

## Rewriting Biraciality and War in Kien Nguyen's *The Unwanted*

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Although biculturalism is commonly addressed in Vietnamese American fiction, Kien Nguyen's *The Unwanted: A Memoir* is the first Vietnamese American text to document the biracial experience of growing up Amerasian under communist rule in post-1975 Vietnam. As critic Rocio Davis notes, because its narrative does not, for the most part, take place on American soil, *The Unwanted* helps "validate a non-American childhood setting for the Asian American subject" which "reconfigures America's image of...its citizens' pasts" (85). Nguyen's memoir does not describe the process of acculturation, documenting only briefly its author's relocation to the United States in its concluding chapter. It does, however, reveal an uncritical acceptance of American politics all the while providing a detailed denunciation of the Communist regime's divisive practices in Vietnam during the late seventies and early eighties. In this article, I argue that Kien Nguyen's narrative problematizes the positionality of mixed-race individuals in Vietnam by presenting their bi-raciality as an incentive to uncover American imperialism and Vietnamese exploitation of power. I suggest that the Vietnam War has been evacuated from the narrative precisely because the American government in the end repatriates Kien Nguyen within the safety of its national borders. Drawing on Elaine Scarry's structure of war and torture, I argue that Nguyen's depiction of societal and familial tensions replicates a model of warfare between surrogate Americans and North Vietnamese in a memoir that has strategically erased traces of the armed conflict. Unable to scrutinize the role Americans played in a controversial war of which he is a by-product, *The Unwanted* casts Kien and his mother Khuon as American proxies who become traitors rather than victims in the eyes of the Communist authorities. Interestingly, it is the US-backed South Vietnamese, including Khuon's sadistic boyfriend Lam and her resentful sister, who function as the heinous inflictors of pain. By denying biracial Kien and his mother a place in the reunified nation, the South Vietnamese perpetuate intrafamilial violence and xenophobia to ensure their own safety under a regime they have not chosen.

After detailing the hardship Nguyen experienced from 1972 until 1985 in his struggle to survive, I then explore the ways in which the memoir's ideological framework informs its narrative structure. While imperialism and war lead to biraciality, internecine strife in the defeated South causes the repeated violation of the biracial body and

its quasi-annihilation. Merging the political with the personal, *The Unwanted* presents the catastrophic impact of these power dynamics on the individual's psyche. I employ the works of critic Leigh Gilmore and psychiatrist Judith Herman to interrogate the relation between trauma, self-representation, and recovery when politics or historical circumstances mold subjectivity as a result of unbearable violence. Subjected to verbal, physical, and sexual violence as a child, Kien's psychic survival upon his successful relocation to the United States at age eighteen depends on his ability to mourn the loss experienced and to forgive himself for harming a loved one (Kien's violation of his girlfriend) as he has been harmed. In examining the narrator's working through the psychic effects of mistreatment and rape, I argue that only the act of writing can provide the necessary space to articulate the pain of racial difference and the trauma of child abuse. Through committing his formative years to paper more than a decade after his migration, Kien transforms societal violence into self-love in defiance of a "place-based identity," (173) to use Arif Dirlik's term, by choosing self-writing as a mode of confession, testimony and connection.

Although *The Unwanted* addresses Vietnam's legacy of war and imperialism, the material wealth that characterizes Kien Nguyen's early childhood along with the ensuing stigmatization of his body sets this memoir apart from others that speak to the aftermath of foreign occupation. Anglophone and Francophone literature alike present mixed children as growing up in poverty. Yet in Francophone texts such as Marie Vieux-Chauvet's *Amour, colère, folie* (Haiti), Joseph Zobel's *La Rue Cases-Nègres* (Martinique), or Kim Lefèvre's *Métisse blanche* (Vietnam), being *métisse* or mixed is seen as a social advantage that can lead to an elevated status, for example under colonial rule. By contrast, Kien Nguyen's memoir illustrates the narrator's difficult negotiation of his biraciality as his body carries the ineffaceable mark of what is perceived as his mother's betrayal. In a country where racial discrimination prevails, the mixed-race children fathered by American soldiers and civilians alike are perceived as the children of the enemy that one must combat. The 1975 reunification of Vietnam robs Kien's mother of the wealth protecting her bi-racial offspring and also leaves Kien unprepared for the hostilities that lie beyond the walls of their imposing four-story mansion. Having only experienced difference based on class rather than race, Kien finds himself suddenly othered by the Vietnamese nation that refuses to grant him citizenry and ultimately prevents his social viability. Kien's existence in postwar Vietnam comes to be defined by verbal and physical abuse, hunger, rape, and incarceration before his unexpected migration to the United States in 1985. Its narrative recalls the many survivor stories that make up the body of Vietnamese American writing in the eighties and nineties.

Vietnamese American literature emerged in the United States in the 1980s with at least a dozen texts published over a decade, less than ten years after the 1975 relocation of many of its authors. Nearly all early Vietnamese American publications were collaborative in nature, mostly for reasons of linguistic proficiency given their authors' recent

arrival. These narratives typically belong to the genre of memoir or autobiography as they recount the authors' often traumatic escape from Vietnam. Their stories are made available to American readers through the filter of the co-author's prose, which transforms the tragic tale of the Vietnamese storyteller into a written narrative that meets American standards.

As Monique Truong (232) has shown, these collaborations proved quite problematic: the changes made by the co-author did not simply operate on a linguistic level, but also on the level of representation, as the narrative voice itself underwent transformations in the translation and interpretative process. Such texts include, for example: Nguyen Ngoc Ngan's (with E. E. Richey) *The Will of Heaven: One Vietnamese and the End of His World* (1982); Truong Nhu Tang's (with David Chanoff and Doan Van Toi) *A Vietcong Memoir: An Inside Account of the Vietnam War and Its Aftermath* (1985); or Nguyen Thi Thu-Lam's (with E. Kreisler and S. Christenson) *Fallen Leaves: Memoirs of a Vietnamese Woman from 1940 to 1975* (1989). The descriptive titles of these texts attest to their testimonial quality as documents of history and to their didactic function: their authors commonly hope to transmit their heritage and inform their American audience of their past. Ironically, as critic Isabelle Pelaud points out, these texts were "atypical" in that they "offered a North Vietnamese perspective" (26) when in fact Vietnamese refugees were commonly southerners who fled their homeland after the communist victory of 1975. According to Pelaud, "both the Americans who fought in Viet Nam and those who protested the war showed more interest in the North Vietnamese than in the Vietnamese U.S. allies in the South" (26). In fact, the marginalization of early Vietnamese American writers through forced collaboration mirrors their precarious status as political refugees. It would take another two decades and the lifting of the U.S. embargo in 1994 for American readers to consider independent publications documenting the difficult journey of South Vietnamese refugees to the United States and their adaptation on American soil. In memoirs such as Jade Ngoc Quang Huynh's *South Wind Changing* or Nguyen Qui Duc's *Where the Ashes Are*, the war operates as a backdrop while their authors attempt to construct new paradigms of biculturality and communality, terms that critic Renny Christopher defines in her book study *The Viet Nam War / The American War* (37).

To a mainstream audience, the most familiar Vietnamese war ordeal of that era is perhaps Le Ly Hayslip's autobiography *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, which Oliver Stone adapted for the big screen and released in 1993 under the title "Heaven and Earth." The book presents the story of a northern Vietnamese girl whose traditional village life is eradicated by war. According to critic Viet Thanh Nguyen, "Hayslip has become representative of those anonymous millions of Vietnamese in whose name the Vietnam War was fought by both sides. Through her extraordinary personal story, she not only symbolically bears the collective pain but also bears the victim's burden of forgiveness" (108). Kien's story *The Unwanted* similarly underscores the importance of forgiveness including self-

forgiveness by conveying the pain of a generation of *bụi đời* ('dust of life') embodied by the mixed-race children of the war. The author acknowledges the sad commonality of his experience in the following words: "As dark as my memoir may be, it is not unique by any means. It's estimated that more than fifty thousand Amerasian children shared my fate, or worse. Their stories are all too common ones of terror and repression, abuse and neglect, strength, and ultimately—for the lucky ones—survival" (342-3). Diana Yoon explains that their pain inscribes itself in their "inability to establish a legitimate national identity" (62) because "Amerasians are viewed as U.S. nationals" by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (72). Kien's apprehension of his biracality is thus shaped by the Vietnamese perception of his racial difference as cultural difference. His narrative records the cynical transformation of the 'dust of life' into 'gold children': as Thomas Bass notes, neglected biracial teenagers found themselves suddenly "endowed with the power to fly themselves and their families around the world" (3) with the implementation of the Orderly Departure Program that allowed the offspring of Americans to resettle in the United States. Aggressively sought after, marginalized children become objects of desire to be bought and traded by anyone desperate to survive in the eighties. Nguyen's story in many ways complements that of Hayslip, the young peasant girl who was raped, tortured, yet ironically rescued by both Việt Cong and American soldiers. Like Hayslip's, Nguyen's is a harrowing tale of resilience in the face of incomprehensible hardship. But it is also the story of the most "unwanted" and almost forgotten legacy of imperialism which seeks, through the tortured reflection of its biological offspring, effacement, relief and recognition.

Nguyen's body in *The Unwanted* threatens to be configured like that of Hayslip, that is according to Viet Thanh Nguyen, as "a powerless one, a silent figure whose presence is only of isolated significance in the movements of armies, nations and capital, and one that is ultimately an object of others' politics" (108). Unlike Hayslip who moves away from silence and invisibility towards speech and representation, however, Kien Nguyen does not concern himself with raising the awareness of his American audience. Neither does he seem invested in giving a voice to the victimized body. While Hayslip advocates for "personal and collective reconciliation on the part of all the war's participants," his is a story of self-reconciliation that necessitates public acknowledgment to mark the victory of laying the traumatic past to rest (Nguyen, *Race* 109). *The Unwanted* in fact presents the biracial bastard of the war as an individual entirely consumed by his inner struggle. Shielded by his mother's wealth until age eight, Kien becomes the target of racial slurs immediately after the communist take-over. Kien observes: "I realized that I was different... I wanted to pull the fair hair out of my head, scratch the pale skin, and peel the expensive sandals off my feet" (44), while later adding that "there has not been a moment of happiness since the day I was taught the word *half-breed*" (281). Persecuted at school, he is also unsafe at home after his mother's forced relocation to a New Economic Zone where he is reunited with his cruel extended family. Subjected to his

cousins' beatings "to within an inch of death" (176) and constantly on the verge of self-loathing, the biracial bastard child of *The Unwanted* is stripped clean even of the status of victim. To be a victim, there needs to be a perpetrator cast as the enemy. Yet American and Vietnamese perpetrators of war atrocities, as well as the war atrocities themselves, are strikingly absent from the narrative.

In her seminal work *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry defines war as arising "where the enemy is external, occupies a separate space, where the impulse to obliterate a rival population and its civilization is not...a self-destruction" (61). Such a paradigm of war has been carefully dissipated in *The Unwanted*: the enemy has vanished and the evils of communism or capitalism have been diluted. In the text, soldiers on either side are portrayed very humanely as under-aged men who want to forget about the turmoil around them. While American soldiers appear lost in the jungle of Vietnam and nostalgic for home, Việt Cong soldiers are presented as exalted yet altruistic patriots. Rather than directing their animosity at Kien, Việt Cong, American and South Vietnamese soldiers alike all seem truly concerned with his well-being. The red-faced, blond American soldier gives Kien candies and calls him a "nice little fellow" because he reminds him of his brother Todd and family in Wisconsin (67). Similarly, the Red, North Vietnamese soldier talks about his little brother on crutches whom he has not seen in five years, all the while playing with Kien's curly hair in a juxtaposed image of fraternity. While the American soldier tells Kien, "You look just like a little American boy, you know?", the Việt Cong soldier teaches Kien about "Uncle Chin Minh Ho, our savior, our supreme president" (67) and how "by his name alone came the destruction of the shackle that, for many years, enslaved our people to the evil Americans and to the phony Vietnamese republican government" (69). Despite ideologically divergent efforts at assimilation, both American and Vietnamese faces remind Kien of the "same expression [he] saw on countless lonely faces every day. It was the homesick look of the children who were lost in the chaos of warfare, witnessing death and disaster, longing for a meaningful touch" (70). Hence the very men who represent the ugliness of war, the capitalist killing machines and the cunning men of the Red army, are portrayed in *The Unwanted* as helpless youths themselves. Victims and victors merge in an image of innocence that reduces soldiers to individuals torn away from their boyhood to defend their countries with ideologies and machine guns. Even the bullet that tragically kills the Nguyen family's protector, Mr. Dang, comes out of thin air on April 30, 1975 to hit its target. Blame has been erased from the narrative and all responsibility disseminated so that the soldiers prefigure Kien who becomes their ideological and psychological proxy.

While the narrative of *The Unwanted* does not describe war atrocities committed on Vietnamese soil, neither does it denounce the ways in which American imperialism was conducted in Vietnam. Even though racial purity and economic inequality remain central to the narrative, *The Unwanted* does not address the responsibility of the

United States in promoting sexual exchange between servicemen and Vietnamese civilian women. As Quan Manh Ha states, American soldiers' "decadence, loose morality and use of drugs...stimulated the reciprocal development of means of supply in the market. 'Tea houses' or brothels, mushroomed whenever American troops were stationed, and many young Vietnamese girls from the countryside moved to larger cities to work as bar girls, street prostitutes, or 'hooch maids' because they could earn even more money in those capacities" (25). Instead, the memoir focuses on the local authorities' treatment of the boys' mother Khuon, who is blamed for participating in such a system and giving birth to two mixed-race boys from different men. Despite her public confession, "a prostitute is exactly what [she] was," because "being a lowly prostitute" as opposed to "an arrogant capitalist" was "the lesser of two evils she could admit to" (Nguyen, *The Unwanted* 111). Khuon is actually hired as a translator by an American civil engineer established in Saigon. The two-year liaison that ensues would be followed by her later marriage to an American officer stationed in Nha Trang in the south. In characterizing Khuon's social status, *The Unwanted* works toward breaking down common misconceptions about the mothers of Vietnamese Amerasian children. A California study indicates that Vietnamese women who associated with American men "did not all have a shady background nor did they all come from the lower classes, uneducated and poor" (Le Van Chung 67). As another survey conducted in the Philippine Refugee Processing Center shows, these liaisons were far from ephemeral ones: while "only 12.5 percent of the women studied reported having been married to their Amerasian child's American father...81 percent had lived with him" and nearly 64 percent received support from the child's father while in Vietnam (McKelvey 45). According to Khuon, Kien's father was quite distressed at the thought of leaving his three-month old son behind and had proposed to take him to the United States.

Whether out of guilt or obligation, Khuon's lovers did not return to the United States without endowing her with a small fortune that would ensure her and her sons' financial stability. While Jimmy's father "was quite generous" upon leaving Vietnam in 1971, Kien's literally "emptied his bank account into [Khuon's] hands," gifting her over thirty-thousand dollars (22). Kien questions his father's intentions, speculating how, perhaps, "my appearance made him recognize his own mortality, or perhaps it was "because of my mother's irresistible charms" (22). This set of alternatives centers on Kien's body as a testimony to mortality or on his mother's body as a promise of immortality, since in endowing a beautiful, high-status woman with his wealth, Kien's father ensures that she will immortalize his goodness, presenting him to an audience as her savior in stories that glorify his kindness and generosity. Non-coincidentally, both versions link the native body to monetary transactions. Eager to shield her children "from the rumors, stares and judgment that [their] American features drew," (44) Khuon uses her acquired fortune with purpose: she secures shares in a local bank, pays off the mortgage on her new home and renovates the house into a Western palace. Her strategic

investments speak to a drive for self-preservation and a sense of self that defy stereotypes: she clearly did not fall victim to young Americans with an exotic fetish for submissive Asian girls. Rather, Khuon represents a minority of the Vietnamese female population who took advantage of the American presence to join the upper-class, enjoy a lavish Western lifestyle, and secure control over the relatively undisturbed, coastal community of Nha Trang.

Khuon Nguyen's confidence and authority are quickly undermined by the retrieval of the last American troops and the Communist victory on April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1975. So strong is the South Vietnamese's belief in the "United States foreign policy [a]s principally altruistic and dedicated to such unimpeachable foals as freedom and democracy" (Said 55) that Khuon fails to leave the country with her bi-racial children when she still has the chance. Having secured seats on a plane out of Saigon, Khuon awaits definite signs that the South government has failed to say her goodbyes. According to the author, less than a month before the communist take-over "Saigon was still deep in denial of the devastation taking place elsewhere in the country" (20). Three years after the communist invasion that Nguyen likens to "an attack of locusts in a rice field, fast and uncontrollable" (24), many citizens of South Vietnam "still hoped for the Americans' return" (134). For Khuon, the reunification of Vietnam is synonymous with betrayal: impregnated by her irresponsible boyfriend Lam, she discovers that he has raped and impregnated her sons' loyal nanny Loan while her business partners flee the country with her assets. Khuon, the "mighty Madame Nguyen, the smoke-spitting, fire-puffing banker" and self-proclaimed diva (89), must face the new political regime deceived, alone and destitute. After the communist victory, she finds herself in the basement of a rented house the size of a prison cell, trapped "like a caged animal" (44) about to lose control as she envisions her sons' bleak future based on rigidified standards of economic and racial purity.

Just as the soldiers, the very individuals who embody a real and murderous war, are presented in *The Unwanted* as quasi-pacifiers caught up in power structures that lie beyond them, so does Kien who finds himself at the mercy of his local, embittered community. Interestingly, it is the South Vietnamese, subjected to a war and a regime they have not chosen, who become producers of oppression and discrimination. In *The Unwanted*, the reality of war and the cruelties it generates materialize as internecine rivalries within Kien's family itself. The corruption of Marxism and Leninism takes on the face of a family gone awry in the chaos of civil warfare. Warfare, or rather the structure of war as Elaine Scarry defines it, relies however on "the relation between the collective casualties that occur *within* war, and the verbal issues...that stand *outside* war," a relation that has been rendered abstract in *The Unwanted*. The narrative has evacuated those "two interior facts about war: first, that the immediate activity is injuring; second, that the activity of war is a contest" with an external enemy (Scarry 63). Only the structure of torture whereby "the enemy is internal" and the "destruction of a race...would be a self-

destruction” (Scarry 61) remains present in a palimpsest-like image. Most interactions depicted in Kien’s memoir seem indeed modeled after “the physical and verbal interactions between...a torturer and a prisoner” (Scarry 63). In setting up a dichotomy between capitalists and communists, North Vietnamese and South Vietnamese, half-breeds and full-bloods, the narrative first stages the torturer as Kien’s ostracized mother who inflicts pain out of terror and second as Kien’s extended family who inflict pain out of spite.

While the 1975 fall of Saigon signifies the end of economic and individual freedom for the South Vietnamese population, for Kien it marks the beginning of familial destruction due to corruption and exploitation. The enforcement of communist values in a country “beset with racism” seems to transform his larger-than-life mother into a monster “covered by a mask of hatred” (20, 45). Overwhelmed by a deep-seated fear for her children, Khuon turns against her own flesh and blood in an act of apparent paranoia as she undertakes to dye Jimmy and Kien’s light hair so they can pass for native children. “Shut up! Men don’t cry!” she screams like a “deranged woman” (45) upon pouring black dye all over their faces with violence. The transformation sought is not simply a physical one: no longer able to hide the secrets of their birth, Khuon is desperate to turn her naïve boys into tough adults ready to face the injustices of the outside world. In giving Kien’s beloved dog to his cousins who kick her to death, Khuon imposes her domination while justifying her cruelty by using a rhetoric of benevolence: “I am not destroying [Kien]. I am teaching him to be a man” (116). Blurring the line between psychological strength and emotional demise, Khuon reveals her bitterness as she refuses to bring Lam’s child, conceived out of wedlock, into “an unforgiving society” (23). When Kien enquires about the abortion pills, Khuon grabs him by the shoulders, throws him against the wall, and shouts: “What do you know about the pills, you nosy little bastard? ...If you ever breathe any of this to anyone, I’ll kill you. Do you understand me?” (50). Driven by the incentive to survive and consumed by guilt, the caretaker becomes a torturer willing to risk her offspring’s emotional well-being. As she beats Kien “like he was [her] enemy” (135), her invective attests to the displacement of her shame onto her son whom she sees through the eyes of the communist regime. Powerless, she views Kien as a permanent symbol of her association with American capitalism. In an urge for self-preservation, she temporarily aligns herself with the dominant ideology and misidentifies her own offspring as the enemy, which causes an inner battle. As Scarry argues, “torture consists of acts that magnify the way in which pain destroys a person’s world, self and voice, so these other acts that restore the voice become not only a denunciation of the pain but almost a diminution of the pain” (50). By torturing her son, Khuon inflicts upon him the pain that consumes her in an act of misguided transference to regain agency.

Setting up a dichotomy between the mother as torturer and her son as prisoner, *The Unwanted* presents Kien’s maternal family as an extension of the anguished mother. Kien’s aunt, her passive husband,



and their fourteen children who share land and a house with Kien's mother, brutalize the boys relentlessly. Kien quickly learns to accept "like a defense mechanism" the insults "half-breed" and "bastard child" that his cousins direct at him (97). From crushing Kien to the ground to shoving his face in the dirt, spitting on his back, or viciously killing his dog, five of the boys are particularly ruthless with their cousin whom they never miss a chance to abuse. As Robert Mckelvey confirms, "to be a Vietnamese Amerasian in postwar Vietnam was to be a child growing up in the hands of your father's enemies. The hatred that the enemy had felt, and continued to feel, for your father and his country was directed against you, even though you were innocent of any wrongdoing" (117). Ruthlessly called *mỹ lai* (Amerasian), *con lai* (half-breed) or *mỹ đen* (black American), Amerasians often had to endure more verbal or physical abuse than their mothers (Brennan 12). Kien's cousins claim to torture him and his half-brother Jimmy out of revulsion for the foreignness that the boys embody. As Moonlight, one of his female cousins explains: "You remind everyone of the past. The odd appearance of your brother and the way your mother has made her money through her association with the foreigners. Everyone in your family is a capitalist" (Nguyen, *The Unwanted* 124). Despite this apparent alignment with the dominant communist ideology, Kien claims that "everyone in the south despised the inflections of the North Vietnamese, as it represented all the repression of Communism" (193). Without official government authorization, employment could not be secured. Many hard-working citizens had to resort to becoming street vendors, to opening a shop at the market to sell rice, potatoes or beans, or to acquiring goods to sell for a profit. Yet all business enterprises were considered counterrevolutionary, "believing they drove up prices and disrupted the economy" (146). In such a threatening climate, poverty was rampant. As Kien puts it, "people merely existed" (146) and they secretly blamed the communist regime for their misery. Rather than endorsing communist ideology and the new class system that regulates their community, Khuon suggests that her sister's family, like many others, direct their animosity at her boys because they are in fact jealous of their former status and opulence.

Just as Khuon "take[s] out her anger" (114) and frustration on her son, so does Kien's maternal family. When the local authorities relocate Khuon to the property she shares with her sister, the latter warns her: "You can't talk to us like you still have money," accusing Khuon of condescension based on her own family's lower class standing. She adds: "We live side by side [now]. What you do will reflect on my family by association" (97). While Kien's aunt speaks of protecting her family's reputation from Khuon's impure lifestyle, Khuon is quick to remind her of the continued support she provided their family throughout the war: "All of this, the house, the furniture, even the food that is still stuck between your teeth, all came from me...Your existences are made possible because of this lowly prostitute" (176). The hatred that Kien's maternal family harbors clearly stems from lack, resentment, and envy, but also from

internalized xenophobia and their hunger for self-determination. Embodying the southern community by metonymy, Kien's maternal family tortures him, I contend, to exercise the little power they have gained as "the lowest working class in the south" (125), and to release their own pain. The physical pain they inflict is but an expression of their mental pain. As Scarry explains, torture allows "the pain [to be] hugely present for the prisoner and absent to the torturer" so as to "magnify the distance between torturer and prisoner and therefore dramatize the former's power" (50). Falling prey to the communist ideology that oppresses them, Kien's extended family attempts to reassert its dominance through torture. When Kien is accused of stealing a few potatoes from his aunt's house, his cousin Tin beats him nearly to death under the watchful eye of his own mother. Protective of her abusive son, Kien's aunt advises, "Be careful, Tin, don't hit him in the face," while blaming Kien for the beating: "You caused this to happen to yourself" (160-61). By watching him suffer, Kien's aunt reasserts her meager authority over him in what amounts to "a fantastic illusion of power," to use Elaine Scarry's words (28).

The structure of torture employed first by the distraught mother, and second by her vindictive siblings soon gives way to war in *The Unwanted* in the person of despicable Lam. After a failed attempt to escape the country, Khuon's parasitic lover forces himself back into the Khuon family unit in ways reminiscent of the communist regime infiltrating Khuon's life. Lam's double rape of Kien and his nanny Loan, both under the care of a pregnant Khuon, gives the torturer a new hideous face. When Khuon convinces Loan to end both their unwanted pregnancies, eight-year-old Kien suddenly becomes the target of Lam's uncontrollable rage: to avenge the rejection of his own lineage, Lam reasserts his authority through physical violence directed at the powerless. Kien's body functions like a territory to be marked, claimed, and literally penetrated only to cause psychological harm to the mother who had defied him with "exaggerated detachment" (129). Having proclaimed, "I am not going to take this abuse any longer ... don't toy with me, dirty whore," (129) Lam repeatedly violates Kien in acts of spiteful pedophilia. Torture, "the willful infliction of ... bodily agony" in Scarry's own words, quickly gives way to war, when Lam specifies who he intends to injure, thus clarifying "the relation between the obsessive act of injuring and the issue on behalf of which that act is performed" (63). As he holds Kien down by the neck, Lam whispers, "Listen to me and listen good, little muck ... someday when you grow up, if you ever have to blame this on anyone, blame it on your mother. She started this *war* first, the moment she destroyed my unborn child" (Nguyen, *The Unwanted* 130; my emphasis). The child's violation functions as an act of vindictive retaliation that both delineates and attaches blame to an opponent, in a war of which Kien becomes the unfortunate object. Lam punishes Kien, the half-breed, for living in the place of his own flesh and blood, Loan's child, whom he views as the unborn peasant child of the revolution. Khuon, the former business woman, claimed his progeny's life so that he can claim her child's psyche as his words "seeped into [Kien's] soul like ink" (130).

War had been declared reenacting a vile conflict between communism and profiteering imperialism. Khuon, upon realizing “from the way he behaved” (260) that her son had been raped, vows to annihilate Lam. Unbeknownst to Kien, she uses her reputation as a fallen woman to seduce Mr. Qui Ba, the community leader so that she may send Lam to a reeducation camp. Wishing him to “rot in hell” “like a stray dog...[that] no one will ever remember,” (261-2) she comes face to face with him six years later, upon rescuing Kien from the same camp after his failed escape by boat. Warfare is ever present in Khuon’s last words to Lam as she hisses: “Bastard, I sent you away because you hurt my son. I am a mother. I had no choice but to seek vengeance” (260). As she adds: “I couldn’t get revenge if I didn’t have concrete facts...I sat on the edge of his bed and I watched [Kien] suffer while I was pregnant with your daughter” (261). The state of warfare that opposes female agency to male perversion ends with Khuon reasserting her domination over Lam as a resourceful and caring mother.

Not only does the narrative of *The Unwanted* set up a dichotomy between Khuon and Lam in which Kien acts like a mere prey, a symbolic territory to be conquered or defended, but it also lays blame and invites responsibility in ways that erase Kien’s position altogether. Despite his mother’s best efforts, the redefinition of power dynamics around him leaves Kien helpless, terrified and alone. As Scarry alludes to in her study, “the impact of pain on human consciousness” often leads to a dispossession of the self since “one’s own body and voice now no longer belong to oneself” (53). *The Unwanted* provides ample evidence of Kien as subject working through the psychic effects of these traumatic experiences. Yet autobiography as a genre does not lend itself without suspicion to psychoanalytical criticism, given the act of construction or invention implied in the act of narration.

Similarly, although the act of writing is commonly considered therapeutic for trauma survivors, self-representation and the representation of trauma appear contradictory; while autobiographical writing necessitates self-representation, trauma is often defined as that which evades representation. These paradoxes point to what scholar Leigh Gilmore calls the “limits of representation,” contending in the latter case that “the project of representing the self and representing trauma reveals their structural entanglement with law as a metaphor for authority and veracity, and as a framework within which testimonial speech is heard” (7). Indeed, truth telling, testimony, confession, and according to Gilmore, the burden that the exploration of trauma imposes on memory “by its public charge to disclose a private truth” (14) inevitably constrain the act of self-representation. Like the limit-cases Gilmore examines, Nguyen’s narrative evades conventions of the genre by using self-writing to articulate trauma while detailing self-consciously the process of recovery. Drawing a distinction between autobiographical genre and autobiographical discourse, Gilmore suggests that “as a genre, autobiography is characterized less by a set of formal elements than by a rhetorical setting in which a person places herself or himself within testimonial contexts...in order to achieve as

proximate a relation as possible to what constitutes truth in that discourse” (3). The rhetorical setting in *The Unwanted* first places vengeful Kien in the same structure of war defining his mother’s and Lam’s exploitative relationship. It then presents Kien’s impulse to write as means to heal from the violence he endured and from the violence he later committed.

By conflating self-representation, articulation of trauma, and self-writing as healing, *The Unwanted* intensifies the paradox of identification, what Gilmore calls the “autobiographical paradox of the unusual or unrepresentative life becoming representative” (19). Yet as it evades the boundaries of autobiography, the narrative also reinscribes itself within its conventions by inviting moral judgment, aligned with the autobiography’s tradition of “institutionalizing penance and penalty as self-expression” (Gilmore 14). *The Unwanted*, under the guise of merely chronicling Kien Nguyen’s life events as he experienced them, adopts a confessional dimension by bearing witness to the acts of violence that he himself commits against a loved one, namely Kim, his first love and the northern daughter of their community leader. His mistreatment of Kim, although rooted in abuse and the despair born from such abuse, continues to torment Nguyen well into adulthood. By presenting himself as a perpetrator of violence, Nguyen seeks to purge himself of such violence. Only by confronting the past, including his own contributions to the shaping of his part, can he free himself from it. As Gilmore contends, “the self who reflects on his or her life is not wholly unlike the self bound to confess or the self in prison, if one imagines self-representation as a kind of self-monitoring” (20). Although “culpable” (20), the self also seeks to be “responsible” and invites sympathy “through acts of self-inspection and self-revelation” (19). Through self-scrutiny, which according to Gilmore “enables an autobiographer to be representative more than any particular set of experiences,” (19) Nguyen demonstrates a longing to gain control over the trauma experienced during his most formative years, thus fostering identification, credibility and trust.

While Kien’s biraciality marks him as a tainted element that can never be assimilated into the nation reunited under communism, the emerging paradigm of war and torture that characterizes his familial life places Kien at risk of self-destruction in the contest to survive. The power struggle between Khuon and Lam that results in Kien’s rape indeed causes Kien to equate the feeling of “emptiness that grew bigger and colder” inside him with “shame and isolation” (Nguyen, *The Unwanted* 131). As Kien attests, “humiliation was eroding my soul. My mind was empty. I retreated into a white cocoon, just like death, cold and vacant, and at that moment it was the only comfort I could find” (131). By resorting to dissociation as a means to flee and regain control, Kien attempts to protect himself from what Judith Herman terms “a familial climate of pervasive terror” (98). In *Trauma and Recovery*, psychiatrist Judith Herman apprehends both the political and personal facets of psychological trauma, including stages of recovery. She confirms that voluntary suppression of thoughts, induced trances, and dissociative states are coping mechanisms recalled in the

testimony of many survivors of child abuse (102). She warns specifically against these “protective feelings of detachment” which may also “lead to a sense of complete disconnection from others and disintegration of the self” (108). While Lam whispers to Kien, “Scream and I will break your neck” (130) or, “If you are stupid enough to tell your mother about this, I will go after your brother next” (131), Kien experiences the overwhelming sense of helplessness commonly associated with acts of violence that, according to Herman, violate the autonomy of a person at the level of basic bodily integrity. Years later, his body still remembers when he finds himself trapped in a reeducation camp in Lam’s company. As “a familiar yet haunting voice uttered my name,” Kien states, “it was as if an electric current had jolted through my spine. I wanted to run, but my knees wobbled. I wanted to speak, but the words were trapped in my throat. Everything threatened to turn black around me” (Nguyen, *The Unwanted* 250). Although he lacked an understanding of sexuality at the time of his rape, Kien’s body continues to register its destructive effects well into adolescence.

Unsurprisingly, as Herman contends, Kien’s “capacity for intimacy is compromised by intense and contradictory feelings of need and fear” (56) that manifest themselves during his dramatic goodbye with his girlfriend Kim on the eve of his departure for America. Although Khuon feels victorious in the struggles against Lam’s assertion of power, her own suffering has not gone unnoticed by her son. His sense of self compromised by the anger, guilt and shame at the indignity suffered as a child, Kien replicates the structure of war informing Lam and Khuon’s interaction in his own romantic relationship. Upon falling in love with Kim, Kien struggles to separate her familial and political affiliation from his own feelings for her as Mr. Qui Ba’s daughter, the community leader with whom his mother has an illicit affair. Kim embodies for Kien both the harm caused by the corrupt communist system and the possibility of finding validation in her professed love for him. In the immediacy of his departure, Kien finds the courage to seek the physical intimacy he longs for, yet experiences the contradictory urge to hurt Kim. While expressing his love to her, he uses the rhetoric of war to confess: “I didn’t understand why she cried; yet I didn’t want to find out...I had to get revenge for my mother, and for myself. Revenge required a price. I wondered what would be my price? I reached for her nylon pants, took them off and threw them on the ground next to her shirt. Intoxicated...I took off my own clothes as I watched her naked body shiver” (Nguyen, *The Unwanted* 313). Unable to dissociate the girl he adores from the daughter of the communist leader, Kien discovers in his own sexuality an unsuspected form of power; his burgeoning sexuality yields a sense of agency that he has difficulty controlling. Carnal desire transforms into the compulsion to inflict pain to avenge his and his mother’s mistreatment at the hands of the local authorities. The empowerment that comes with the assertion of his masculinity through what appears to be unconsented sex is immediately questioned by his own inability to trust his feelings, which her panicked words reinforce. As she asks

feebly “what will happen to the baby, unwanted before it’s even born because its father is a half-breed,” (313) she revives the repressed “agony that [Kien] has buried so deep into [his] soul” (315). Like a wounded animal, Kien retaliates in a speech full of hatred, an expression of his inner pain that verges on masochism. He states odiously: “Do we look like we belong together? You with your stupid Communist accent, it sickened me from the very first day we met. I hate you and everything that you stand for. I hate your father and the way he treated my mother. I hate your people, how they robbed me of everything I ever got. If I could hurt one of you, I can leave this place satisfied” (316). In his panic, Kien momentarily negates Kim’s individuality in favor of the collective “you” that identifies her as the enemy who has continually displaced him from his motherland because of his father’s genes.

Yet in brutalizing his beloved, Kien only succeeds in brutalizing himself. As Judith Herman explains, trauma brings about loss that must be mourned, but survivors often “refuse to grieve as a way of denying victory to the perpetrator” (188). Resistance to mourning commonly manifests as fantasy through revenge, as enacted here in *The Unwanted*: the victim imagines that by retaliating against the perpetrator, he/she will purge himself/herself of the pain of trauma. With the roles of victim and perpetrator reversed, the revenge fantasy acts as a “mirror image of the traumatic memory” and expresses both a “wish for catharsis” and a desire for vengeance that “arises out of the experience of complete helplessness” (Herman 189). As Herman clarifies: “In her humiliated fury, the victim imagines that revenge is the only way to restore her own sense of power. She may also imagine that this is the only way to force the perpetrator to acknowledge the harm he has done her” (189). Far from restorative or cathartic, revenge for Kien is quickly followed by “frustration and shame” as he admits: “Now I understood the price that I had to pay for my revenge. Whether Kim forgave me or not, I had broken her physically and emotionally. I was no better than Lam, or her father, or any loathsome creature that ever crossed my path. Worst of all, I had to live with that knowledge” (Nguyen, *The Unwanted* 322). As the abused child participates in the abuse of a loved one, he proves to himself that the abuse of which he was the object was justified by his malevolent nature. The ensuing self-loathing only exacerbates Kien’s desire for acceptance and belonging which had been plaguing him since the communist take-over.

Despite a greatly compromised sense of self, Kien succeeds where most Amerasians fail: he not only migrates to the United States with his mother and half siblings, but also adapts well to his new American life. Kien completes his studies and graduates from the prominent New York University of Dentistry in 1998, thus securing a comfortable middle-class American life, away from war, deprivation and abuse. Yet Vietnam continues to haunt Kien fourteen years after his escape to the United States. Determined to find peace of mind, Kien clings to his grandfather’s parting words that still resonate in his ear: “*If you want to ever achieve happiness, don’t dwell on the past...What is the point of*

*obsessing over something that has already happened, and that you cannot change? Live! And be merry*" (341). Kien's decision to "live" and "be merry" only succeeds in keeping his trauma repressed during the hectic years of graduate school. Shortly after graduation, Kien finds himself plagued by intensifying nightmares. He states: "Often, I dreamed that I was still on the streets of Saigon, trying to get the last of my documents signed. Other times, I saw myself drowning in the middle of a vast ocean. Above my head, pale corpses wrapped their limbs together to form a shield of flesh preventing me from reaching the surface" (342). Terrified and alone, Kien succumbs to a deep depression that leaves him feeling suicidal. He first turns to writing out of desperation to record his nightmares, committing each dream and "frightening images" (342) that haunt him to paper. Although helpful, this strategy captures memories that might be recurrent but remain disjointed. Kien does not find relief until he has written down his actual life story, at his therapist's suggestion. His memoir is thus born out of a solely individualistic endeavor. As he explains it himself, writing his memoir would not simply become cathartic; it would be literally lifesaving (Van, "Interview").

*The Unwanted: A Memoir of Childhood* adds to a large body of Vietnamese American life writing that typically mourns the loss of the homeland commonly seen as desecrated by the communist regime after the 1975 reunification. Leaving against their will unlike Kien, most refugees fled the new Communist government with a heavy heart and a guilty conscience. As Qui-Phiet Tran affirms, for Vietnamese nationals "being exiled means depriving one's life of its meaning because individual destiny is inseparable from national identity" (103). Inextricably bound to his native land, its soil and traditions, the refugee according to Nguyen Hung Quoc "carrie[s] with him the shame of leaving his fatherland, and also a treasure of memories and affections to help him endure his future fate of a miserable wanderer in a foreign country" (29). In the late nineties and early twenty-first century, many writers such as Lan Cao in *Monkey Bridge*, Dao Strom in *Tin Roof*, *Grass Roof*, lê thi diem thúy in *The Gangster We Are all Looking For*, Truong Tran's *Dust and Conscience*, or Bich Minh Nguyen in *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* located the pain of exile in detachment from a national destiny, which must be compensated for. Their writings nurture cherished cultural memories while expressing bitter nostalgia for the loss of the homeland. By contrast, Kien Nguyen attempts to banish from his mind the assaults perpetrated by a nation that fell prey to bigotry, selfishness, and cruelty. The loneliness and displacement expressed in Vietnamese American life writing are replaced in Kien's narrative by feelings of the hope of finding both solace and acceptance in the physical separation from the Vietnamese national space. For Kien, writing his memoir aims at eliminating victimization, reclaiming himself as a subject, and achieving a sense of psychological wholeness through forgiveness. In bearing witness to the horrors to which he was subjected, Kien as author/narrator begins to "shift from being the object or medium of someone's (the perpetrator's) speech...to being the subject of [his] own," which critic Susan Brison terms a "speech

act of memory” (39). As Brison explains, speech acts are performative in that “under the right condition *saying* something about a traumatic memory *does* something to it” (48). The process of recovery thus necessitates the remembering, yet letting go of, the past. In order to let go, or rather to avoid letting the past consume a victim of trauma as she invokes it, “traumatic memories... [as] the unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences [must] be integrated with existing mental schemes, and be transformed into narrative memory” (176), according to psychiatrists Bessel Van Der Kolk and Onno Van Der Hart. In *The Unwanted*, the act of writing fulfills this very function, that of confronting, exposing, classifying, and ultimately organizing traumatic memories into a coherent narrative over which the writer can assert control. As though an external observer of his own life, the author explains that when he started writing, he found himself “watching a little boy among the faces of [his past]” as “the events of [his] life unfold[ed] before [him]” (Nguyen, *The Unwanted* 342). As the little boy materializes on paper, so do his painful experiences, suddenly tangible and accessible, therefore utterable. This phenomenon, according to Susan Brison, describes the transformation of traumatic, sensory memory into narrative memory in order to remake the self.

The end of his narrative symbolizes the turning of a page in the author’s life so that the war that dictated his biraciality and resulted in his abuse may finally be put to rest—a moment which requires public recognition. While Kien Nguyen sells his book to a major press in a bidding war, he attests: “I completed *The Unwanted* on March 22, 2000, at the same time that the world observed the twenty-fifth anniversary of the end of Vietnam’s conflict. I don’t have the nightmares anymore” (343). Kien’s closing words mark the beginning of his self-definition. As Herman argues, the individual’s recovery cannot rely solely on its historicization: recovery has to take place “within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation” (155). By refusing the status of abuser or abused, victim or perpetrator, Kien Nguyen chooses self-determinism and agency. He writes: “My reason for writing this book at first was purely personal. I just wanted to heal myself. But, as the story progressed, I thought more and more about the other Amerasians I had encountered...I kept writing in hopes that these innocent victims’ lost childhoods might finally be mourned, and their buried secrets at last revealed” (343).

Finding relief but also purpose in writing his life story, Kien Nguyen reinscribes *The Unwanted* in the genre of Vietnamese refugee literature so prominent in the United States at the time of its publication in 2001. In so doing, the memoir can be said to focus on the political as it denounces the model of warfare regulating cultural and familial dynamics, in the image of the violent interactions between surrogate Americans and Vietnamese. It simultaneously focuses on the personal, revealing extraordinary efforts to protect the self from the shame, guilt, and indignity of torture and rape. Kien Nguyen’s memoir thus exposes the need to bring to the forefront of critical discussions the positionality of Amerasian children in post-war Vietnam and of their inevitable displacement from the reunified nation. Reduced to an



abused Amerasian body in Vietnam, Kien is finally free to enact self-acceptance through the act of writing, once safely on American soil. His literal inscription into American culture with the publication of his memoir necessitates both a physical separation from Vietnam, the land of his birth that repudiated his otherness, and his acceptance of such rejection. In commemorating unspeakable abuses that he and others like him have experienced, *The Unwanted* anchors itself firmly in a Vietnamese American literary tradition that has since then moved away from narrating war and trauma to focus instead on processes of acculturation in the United States, but continues to fight for recognition, authority and acceptance.

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