Diasporic South Vietnam: Pacifist Nationalism and Its Militant Shadow
in Ly Tho Ho’s Novel Sequence

Note: This paper is an excerpt of a chapter from my dissertation entitled “Rewriting Vietnam: Forms of Nationhood in Diasporic Literature,” which examines diasporic Vietnamese novels published in the United States and France after the Vietnam War. The project stakes the claim that these texts rewrite Vietnam’s historical alignments and modes of national identification. My chapter contains two sections of textual analysis, as stated in the introductory section. Due to length constraint for the workshop, however, I include only one section here.

In a 2015 PBS documentary called Terror in Little Saigon, journalist A. C. Thompson investigates a series of unsolved assassinations in the 1980s and 90s of Vietnamese American journalists who wrote for Vietnamese-language newspapers in the U.S. It was a matter of ingroup conflict: while alive, the reporters all openly criticized the National United Front, a group allegedly consisting of elite members of the former Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) who tried to mobilize a force against the Communist takeover of their homeland. The murders were ugly reminders of the Vietnam War, which Americans now tend to view with a mix of indifference, confusion, or shame. Connecting some rather blurry dots, Thompson suggests that the CIA and the FBI patched over the murders and the U.S. government might have funded the Front’s military enterprise—a journalistic skepticism honed by the Pentagon Papers. The Front
would not tolerate dissent, according to Thompson, and the journalists paid their lives for their words. Domestic terrorism ran unchecked under the authorities’ nose within South Vietnamese communities across the U.S., and these people were so afraid that they dared not speak about the Front’s alleged assassination team. As the film demonstrates, in the half century since the Vietnam War, the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), more commonly known as South Vietnam, has remarkably transformed, from America’s best hope for containment against communism in Asia, into ethnic cesspools of political intrigue and conspiracy in the U.S. Behind the murder mystery lies a dark force inscrutable to the U.S. public, and Thompson at one point finds himself in a Thai jungle searching for the truth, Willard-like in an uncanny reenactment of *Apocalypse Now*. What is this unknown quality so menacing to the American journalist that he must speak of it in the language of terror? What other nuances are there in diasporic South Vietnamese cultural, historical, and political existence aside from *Terror in Little Saigon*’s depictions of manic criminality and silent grief?

While the figure of the Vietnamese refugee in the U.S. brings up the devastating images of the war, the country from which they escaped is rather elusive in popular discourse, especially when their “Vietnam” is not the same as the unified Vietnam after the war. The seed for the Republic of Vietnam was sown when Vietnam tried to shake off French colonialism in the middle of the last century. In 1949, France created the State of Vietnam (SVN) as part of the French Union—the colonial power’s last effort to hang onto Indochina as Ho Chi Minh pushed relentlessly for non-negotiable independence.¹ The Vietnamese emperor Bao Dai became the head of state in what is known as the Bao Dai solution spelled out in the Elysée Accords (Miller,

¹ France’s attempt to compromise with the indigenous call for more autonomy in Indochina began in the 1930s. See Brocheux and Hémery 322–24.
When China and Russia officially recognized the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in 1950, the U.S. and Britain pledged their support to the SVN (Bradley 56). After the Battle of Dien Bien Phu decisively pried apart France’s last grasp on Indochina in 1954, Bao Dai had to accept his own incompetence as governor and asked the prominent anti-French, anti-communist leader Ngo Dinh Diem to become the prime minister of the SVN (Miller, *Misalliance* 51, Jacobs 54). Both the DRV and the SVN saw their territories changed overnight with the Geneva Accords, which separated the two states at the seventeenth parallel and plunged them into the global Cold War. Diem spent the next year consolidating his government’s power by squashing competing factions in the Mekong Delta. On October 26, 1955, Diem, who was vehemently anti-French, moved the SVN out of French Union after a successful plebiscite against the weak-willed emperor and established the first constitutional Republic of Vietnam (RVN) with himself as its president (Bradley 83, Jacobs 224–25). Thus began the second independent, postcolonial state in Vietnam competing for noncommunist sovereignty over a unified nation. The RVN would have to weather incessant political storms from both its northern enemy and American ally. Diem’s recalcitrant attitude against U.S. dictates led to his assassination in 1963, which ushered in a chaotic period of military rule (1963–67), followed by a second constitutional presidency under Nguyen Van Thieu (the Second Republic 1967–75) (Taylor, *Voices* 3–4). The escalation of U.S. military involvement in 1965, the subsequent “Vietnamization” of the war later in the decade, and the Paris Peace Accords of 1973 would punctuate the RVN’s decline over a decade, culminating in the Communist takeover of the capital on April 30, 1975.

Considering that the RVN’s blueprint was a French design and that its entire existence thoroughly relied on U.S. economic and military aid, to speak of South Vietnamese nationalism
is to go against the deeply held assumption in decades of historiographies on the Vietnam War. Until recently, the RVN has been understood as a puppet state run by lackluster lackeys, nothing more than a product of French and American alliance against communism in Asia. From this perspective, there was no real nationalism in such a state—if it could even be considered that—because it was not established by the people for the people. Historian Seth Jacobs, for example, dismisses the RVN as “little more than a piece of real estate south of the 17th parallel” that “lacked almost totally the sense of ‘imagined community’ that Benedict Anderson deems essential to nationhood” (175). This is not a singular statement by one historian; the question of South Vietnam is at the center of the recent, rancorous rift among Vietnam War historians, splitting them into two camps: the so-called traditionalists, who view South Vietnam as a makeshift project abetting shameful U.S. militaristic imperialism, and revisionists, who argue that the U.S. was correct to defend the RVN as the best hope not only for the country but for the region against the communist domino effect.\(^2\) James Carter, for example, refuses to utter the proper noun “South Vietnam” and prefers to use the phrase “southern Vietnam” (13) to register his firm belief that the RVN was a failed American invention, “a fundamentally unstable client regime” (150). On the other hand, Andrew Wiest’s, Keith Taylor’s, and Nathalie Nguyen’s studies of former RVN citizens and soldiers insist that the ARVN fought valiantly for their flag.

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\(^2\) The debate began as a feud between historians Robert Buzzanco and Keith Taylor in which the former caustically critiques the latter and his ilk for revising the Vietnam War as a noble cause (“How I Learned to Quit Worrying”), to which Taylor, who had earlier claimed that he would stop teaching a Vietnam War as a mistake (“How I Began to Teach”), responded by accusing Buzzanco of arguing with more emotion than evidence (“Robert Buzzanco”). This debate was kicked into high gear with the 2006 publication of Mark Moyar’s *Triumph Forsaken*, an unapologetic defense of U.S. policy and military escalation in Vietnam. The book sent powerful shock waves through the field of U.S. diplomacy studies. Carter’s *Inventing Vietnam* (2008) was a clear reaction to Moyar’s book, and prominent historians of the war subsequently put forth their reviews in the 2010 collection *Triumph Revisited*. 
and the refugees’ deep grief over the loss of their homeland cannot be explained away as mass hysteria. Each viewpoint carries serious implications, as its opposing camp quickly points out: Declaring that the RVN is a puppet state means uncritically taking the Northern regime as the sole legitimate state and ignoring its wartime dependence on China and the U.S.S.R., oppressive policies to squelch dissent, and continuing violations of human rights (Taylor, “Robert Buzzanco” 439, 447). Styling South Vietnam a lost cause, however, risks justifying U.S. military interventions around the world and perpetuating the destructive ideology of Manifest Destiny (Chapman 113). Whichever side of the debate one favors, it is clear that, since the Vietnam War discourse entered the twenty-first century, South Vietnam had led the cutting edge.³

To begin understanding South Vietnamese nationalism, one must challenge the essentialist thinking when it comes to Vietnam’s postcolonial Cold War national development. That is to say, the civil war was not a competition of nationalist thoughts as faits accomplis, and cultural “authenticity” was never the yardstick of success. Rather, upon decolonization, Vietnam was an open field of nationalist experiments; both Hanoi and Saigon regimes suppressed other alternatives and warred with each other to proclaim “true” nationalism. Nationalism in the South—as in the North—was an evolving phenomenon, shifting with unexpected political tides.⁴

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³ Although South Vietnam is becoming a more serious topic of discussion, it still serves mostly as a proxy to the question of whether or not American involvement was justified. In Edward Miller’s perceptive words, “The sound and the fury of the clashes between the proponents of orthodoxy and revisionism have sometimes obscured a simple but important historiographical fact: the debate between these two schools has been, a root, a debate about the United States and about Americans” (“Ngo Dinh Diem” 195). Nevertheless, several scholars of Vietnamese studies are paying closer attention to South Vietnamese cultural politics and revising some hardened assumptions such as Vietnamese Catholics’ complicity with the Diem government. See Chu, Hansen, Nguyen-Marshall, and L. Tran.
⁴ The necessary incoherence and sometimes ambivalence of nationalist development in the North is perhaps the reason why there cannot be an agreement on whether Ho Chi Minh was more communist than nationalist.
Though RVN state-making policies and diplomacy have received some overdue attention in recent both traditionalist and revisionist accounts, the more nebulous phenomenon of South Vietnamese nationalism exceeds current historical frames. Yet, following Odd Arne Westad’s insight that the Vietnam War was a competition between Vietnamese nationalists who espoused “two opposing versions of European modernist thought” (4), one should appreciate better that there is nothing essentially Vietnamese in either Northern communism or its Southern rival, noncommunist personalism (nhan vi). Communist and capitalistic democracy only happened to

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5 In the essay that sparked the historians’ wrangle, Robert Buzzanco mounts a widely accepted criterion: “‘Nationhood,’” he declares, “involves more than a titular head of state and an army; it involves consensus, sovereignty, development, international legitimacy and other defining criteria, and southern Vietnam lacked that essential ‘stuff’ so the U.S. had to try to invent it, with results that were really not surprising to those who were involved in Vietnam decisions at the time” (“How I Learned”). In order for South Vietnam to claim nationhood, there must be proof of some “essential ‘stuff’” beyond the usual government and military business. In Buzzanco’s eyes, the RVN lacks a nationalist core, and when one digs through all the state’s trappings, one sees only American plastic and concrete. Carter, who completed his doctorate under Buzzanco’s direction, elaborates this point in his book *Inventing Vietnam* (2008), which shows in great detail how the U.S. funded all infrastructure projects and sustained the entire economy south of the seventeenth parallel. Miller, to date the foremost expert on the First Republic, has responded to Buzzanco’s charge, but only in kind: “Did Britain, France, and other states of Western Europe become less real after they received Marshall Plan aid? At what point does foreign aid transform a real state into one that is not real?” (“War Stories” 466). The debate on RVN “nation-ness,” “the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time” (Anderson 3) that Hanoi has consistently denied Southerners, so far has reached an impasse, and it has become a matter of academic preference. For example, in the editorial introduction to his collection of South Vietnamese anecdotes, Taylor goes so far as to pitch Vietnamese Nationalism (capital N) in the South against Communism (capital C) in the North, asserting that true nationalism was in the South’s possession.

6 Personalism, “the guiding ideal behind the South Vietnamese state” (Bradley 85), in Miller’s description, “offered a ‘third path’ to social development that was neither liberal nor communist” (Misalliance 44). As the philosophy’s most well-known proponent Emmanuel Mounier—the main source for Diem and other Vietnamese personalists—explains, “In questions of the collective life, personalism always gives the techniques of education and persuasion priority over the techniques of enforcement, diplomacy or deception; for man only works well when he is working with the whole of himself. … Totalitarian methods proceed from the impatience of the powerful” (42). The personalist creed manifests in Diem’s definition of democracy: “Democracy is essentially a permanent effort to find the right political means in order to assure to all citizens the right of free development and of maximum initiative, responsibility, and spiritual life” (qtd.
be the strongest currents of thought that swept anti-colonialists the world over through most of the twentieth century. Furthermore, Benedict Anderson has argued that “nationality, or, as one might prefer to put it in view of that word’s multiple signification, nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind”; they emerged in eighteenth-century Europe and were subsequently “transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations” (4). The Western-educated Vietnamese anti-colonialists, Ho Chi Minh and Ngo Dinh Diem most important among them, all agreed that French colonialism must end, and they were eager to experiment with ideas they read about in foreign books or found in Europe while navigating the rough waters of realpolitik. Northern and Southern nationalisms were indeed malleable. In her study of Chính Luận, the longest-running Vietnamese-language daily in Saigon, Nu-Anh Tran concludes: “Identity in the Republic of Vietnam was … hemmed in ethnically by Americans and politically and ideologically by both the communist North and southern insurgents,” and Southern nationalism was forged out of “the cramped space between these two opposing groups” (N-A. Tran 196–97). Lien-Hang Nguyen, in Moyar 75). Scholars disagree on whether or not the RVN elite fully appreciated and tried in good faith to put personalism into practice, but, more relevant to this study, Diem’s selection of this philosophy over, say, Adam Smith’s The Wealth of Nations or the Mont Pelerin Society’s instructions shows that the RVN from its inception never toed the line of U.S. neoliberal capitalism. As he said in 1960, “Both, the free capitalist and the forced Communist, solutions have achieved great industrial progress, but both, especially the Communist solution, have inflicted great damage on man. / Realizing this fact, the most advanced elements of mankind are seeking a third solution capable of quickly achieving the industrial revolution without the evil consequences of the two above” (qtd. in Donnell 39). Diem’s effort to translate personalism—a French Catholic intellectual project at the dawn of the twentieth century—to the postcolonial Vietnamese context captured his continual grappling with the country’s colonial past, the centrality of the Catholic faith in his statesmanship, and a desire to steer his country away from both communist collectivism and capitalist individualism. For more on personalism in South Vietnam, see Donnell; Miller, Misalliance 43–47; Moyar 35–37; and Catton.
other the other hand, has shown that Hanoi had to modify its nationalist thought, rhetoric, and strategy depending on the uncertainties of the Sino–Soviet split (41–42). Rather than monoliths, Vietnamese nationalisms were porous and agile. One may view the Vietnamese civil war as a grand and devastating laboratory of governance forms in the nation-state paradigm after the colonial era; two of these forms quickly became dominant with fuel of foreign support, and their articulations of nation-ness coagulated only through direct competition.

To capture South Vietnamese nationalism, diasporic literature seems a counterintuitive subject of study because it disobeys the RVN’s geographical and historical boundaries (south of the seventeenth parallel 1954–75), but one finds precisely in this ironic choice a vigorous and complex national consciousness that is beyond the formation of the state itself. That the rise of the realist novel coincides with emergence of the modern nation-state is now common knowledge (Anderson 25–26), but for a state so short-lived under constant wartime censorship as South Vietnam, nationalism in fiction forms had a hard time finds its emergence within the country and became virtually impossible after the state collapsed in 1975. In the 1980s, Vo Phien, a respected South Vietnamese writer and critic who lived in exile in Southern California, compiled *Southern Literature: A Survey (Van Hoc Mien Nam: Tong Quan)*, a laborious and ambitious four-volume anthology of South Vietnamese literary works of all genres from 1954 to 1975.8 “Southern literature 1954–75 receives no critical attention; it is being destroyed,” Vo

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7 For more on Vo’s life and work, see Schafer.
8 All translations from Vo’s work are mine. Though written in Vietnamese and published by a Vietnamese American press in Southern California, the project was funded by the Ford Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Henry Luce Foundation through the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies. The first volume contains rich information about the writers, readership, publishing conditions, cultural and social contexts, and broad sketches of literary features. It divides the state’s existence into two parts: 1954–63, from decolonization through the First Republic, and 1963–75, from the junta rule to the end of the Second Republic. The volume then broadly sketches of the
Phien explains his intervention; this dismantling has happened not only physically with Hanoi’s ban list and police confiscations but also with the Party’s actively substituting RVN literary legacy with an approved “Southern liberation literature,” or Communist-leaning works (26). Vo Phien sees himself as the exiled guardian of a bygone culture eroded by the state. Importantly, he insists on the exceptionalism of the RVN’s 1954–75 periodization: “After 1975, some of us continued to write abroad, some continued to write quietly in the country, some wrote stealthily in prison, and some collaborated with the new regime. This is an absolutely distinct era, which, with its own complexities, deserves its own study; it cannot be considered a supplement to the 1954–75 period” (30). The critic’s exceptionalist frame can be excused for his nostalgic attachment to a lost homeland, but of particular interest here is Vo Phien’s diasporic nationalism that drove him to complete the arduous task of canonizing South Vietnamese literature. The irony is clear: the canon of RVN literature does not derive from the nation-state as is the case for almost every other country; it results instead from a diasporic look to an in-country past radically broken from the exilic present. To put it simply, by embarking on his project, Vo Phien already made a compelling case for why diasporic literary enterprises are important to understanding South Vietnamese nationalism.

Diasporic South Vietnamese literature rejects any assumption of a unilateral, outward movement of ideas from Vietnam to the overseas; instead, it follows a distinct lineage and provides a discursive space that moves simultaneously back to the homeland and out into the larger world.⁹ In a study that takes up this issue of nationalism in South Vietnamese and

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⁹ According to Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur, one big contribution of diaspora theory is that it offers “ways out of the trappings of this hierarchical construct of nation and diaspora,” which would cast diasporic subjects as “imitations of real citizens in the home state” (8). In this
diasporic literature, Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong declares that South Vietnam was “a nation experiencing the loss of the promise of collective sovereignty, and thus the loss of the life force itself” (10), to wit, the same viewpoint that traditionalist historians occupy. While Nguyen-Vo acknowledges the “historical interruption” of April 30, 1975, she nonetheless insists that there is a thematic continuation in works from South Vietnam to the diaspora “in that they make possible subject positions in a necessarily spectral nation” (7), with “spectral” indexing the state’s lack of “organic” authenticity (4–5). Nguyen-Vo in effect rebuts Vo Phien’s insistence on the absolute literary break between the state and its postwar diaspora. Both critics, however, fold together chronology and geography by assuming that the diaspora only began after the war. Against this loss-leaning mode of analysis awash with prophetic doom, I posit that diasporic South Vietnamese literature written in English and French and published abroad in fact belongs to a writing tradition that has produced some celebrated texts of Vietnamese anti-colonial nationalism, such as Phan Boi Chau’s *History of the Loss of Vietnam (Viet Nam vong quoc su)* (1905), written in Chinese while Phan lived in Japan, and Nguyen Ai Quoc’s *The French Colonial Process (Le Procès de la colonisation française)*, written in French while Nguyen—later Ho Chi Minh—was in Paris. This tradition preceded independent Vietnam and outlives the civil war. Overseas, Vietnamese nationalists of all stripes have produced texts that contain ideas considered scandalous and seditious by ruling regimes in-country, French or indigenous, northern or southern. Writing in foreign languages, the writers reach audiences beyond their compatriots. In this sense, their works contain a double consciousness: speaking to the domestic elite who can access the texts and to the world on behalf of their country. Conscious that South

sense, they conclude, “diaspora forces us to rethink the rubrics of nation and nationalism, while refiguring the relations of citizens and nation-states” (7).
Vietnam began as a French construction and subsequently stayed on U.S. life support, South Vietnamese overseas know too well the charge of being stooges to foreigners. Their literature provides an opportunity for self-representation and even national defense, countering Hanoi’s worldwide propaganda in the West. Despite its generally anticommunist sentiments, this literature is not an extended arm of the Saigon government. On the contrary, writing abroad allows for freedom of ideas unacceptable to both wartime regimes and to the current one in power. Diasporic literature, then, while enveloped in the politics of the Cold–civil war, has a political autonomy that makes it, to use Vo Phien’s remark mentioned before, not a supplement. Indeed, this literature moves beyond the codified ideas in both North and South as well as reveals a remarkable degree of heterogeneity in nationalist thought.

The following analysis looks closely at two prime examples of diasporic South Vietnamese fiction with their own versions of literary nationalism. Both novel sequences deal directly with the political strife of the RVN and its post-state affect.\(^\text{10}\) The first is the untranslated trilogy by French Vietnamese novelist Ly Thu Ho: *Bereft Springtime* (*Printemps inachevé*, 1962), *At the Crossroads* (*Au milieu du carrefour*, 1969), and *The Illusion of Peace* (*Le Mirage de la paix*, 1986).\(^\text{11}\) The second series is the duology by Vietnamese American author Lan Cao: *Monkey Bridge* (1997) and *The Lotus and the Storm* (2014). Despite the authors’ different novelistic aesthetics and linguistic audiences, their texts match well together in a critical frame as they represent and interpret the strife of the RVN in its glory and with all its irredeemable faults.

\(^\text{10}\) Their explicit engagements with matters of the nation-state also set them apart from other diasporic Vietnamese works in English and French, which for the most part depict the difficulty of the refugees’ flight, pain of losing their homeland, and the complexity of starting new lives on foreign lands.

\(^\text{11}\) All translations from Ly’s novels, including their titles, are mine. For convenience, I use the translated titles in the rest of the chapter.
Strung on a chronological timeline, the five novels, whose publication dates range over fifty years from the early 1960s to the early 2010s, cover the story of the southern state from its prehistory in the 1940s to its contemporary diaspora. Each author employs the sequence structure for her novels not only to show her characters’ and their country’s development through the decades but also to rework preceding ideas as history unfolds. Occupying that uncertain terrain called diaspora, these texts are national narratives outside the nation, nested in the literary worlds of France and the U.S. at the risk of misapprehension and perpetual marginalization. While they partake in a similar project in different times, places, and languages, each author deploys particular novelistic conventions to present her own take on diasporic Southern nationalism. Ly writes in the traditional realist mode, which gives a wide-angle view of difficult social problems to be dissected and resolved, satisfactorily or not, through characters’ personal developments and relationships to one another. Narrative resolutions then carry the potentiality of peace in Ly’s writerly conscience, and her three novels are successive attempts to promote a Southern nationalism with a pacifist intent. On the other hand, Cao’s novels, with their stories of post–1975 refugee resettlement in the U.S., rest uncomfortably within the tradition of American immigrant narratives. Subverting the immigrant’s narrative convention through a gothic lens, Cao portrays immigrants who, racked with the trauma of war loss, either refuse or cannot be saved by the American Dream. Instead, they continue to murmur the story of South Vietnam to their young, sowing the narrative seeds that grow into tenacious vines binding the next generation in the U.S. to the fallen nation.

PACIFIST NATIONALISM AND ITS MILITANT SHADOW IN LY THU HO’S TRILOGY

Ly’s biography remains obscure. She settled in France in 1956, just two years after the last French left Vietnam. She passed away in 1988. While in Vietnam, she lived through the
transition from colonialism to independence and witnessed the establishment of the First Republic. According to one account, she was the only Vietnamese woman of her generation to write and publish francophone novels in Paris from the 1960s through the 1980s (N. Nguyen, “A Classical Heroine” 456). The covers on her books inform the reader that she was from a middle-class family in rural South Vietnam. She most likely received a formal education in the French colonial system and thus became fluent in French well before moving to Paris. There is no known evidence of Ly’s connection to the Southern political elite. Her novels, mostly out of print today, have received little critical attention. Ly never made a case for her own novels, but their prefaces written by Vietnamese academics in France hint at books’ significance. One scholar opens *At the Crossroads* by claiming that the reader is about to see a position “at once anti-American and anticommunist” in a narrative voice that is “perfectly neutral, above the chaotic melee of demagogical ideologies currently tearing apart this gentle country” (7–8). He adds, “Her novel is the image of the wounded southern Vietnam through the lens of an intellectual who is neutral [*non engagée*] and free from any blind and sectarian submission, and she is even freer to express her opinion, honest and courageous, on this useless war and on the way to bring it to an end” (8). This defense of Ly’s neutralism is suspect, but one should not underestimate the diasporic freedom with which Ly can present her pacifism and at times sympathy for the communists. Another academic sets the tone for *The Illusion of Peace* by calling the communist takeover “the implacable seizure by a foreign ideology ill-fitting to [the Vietnamese people’s] aspiration” and condemning the reunification in 1975 as “merely territorially imposed … not as a result of the union of hearts” (5). These endorsements featured

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in Ly’s books announce her desire to understand both sides of the war and her defense of the South nonetheless.

Ly begins her literary intervention with the RVN’s weakest point since decolonization: its lack of ownership over the Viet Minh’s decisive victory over the French. Making way for a Southern alternative for peace over war, Ly sullies the DRV’s most august claim of Viet Minh legitimacy. Published in 1962 during the First Republic, *Bereft Springtime* trains its gaze on the years of the decolonization war from the mid-1940s to the mid-1950s. As opposed to the jubilee of the French’s defeat seen in the dominant narrative, Ly’s story receives this moment with dread and despair. At the center of this narrative set in southern Vietnam is the romance between two young lovers: the protagonist Tran and her lover Châu. As the anticolonial fervor sweeps the country, Châu joins the Vanguard Youth Corps (*Jeunesse d’avant-garde, Thanh nien Tien phong*), a non-communist nationalist force active in Cochinchina (103).\(^\text{13}\) The southern Vanguard Youth fight side-by-side with the northern Viet Minh against the French for months before they join together for the August Revolution of 1945. Through Châu’s experience in the revolution, Ly reveals the rift between the two anti-colonial groups. Châu disapproves of the Viet Minh’s anarchic violence. He admits to his lover:

> I find it regrettable that we have been duped like children, that we have lost our sangfroid, and that this revolutionary will end in bloody battles. I wonder what our purpose is when we murder the French, most of whom are innocent, especially the

\(^{13}\) In Duong Van Mai Elliott’s description, “The Vanguard Youth Corps, as its name implies, went where others would be afraid to tread. It got involved in projects fit for prison work gangs. The government used it to rebuild roads and bridges and to clear new land for cultivation—priorities for a country recovering from the devastation of war. In a system that glorified manual labor, membership in the corps was like a badge of honor. The graduates inspired trust—after all, they had proven their mettle and dedication in incredible hardships” (417).
priests. We are only playing the game of the imperialists who use these incidents to show the world our people’s immaturity and pressure the [French] government to delay granting us independence. By shedding blood, we are creating a deep rift between the French and Vietnamese, and we have no more hope for a peaceful solution to this question. (105)

As a Vanguard Youth, Châu distinguishes himself from the Viet Minh by desiring to prove the Vietnamese people’s restraint and maturity for self-government. Châu rejects the fatal split between colonizer and colonized and argues for lenience toward French civilians in Indochina. This is the earliest instance of Ly’s pacifist nationalism, which advocates gradual, non-violent decolonization. In Châu’s statement, we see a nationalist, anti-colonial critique of the Viet Minh. Given their success at Dien Bien Phu, the Viet Minh have claimed singular credit for Vietnamese anti-colonialism; therefore, any critique of this revolutionary movement, especially from the South, is immediately suspect. By foregrounding a southern anti-colonialist’s denunciation who has direct experience with the Viet Minh, Ly unsettles the equation between the Communist-leaning group and Vietnamese patriotism and opens a path for the South to claim Vietnamese birthright. She also challenges the view that the South was the main aggressor by presenting a peace-loving southern patriot vis-à-vis the Viet Minh lacking sangfroid.

The pacifist nationalism in Ly’s fiction juggles between its opposition to communism and American control, indeed, the young state’s Scylla and Charybdis. Responding to the ominous situation in the RVN through the 1960s, Ly’s *At the Crosswords* reflects deeply on the perceived

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14 It is probably not a coincidence that Ly named her first novel after another work by Vietnamese modernist writer Khai Hung, whose own *Bereft Springtime* (*Nua chung xuan*) was published in 1934. Khai Hung joined the non-communist Vietnamese Nationalist Party (Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang) and was reportedly executed by the Viet Minh in 1947 (V. Nguyen).
lack of Southern zeal and hints at a scandalous willingness to open hearts and minds to Viet Cong nationalism as a critique of U.S. dominance in the country. Ly’s second novel was published in 1969 after the downward spiral of the military rule, which lasted from 1963 after Diem’s assassination to the start of Nguyen Van Thieu’s presidency in 1967. The story starts in 1965 and revolves around the romantic courtship between Lang and Văn. Witnessing the South’s decline in despair, Văn decides that he will join the National Liberation Front (NLF), aka the Viet Cong, to study the anti-government movement. Lang responds in shock, “How could you think of something like this, associating yourself with men who have killed your brothers and one of mine?” (38). Risking being perceived as a traitor, Văn tells her his guiding questions:

Having contributed as much as the Vietminh to the struggle for independence, why wouldn’t we nationalists have the right, like our brothers in the North, to our own ideology, our conceptions of family and society, our ideas of human rights, our regime of liberty and social justice? … Why wouldn’t we have the same courage and faith to defend ourselves against the revolutionaries who want to steal and monopolize the fruit of a shared victory? … Would we have to continue this game indefinitely and only take on a passive role in this war like mercenaries paid by foreigners? (42–43)

Driven by an anxiety over the incompetence that grips the Southern army, Văn’s “research journey” (40) seeks lessons on nationalism from the Viet Cong, the only southerners practicing the idea of reunification by collaborating with the North. As Văn explicitly states, his dangerous turn to the domestic enemy hinges on a deep skepticism of the American foreigners, who he believes have reduced the South to a mercenary state. Văn’s conditional preference for the Viet Cong over the Americans loudly condemns foreign encroachment, and here he walks a tightrope

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15 For details on this period of the RVN, see Lam.
between betraying the RVN and losing his life as an infiltrator in the enemy camp—a position that only a diasporic text in France can articulate given the political strictures in-country.

The lessons of nationalism Lang and Văn learn in a desperate time reveal a dilemma inherent in South Vietnam’s shunning of political doctrines: compared to the North, Southern ideological openness ironically threatens to bring about its downfall. As revealed in Lang and Văn’s exchange, Lang appears the hardline anti-communist who toes the enmity line, compared to her intellectually adventurous lover. “In Lang’s heart,” the narrator tells us, “Vân’s absence hurt her less than the reasons for his departure. She concluded that his love for her was not as big or strong enough as she had thought to stop his impetuous desire to join the enemy’s camp. Jealous of his ideas and rather petty-minded, she wished fervently that Vân would fail in his effort and that he would come back to her disappointed and forever get over his wrong idealism” (55). Lang sees Vân’s research project as a betrayal, and she perceives the Viet Cong as a romantic rival—a subtle but effective way Ly expresses the erotic charge of national attachment. Lang then embarks on her own learning course by reading historical documents, studying political analysis of Marxism, and listening to communist propaganda on the radio (56), all to prove Vân wrong and restore their political alignment. Despite their different methods, it is Lang the hardliner who finally presents the valuable lessons that they both agree on:

Trying to create a climate of security in the cities, shielding the population from the worries and panic, proving the power of the army and the government’s competence, and relying too much on allies’ military and economic aid, the Southern government deprived this war of its popular character and rendered it a conflict for men in power and their mercenary army. … And meanwhile, everything went on as if this war weren’t a struggle
for the survival and liberty of a Southern people who didn’t want to live and die under the hammer and sickle. (90–91)

The four participial phrases justifying the damning verdict against the Southern government sound endless, and, except for the last one, they point to the tasks that any state is supposed to deliver. The people do not know how bad the war is, and therefore they cannot come to its—and their own—defense. According to Lang and Văn, the problem with the RVN is that it is too good to its people—a statement that would flummox most observers then and now. Be that as it may, this point is a familiar one among critics of U.S. Vietnam policy: the RVN has become a hollow shell without the popular substance. More pointedly, the two past subjunctive negatives in the conditional clause cast doubt on what should be present affirmatives: Lang cannot say that the war is supposed to be a struggle for the survival and liberty of a people has something better to offer than communism. In other words, the South’s lack of that doctrinal something—what in a peacetime democracy would be considered healthy heterodoxy—rings its death knell in wartime. The prefix of anti-communism is not enough to carry a state, and all the nice things offered by the U.S. cannot outweigh a single-minded popular front. Ironically, Văn and Lang’s passion for Southern nation-ness is precisely what drives them to such a pessimistic diagnosis; their nationalism persists through the fathomless lack.

Ending with the metaphor of a national family, the novel’s resolution tenders a plea for peace across Vietnam based on a common patriotism beyond politics; yet it also implies that the Southern state would take the lead on the effort. In the midst of a battleground that sees a Viet Cong dead, leaving his young daughter to Văn’s care, the seasoned student of nationalism shares his sage advice. “At this tragic crossroads,” Văn says,
Only patriotism will guide the steps of each Vietnamese on the road where the supreme interests of his country lie. The sacred duty for us all is to restate the urgency of the negotiations for a ceasefire to the leaders of different parties responsible for the war—a ceasefire that will allow Vietnamese to explain and reconcile among themselves, that will open the door to a just and honorable peace for everyone. (208)

Rather than defending military escalation, Văn advocates a kind of patriotism capable of bringing all Vietnamese back to their shared nationality and healing the political divide. Only this internal unity without foreign influence can bring the postcolonial country to a satisfactory peace.¹⁶ At the Crossroads imprints this vision in the book’s final image: “In the morning silence, the day awakens with its first golden gleams. On the empty path, three silhouettes, one of which belongs to a child, help one another move forward on the big road. … In their eyes burn an intense hope, hope for a near future where this horrid picture of war will be but a bad memory” (208–09). Ly’s poetic solution is an alternative family: Lang and Văn adopt the Viet Cong’s child, crossing the enmity line to form a new, cohesive unit. This non-biological kinship structure seals the rupture in Bereft Springtime and sutures the imaginary cut at the seventeenth parallel. This is not an equal peace, however. The new family formed in the novel can only emerge after the child’s Viet Cong father dies, and the non-communist couple will head the

¹⁶ This point of view was gaining currency in the RVN in the late 1960s and early 1970s among South Vietnamese peace activists frowned upon by militant anti-communists. The Catholic academic Ly Chanh Trung, for example, wrote an unpublished tract on the peace solution entitled The Basis for National Reconciliation in Vietnam in January 1975 in light of Nixon’s Vietnamization policy. French Vietnamese scholar Tran Thi Lien, who keeps a copy of this rare document, summarizes its main point: “In [Ly Chanh Trung’s] view, despite military withdrawal, the United States was pursuing the same war policy. The only solution was for the United States to withdraw from Vietnamese affairs and let the Vietnamese be the actors of reconciliation, via the constitution of a representative South Vietnamese government. Confronting the American policy of ‘Vietnamization of war,’ he proposed to ‘Vietnamize peace’” (463). See also Nguyen-Marshall, “South Vietnam Had an Antiwar Movement, Too.”
household. There is no place for the communists here, and one should remember that only the desperate ask for peace in this situation. The charming idea of nation-wide peace in fact hides a South Vietnamese nationalism fashioning a way forward that would give the struggling state at least some moral leverage.

The loss of the RVN in 1975 prompts a radical revision in Ly’s decades-long literary project, and her work shifts from wartime didacticism to postwar resignation. Published more than a decade after the war ended, *The Illusion of Peace* meditates on the rationale for and aftermath of the 1973 Paris Peace Accords—the result of Nixon’s Vietnamization policy that withdrew U.S. troops and left the two Vietnams to resolve their own conflict. Featuring members of the Southern army as its primary characters, Ly’s last novel takes a militant turn away from the civilian perspectives in *Bereft Springtime* and *At the Crossroads*. Sensing that her pacifist proposal at the end of *At the Crossroads* simply does not work—doesn’t Nixon’s policy grant that peace wish?—Ly takes advantage of the novels’ sequential structure and summons Vân from the second novel to the third to reassess the prospect of domestic peace. This time, Vân has to modify what we have heard him say in the previous paragraph:

We discuss Vietnamization and accept its principles. But we cannot stop looking at the U.S. Each time Nixon or Kissinger make a statement supporting the Saigon regime, our compatriots sees America’s determination not to let go of the South. … But as soon as the American president mentions military cutbacks, the rich and our military and civilian leaders hasten their wives and children to flee the country, taking with them the country’s important capital accumulated from U.S. aid. (104)

Intoxicated by American dollars, South Vietnamese elite’s hearts and minds are not in their own country, and the ideal patriotism that Vân previously preaches has no chance to materialize.
Vân’s reappearance and negative reevaluation spell out the limit of Ly’s diasporic literary nationalism. While she could take creative license to revise Viet Minh history in the first novel and craft a pacifist vision to support an existing Southern state in the second, the fall of Saigon in 1975 demanded Ly to rethink hopeful national sentiments. More than ever, Ly’s fiction holds a clear mirror to the failed state, and *The Illusion of Peace* presents portrait after portrait of decrepit, anguished, and perverse lives: army deserters, greedy elite, black market rogues, prostitutes, and shantytown dwellers here daub the third book in dark colors never allowed in the first two.

To set her nationalist literature’s new goal when RVN state-formation ceases to be a viable objective, Ly pitches the next battle: the literary preservation of the South and its legacy. The RVN’s material existence depends on the U.S., and, as Vân points out, Southern patriotism may be more fiction than fact. But South Vietnam stands to lose something even more valuable than the state itself: its historical dignity and narrative agency. To deliver this ultimate message, Ly reintroduces the Vanguard Youth soldier Châu from the first novel *Bereft Springtime*, thus bringing the trilogy to a full circle. Châu comes back in *Illusion* as an NLF sympathizer—his former lover Lang’s biggest fear has come true after all. In the final clash between a defender of communism and a spokesperson for the RVN, Ly stages a dialogue between Châu and *Illusion*’s protagonist Huu-Lôc, an intensely patriotic Southern army commander. Regarding the impending end of the war, Châu says, “The departure of American troops and Nixon’s forced surrender of responsibility only precipitate this revolutionary war’s final act. This war’s just cause better strengthens its soldiers than any weapons” (268). Huu-Lôc here interrupts Châu: “The good, just cause is always the one that triumphs. Victors become masters, losers traitors. And what about us? What do you make of our cause, our survival on this Southern land? We’re
only defending our rights to be free in our country, to live without constraint of any kind” (268–69). This dialogue in Ly’s third novel also marks her attempt at revising her first: it is hard to miss how closely Huu-Lôc’s questions resemble Châu’s quoted earlier. These same questions—posed more than two decades apart—reveal the persistence of the crisis in South Vietnamese self-justification. And yet, this repetition carries a crucial difference. Victory here means more than retaining a state; it also earns the dignity to proclaim justice, to be judged favorably by posterity. At stake is not only freedom in the political sense but also the ownership of one’s own national narrative, a patrimony. A decade after the war, Ly renders the fiery conflict into a competition of legacies, announcing anew how the war of words would continue to be fought overseas.

Ly’s usual narrative resolution through courtship and marriage breaks down in Illusion but only for a new literary figure of postwar Southern nationalism to arise. Illusion’s protagonist dies one week before Saigon falls (291), but unlike other tragedies, his death is not the end of the story. His wife Thu-Thuy sustains the narrative through a series of gravesite laments, which make up most of the book’s last chapter. Thu-Thuy tasks herself with narrating the events of the first year of Hanoi’s rule to her dead husband every time she visits his unmarked burial site; the reader thus assumes the position of the buried. We witness here a declension in narrative strategies from At the Crossroads to Illusion: from a dawning national family to a grieving widow sighing to her husband’s ghost. Embedding the history of reunified Vietnam in a widow’s laments, Ly challenges the DRV’s celebratory mood in her diasporic eulogy for a fallen ARVN hero: “You see, my love,” Thu-Thuy says, “the war is basically over, but that doesn’t mean peace is with us” (298). The “illusion of peace,” as the title suggests, is fully exposed here with
tales of suffering such as threats of rape, family and friends disappearing, imprisoned, and sent to reeducation camps, which cause Thu-Thuy to wonder:

Aren’t we of the same race, molded by the same earth that makes up Vietnam? I don’t understand it. I have promised never to reveal to my sons that their father was felled on this Southern land by the bullets of his compatriots born by their mother of the North.

(303)

Unmistakable in Thu-Thuy’s language of race and soil is her critique of the DRV’s anti-patriotism. By treating Southerners with violence and hate, the North has forsaken their common heritage. Thu-Thuy sees this a national shame that she cannot bring herself to whisper to her children. She continues meditating on the kind of national education she wants for their sons:

If by chance they later learn the truth, I will explain to them that it’s all because of war. Just like love, war knows no borders. With this promise, I want my children to know intimately that Northern mountains and Southern rivers belong to only one Vietnam, their one nation. I will tell them that neither the vast oceans nor the deep forests can contain the fire of hate and violence that has devoured the world. Only man will succeed in extinguishing that fire with forgiveness and kindness. (303)

Behind Thu-Thuy’s admirable belief in one people under one nation in the midst of suffering is her self-elevation into the holder of the true narrative of Vietnamese heritage. The Southern widow’s private nationalist lesson to her sons runs counter to the new state’s narrative of victory over the lackeys. By taking the higher moral ground of preaching forgiveness and kindness, Thu-Thuy wrests the story of reunification from Hanoi. In effect, Thu-Thuy preempts her late husband’s fear of the loss of narrative agency in the South by refusing to let the North to claim the just cause. As in Vân’s plea for peace seen in *At the Crossroads*, Thu-Thuy refuses to
concede to Northern communism, reducing the ideological conflict into ahistorical “war.” The North has overtaken the RVN, but it has failed to win Thu-Thuy’s heart and mind.

Ly lived through three momentous transitions of Vietnam in the twentieth century: the end of colonialism, the creation of two postcolonial states, and the end of the Southern state. Her three-part literary work is among the clearest examples of diasporic South Vietnamese nationalism and also the most neglected in Vietnam and Vietnam War scholarship today. This diasporic nationalism changes its affect and strategy with the war’s progress and shows how, contrary to many historians’ insistence, Southern nationalism not only existed but also exceeded the state’s geographical and temporal boundaries. In her vision and revision of pacifist national sentiments, Ly never gave up on the Southern cause, and this peace-seeking proves militant especially when it tries to make up for the doctrinal lack in the South confronting Northern communism.

[Cut for length: an analysis of Lan Cao’s novel sequence and the chapter’s broad conclusion.]
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