To close this essay and introduce its last book, I offer a Vietnam syndrome definition that has more in common with the clinical than the political version. Bush's rhetoric tried to make the Vietnam syndrome a national disability that needed overcoming, an occasion for rehabilitation through new world ordering.

On the contrary—America's Vietnam syndrome is a chronic illness its citizens must manage, an enduring condition with pedagogical value. One of its major symptoms is refusal to see that the US inflicted trauma and terror on the people of Vietnam and Southeast Asia in the name of idealism, of theories of dominoes and modernization, of appeals to hearts and minds, and of desires for peace with honor. One way to address this symptom and others is to replace lack of awareness with recognition of collective responsibility for a war in which atrocities were the rule and not the exception—predictable outcomes of exceptionalist logics, acts that were shocking but not truly surprising. The My Lai massacre of 1968 remains emblematic of such acts, thanks in part to large bodies of academic and general literature. These texts are opportunities for readers to do work that facilitates American accountability and questions exceptionalism. William Thomas Allison understands the importance of such activity and encourages it in his brief but thorough and valuable new book.

My Lai: An American Atrocity in the Vietnam War is the latest entry in the "Witness to History" series published by Johns Hopkins University Press. The text brings a twentieth-century dimension to a series that has, until now, limited its scope to King Philip's War, Preston Brooks' cane attack on Charles Sumner, the victories of the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Northern Arapaho nations over the US Seventh Cavalry at the Little Bighorn River, and similarly pivotal events. The editors' selection of the April 1968 My Lai massacre as a more recent watershed serves readers well, as does their choice of Allison. This prolific author is a history professor at Georgia Southern University, whose works include *Military Justice in Vietnam: The Rule of Law in an American War* (2006). In *My Lai*, Allison puts his expertise to superb use when detailing post-massacre investigations and discoveries, and on the courtrooms where US Army Lieutenant William L. Calley, Jr., and others stood accused. Thus, *My Lai* is a compelling case study in more ways than one.

The book reaches out primarily but not exclusively to undergraduate audiences who need, or whose teachers want them to have, an introduction to My Lai. Allison supplies before-, during-, and after-the-event contexts necessary to such a project, but the courts martial hearings interest him most and provide the most compelling reading. These are reconstructed in economical, well-paced prose that should engage most readers. Allison's characterization of Calley is memorable—he disdains this man who "personified the popular cultural stereotype of the incompetent lieutenant in Vietnam," but he also makes it clear that Calley reached a position of authority because of the war's circumstances, the questionable judgments of recruiters and superiors, and the functions of military bureaucracy (21–22).

Unlike *The Oriental Obscene*, which also gives attention to My Lai but in a starkly different context, Allison's book breaks no new theoretical ground. Nor does Allison complicate and expand the scope of his topic's inquiry, as Martini does in *Agent Orange*. However, judged according to its own goals and on its own terms, *My Lai* comes close to equaling those books in significance. Allison has the potential to reach a wide audience with the message that My Lai still matters and must continue to matter. Professionally and personally, sharing that message is one of my priorities. If my classroom experience of teaching about the Vietnam–US war during the last two decades is typical, I can say that lack of knowledge about that conflict is widespread among undergraduates. Fortunately, most students are eager to learn about the war, which entails facing up to My Lai. Allison's work will be a resource for me in the future, and not just for its subject. He is a careful writer who grounds his narrative in archival research that puts court records, contemporary press accounts, and other primary sources to deft use. Along with the book's back matter (a timeline, endnotes, and a strong bibliographic essay), these fundamentals make *My Lai* an effective example for students learning the discipline of scholarly inquiry.

Unfortunately, Allison does not address My Lai's racialized antecedents and implications or find space for Vietnamese voices. To compensate, teachers need to combine Allison's book with other sources, notably the documentary film on My Lai that the Public Broadcasting Service produced for its American Experience series in 2010. They should also provide information on how some US veterans are working with residents of My Lai and other Vietnamese communities to improve local facilities and services. Such pedagogy will help students contextualize what they will struggle to fathom—that American troops could kill civilians deliberately, sometimes sadistically.

Students will also learn how other American soldiers—Lawrence Colburn and the late Hugh Thompson, whose names should be at least as well known as Calley's—stopped some of the carnage at My Lai, saved Vietnamese lives, and brought these war crimes to the attention of an American public that often reacted in polarized ways. Some used their outrage as motivation to work for peace. Others chose to celebrate Calley's acts and denounce his critics. Allison uses the words of New Orleans resident Hildegard Crochet as the epigraph for one of My Lai's chapters: "He's been crucified. Lieutenant Calley killed 100 Communists single-handed. He should get a medal. He should be promoted to general" (95). Knowing the spectrum of responses to My Lai is crucial to understanding the roles of language and stories in shaping Vietnam War memories. In a variety of compelling ways, the books discussed here illustrate the urgency of that understanding, providing an invaluable service for generations of readers who are coming of age during times of new world ordering and global wars on terror.

Notes

1. Associated Press (Mike Ives), "Humerus Reunion: Doc returns Vietnamese veteran's arm," *USA Today*, July 1, 2013, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2013/07/01/doc-returns-vets-arm/2478599/>. Although Mike Ives's name does not appear in the byline for this news story as published in *USA Today*, he is listed as its author in other sources, some of which ran the story in edited versions.
2. "McDonald's opens first outlet in Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh," *BBC News Asia*, February 8, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-26101009>.
3. Marisol Cortez, personal communication, September 8, 2013.
4. Chong opts for "oriental" over "Asian" in her book for polemical reasons: "I wish to rework Edward Said's notions of orientalism to apply to the American contexts and to distance the image of Asia and Asians produced in these texts from any strict reference to actual Asians and Asian nations" (iv). Moreover, Chong chooses not to capitalize "oriental" and "orientalism," citing the influence of Lisa Lowe and an emphasis on "multiplicity and heterogeneity" of the terms' referents (ibid.).
5. I first heard the "red capitalist" term in conversations with Vietnamese people when I visited Vietnam in 1995 and spent one month there. One of my hosts offered an illustration of the changes by pointing to the construction of a high-rise luxury hotel in Ho Chi Minh City and telling me that the hotel's owner was once a member of the National Liberation Front (better known as the Viet Cong).
6. The five pictures are 1978's *Coming Home* (Hal Ashby), *The Boys in Company C* (Sidney Furie), *Go Tell the Spartans* (Ted Post), and *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino) and 1979's *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Coppola).
7. These include martial arts genre films: *Deep Thrust—Hand of Death* (Huang Feng, 1972), *The Street Fighter* (Ozawa Shigehiro, 1974), *They Call Me Bruce?* (Elliott Hong, 1982), and Bruce Lee's cinematic oeuvre. *Bruce Lee: The Man Only I Knew*, a 1975 biography of the icon by his spouse Linda Lee, is also a topic of Chong's analysis.
8. Quoted in Harvard Sitikoff, "The Postwar Impact of Vietnam," *Modern American Poetry*, www.english.illinois.edu/maps/vietnam/postwar.htm.
9. Robert Jay Lifton, *Home from the War: Learning from Vietnam Veterans*, 4th ed. (New York: Other Press, 2005): 15.