

“It’s Our War Too”: Barriers to Authorship by Women Writing Vietnam War
Poetry

Thesis by
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ABSTRACT

Even though American women had higher rates of involvement in the Vietnam War than any previous war, poems about their experiences were extremely scarce until over a decade after American troops withdrew. A major contributor to the lack of literary representation is the critical dismissal of women's war poetry as being unable to teach readers meaningful "truths" about war. This thesis examines two collections of female-authored poems, *Visions of War*, *Dreams of Peace* and *Shallow Graves*, which were published in 1991 and 1986 respectively. The former contains poems from 40 women, most of whom served as army nurses; the latter combines the experiences of Wendy Wilder Larsen, an American woman who lived in Vietnam for two years, and Tran Thi Nga, a Vietnamese woman who immigrated to America. The collections reveal that most American women responded to critical expectations either through self-erasure or active rebellion. In contrast to the American women, Nga is granted authority by critics because her Vietnamese perspective is unique in English literature, but her authorship is instead challenged during the process of adapting her story for an American audience.

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1. Introduction to Women's War Literature.

There is a long tradition for those who have witnessed war, whether as a soldier or as a civilian, to attempt to make sense of their experiences of war through writing. Within this tradition, readers and reviewers often scrutinize the writer's authority, based on whether they had sufficient participation in the war. Audiences have a clear picture in their mind about the types of people who know war, and usually, this picture excludes women. Literary critics often seize on two main points to diminish the contributions of women to war literature. First, they question whether women had enough physical presence to fully "see" the war and be qualified to speak on it. Moreover, critics note that women often tackle war poetry from a more subjective angle, and question whether this is appropriate for conveying truths about war.

The first criticism arises from the historical perception that war is a masculine activity, one that women do not participate in and thus cannot speak on. While this was true for many wars throughout history, things started to change during WWII, when new units were created for women in the armed forces, including the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service, Women Reservists, and Women Airforce Service Pilots. Over 350,000 women served in total during WWII (Kali Martin), which accounts for around two percent of the 16 million total enlisted Americans (Jonathan E Vespa 4). This trend continued during the Vietnam War, which had 265,000 enlisted women, accounting for about three percent of the nine million total military personnel (Vantage Point Contributor). While women in the military were vastly outnumbered by men and did not serve in combat roles, their first-hand accounts are nonetheless capable of providing novel understandings of war. Despite the undeniable physical presence of women in Vietnam, however, they continued to lack literary representation decades after the end of the war. *Unaccustomed Mercy* by Bill Ehrhart, an

anthology credited with establishing “the canon of Vietnam veteran’s poetry,” (Lorrie Smith 72) notably lacks any poems by women, even though it was published in 1989, 14 years after the end of the war. Smith summarizes: “In our re-writing of the war, the masculine subject is central and ‘that woman’ is almost always absent, despite her actual presence in the war” (71).

The second criticism of women’s war writing is centered on the perception that it is more subjective compared to men’s writings, and that this is undesirable. Susan Schweik unpacks this attitude by examining a review by Randall Jarrell of the poem “In Distrust of Merits,” which was published by Marianne Moore during World War II. Schweik discusses how Jarrell “systematically misreads her war poems, ignoring their dynamic processes,” then criticizes her poetry for not focusing enough on the literal (Susan Schweik 546)¹. She also points out how Jarrell contrasts Moore’s writing with another classic war poem, Wilford Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est”². Jarrell praises Owen, calling him “a poet in the true sense of the word, someone who has shown to us one of those worlds which, after we have been shown it, we call the real world” (549). Schweik, when commenting on Owen’s work, states, “the text’s commitment to ‘literal’ representation, its firm alliance with an authority of male experience, makes it especially high valued and qualifies it for inclusion in the ranks of canonical war poetry” (553). This example demonstrates that critics such as Jarrell emphasize the trait of “reality” when reading war poetry and believe that a poem is “real” only if it includes objective descriptions of war. Since critics also believe that women wrote in a more subjective manner, this precludes their poetry from capturing meaningful “truths” about war.

¹ Aside from Jarrell, a number of other literary critics also found the poem to be unsuccessful. Their main criticisms are that she focuses on her own feelings over the suffering of the soldiers, that her writing is influenced too much by the news, and that she did not distinguish between internal and external experiences of the war. (Bar-Yaacov 3-4)

² Owen was an English soldier who fought in WWI. The poem “Dulce et Decorum est” was written while Owen was being treated in a hospital during the war, in 1917. It is written from the point of view of a soldier who was attacked by gas shells and describes the gruesome aftermath with great detail. It is presumably based on Owen’s first-hand experiences, as he wrote about a similar incident happening to him in a letter to his mother. (Lee)

This thesis focuses on female accounts of the Vietnam War and discusses how critics' reluctance to grant literary authority to women influences their war poetry. I will first describe general trends in American women's poetry about the Vietnam War found within *Visions of War, Dreams of Peace*, the largest poetry anthology written by female veterans of the Vietnam War. Then, to understand how critical responses specifically affect American women, I will compare their poetry to that of a Vietnamese woman. I will perform a thorough reading of the poems published as *Shallow Graves*, which lends itself well to this purpose because it was co-authored by Wendy Wilder Larsen, an American woman, and Tran Thi Nga, a Vietnamese woman. The collection recounts Larsen's experiences of living in Saigon during the Vietnam War and Nga's life in Vietnam and subsequent immigration to America. While Larsen faces the same social pressures as other American women writing about war, Nga is exempt from them due to her proximity to the war and unique experiences as a Vietnamese person. Between the two, Larsen is the mastermind behind the book, and makes many choices in anticipation of critical responses. I will argue that Larsen expected critics to doubt her literary authority and attempts to counter this by remaining more emotionally detached and objective in her section. Instead, she makes Nga's poems more personal and emotional, since critics highly value Nga's ability to lend insights into Vietnamese perspectives. Nga enjoys more freedom to talk about stories and traditions that are important to her, however, she is restricted by her reliance on Larsen to "translate" her experiences into something that is palatable to American readers.

2. *Visions of War, Dreams of Peace* and Trends in American Women's Writings

Visions of War, Dreams of Peace was published in 1991, over a decade after the end of the war, and contains writings by 40 women, most of whom served as army nurses. While six of

the poets are of Vietnamese descent, it primarily captures the American perspective of the war. Through this collection, it is possible to identify shared experiences among American women who participated in the war. Based on their poetry, we can speculate that many female poets were aware of and heavily influenced by the general criticisms of women's war literature. Immediately after the war, criticisms seem to have deterred many women from publishing their poems, and from asserting their own presence in their writings. In contrast, many poems written years later point out and actively challenge the dismissal of women's writings and demand the same recognition as men.

When reviewing *Visions of War, Dreams of Peace*, Lorrie Smith comments that "Unlike Ehrhart's gathering in *Unaccustomed Mercy*, most of these poems have never been published before" (Lorrie Smith 72). The editors of the collection also highlight this in the preface, saying, "There is almost no published poetry by women about their wars," and "We hope that the reception given these works will encourage more women to write and publish, be reviewed, criticized, and proclaimed" (van Devanter and Furey xxii-xxiii). Therefore, when reading the poems in the collection, it is imperative to understand the barriers that discouraged women from publishing their works, and the role of this collection in correcting this suppression. Interestingly, the book also contains a foreword written by Ehrhart himself, where he explains that he did not include female poets in his collection because they did not submit their poems to him. He recounts a conversation with Van Devanter where she tells him, "Of course, they wouldn't send you their poems. You're a man" (xix). This statement illustrates the struggle that female writers face as they assumed, likely from personal experience, that (male) readers will dismiss their war poetry. They became discouraged from seeking any recognition, to the point where "Van

Devanter had to persuade a number of these writers to publish under their own names” (Lorrie Smith 73)

Although the existence of this collection represents a success in overcoming physical barriers to publication, mental obstacles persist and are evident in many poems. Several poets, rather than discussing their own presence and emotions, instead dedicate their voices to commemorating male soldiers whom they treated. One example is the poem “Hello, David,” which reenacts a conversation between a nurse and her patient David before his death. She begins with “Hello David – my name is Dusty. / I’m your night nurse. / I will stay with you,” then lists all the things she will do for him, from checking his vitals to writing a letter to his mother (van Devanter and Furey 43). Throughout the poem, she defines herself solely in relation to David, and only describes her actions when she performs them on his behalf. Moreover, there is a jarring contrast between the fact that she states the soldier’s name and her use of the pseudonym “Dusty” for herself. By remaining anonymous, she is unable to assume authorship or receive acknowledgement for her writing, yet she still writes, to give a voice to another person. In “The Friendship Only Lasted a Few Seconds” by Lily Lee Adams, she also describes the moments before one of her patients dies. To comfort him, she pretends to be his mother, faking a strong emotional bond with someone whom she has just met. When he passes away, she asks desperately, “How can I keep the / World from forgetting? / After all the friendship / Only lasted a few seconds” (39). In this poem, the nurse sheds her own identity to assume a false one for the benefit of her patient. Despite knowing him for only a few seconds, once he dies, she takes on the weighty burden of continuing his legacy, a burden that should not belong to her. Adams’ obligation towards the male soldier takes away from her ability to continue her own legacy, as she can no longer write solely about herself. Therefore, even in their own writing, these women

struggle with being the subject of a war poem and feel that male soldiers are more worthy of being written about and remembered. This self-erasure demonstrates the pervasiveness of the exclusion of women from war poetry, and how it has affected their own recollections of war.

In fact, some women perceive their very femininity to be a challenge to their understanding of war. Sharon Grant writes in “Flashback,” “If this is a war / why am I swaying on a hammock / painting my nails coral, / planning a tan?” (9) In the poem, Grant reminisces about a period when she was serving as an army nurse and was therefore physically involved in war. Despite this, she undermines her own knowledge of it, even questioning *if* it is a war at all. Grant specifically describes participating in feminine behaviors, and this is incongruent her perception of war. This incongruence echoes the criticism that women’s accounts of the war are not real, since even Grant herself is unable to believe in the “reality” of war while performing the role of a woman. Though the poets in *Visions of War, Dreams of Peace* defy criticisms of women’s war literature through the act of publishing, many are still influenced by it and express self-doubt about their own authority to serve as voices of military conflict.

In contrast, many poems in later decades actively rebel against the physical and mental silencing of women writing about war. Norma J Griffiths asks in her 1982 poem “The ‘Vietnam Vet’”:

The ‘Vietnam Vet’
people instantly conjure
their own picture
in their mind

Is it ever of
a woman? (94)

Griffiths strongly asserts that she is a veteran and expresses frustration that she is not recognized as such. By placing the term “Vietnam Vet” in quotation marks, she challenges the idea that it

has a set definition and asks the reader to question the images they associate with war veterans. Many other poems address the same issue, ranging from pleading with the reader, “Please don’t forget me / I’ve been through war’s hell” (97), to expressing rage:

If one more guy
Asks me if I was in Saigon
Or DuNang
I think I’ll scream.
Or maybe pop him in the nose.
That’s what male vets do to get rid of their frustrations. (130)

Here, the poet directly compares herself to male veterans, and states that they can use their experiences in war as an excuse for violence, while her very participation in the war is questioned by men. Whether they succumb to it or fight it, each of the poets in *Visions of War*, *Dreams of Peace* demonstrate an acute awareness of how society perceives women in relation to war. Even within their own writing, they cannot assume literary authority on the topic of war – they must either defer to male compatriots or fight to convince others that their story is worth hearing.

3. Introduction to *Shallow Graves*

Shallow Graves also appeared in the decades following the war, when women began to reclaim their voices through publication. The authors Larsen and Nga met when Larsen stayed in Saigon from 1970-1971, and they decided to work on a book together when they met again in America, after Nga immigrated in 1975. The book is a collection of prose-poetry outlining the women’s experiences relating to the Vietnam War, and includes many outside sources including letters, excerpts from other works, and folk poems. Although it is published as one cohesive collection, Larsen and Nga’s cultural backgrounds create a divide between their respective sections. Larsen displays a greater need to prove her literary authority, which she accomplishes

by hiding details about her personal life and emotions that may call her credibility or objectivity into question. On the other hand, Nga's section is highly personal, and she speaks extensively about her family and community, as well as the pressures she faces to keep Vietnamese traditions alive. This structure conforms well to the expectations of critics who valued Vietnam War writings from a Vietnamese perspective over American perspectives.

By the publication of *Shallow Graves* in 1987, over a decade after American troops withdrew from Vietnam, many critics were skeptical about American portrayals of the Vietnam War. In a review of American and Vietnamese poetry, Subarno Chattarji writes of one poet: "Yet the 'touchy-feely' guilt-ridden desire expressed by [Larry] Rottmann reflects American desires and pathologies that seem imposed onto the post-war Vietnamese landscape and people. Rottmann reinforces some of the insularity of post-war veteran writings by projecting Vietnam as a space for karmic regeneration" (Subarno Chattarji 214). Chattarji characterizes many American poets as expecting a reward in the form of spiritual healing, and casts doubt on whether American poetry benefits anyone else besides the writer. In contrast, he praises poetry written by Vietnamese people, stating that they "create polyphonic counterpoints to the monophony of American points of view" (216). He makes it clear that he is not alone in his desire for more Vietnamese voices by stating, "there has been a concerted effort since the early 1980s to make Vietnamese representations of the war and its aftermath available to an English-reading audience, primarily in the U.S." (216).

Indeed, several reviewers of *Shallow Graves* echo Chattarji's interest in hearing a Vietnamese perspective on the war and come to the consensus that Nga's story is important and deserves to be told. In contrast, they take aim at Larsen's section, and question whether it is necessary or relevant. For instance, a review in *Time Magazine* states "Wendy Wilder Larsen

reconstructs the early '70s from the American point of view; Tran Thi Nga offers a far more unusual perspective” (“Review of *Shallow Graves*”). Linsey Abrams publishes a longer review in the *New York Times*, and claims that “The least successful part of the book is Wendy Larsen's own story” (Abrams). Referring to Larsen’s criticism of the war and its consequences, Abrams states, “Ironies are pointed up that now, in 1986, function only as sad and obvious truths.” In contrast, she praises Nga’s story, stating that it “helps illuminate the larger history of a country.”³ These reviews demonstrate the different criteria that are used to judge Larsen and Nga’s writing. Due to the lack of Vietnamese representation, reviewers expect Nga, a single person, to represent the perspective of an entire country. In contrast, they see Larsen’s work as superficial because they assume that as an American, she does not have new “truths” to deliver. There is also a double standard in that reviewers consider a Vietnamese perspective to be a significant new contribution to the understanding of the Vietnam War, but not a female perspective. The review from *Time Magazine* describes Larsen’s perspective as simply “American,” without any mention of the fact that she is one of few women to have published poetry about the Vietnam War. American women like Larsen therefore face dual challenges: as women, they are underrepresented in war literature and must prove their authority, yet as Americans, their experiences are not considered to be unique.

While Nga enjoys greater literary authority on account of her Vietnamese heritage, there is one major detail that undermines this: the fact that she did not write her own poetry. The description of the book reads: “These two women – the one, American; the other, Vietnamese – have come together, in a way their countries never could.” (Larsen and Nga, back cover) This

³ A review in *Library Journal* states “The authors nicely convey their impressions of life in Vietnam” (Grefrath). Another review in the *Los Angeles Times* treats Larsen more favorably, but states that a large contributor to her success is that she sets “all the verbal and material accouterments of American presence at a distance from herself” (Eder). Thus, each reviewer judges the book mainly by its ability to capture life in Vietnam.

summary implies that both women are equally represented within the poetry and are partners in the writing process. However, in the foreword, Larsen reveals that she made the decision to publish the book, as she started writing her own poems in 1971, and decided to incorporate Nga's story after they met again in 1975. She also states that "I transformed her memories into narrative verse," while Nga contributed only by telling her stories on recording. (foreword, unpaginated). The result is that Larsen has literary control over the poetry and is responsible for translating Nga's experiences for an American audience. Even though Nga's familiarity with Vietnamese perspectives gives her the advantage of having unquestioned authority, she faces a different barrier to authorship: her inability to write English poetry on her own.

4. Wendy Larsen and Her Pursuit of Objective Poetry

One notable feature of Larsen's writing is her commitment to eliminating any details that may lead the reader to question her credibility. Larsen omits many pieces of personal information from her poems, including details about her husband. In the first poem, "Assignment," she states that she travelled to Vietnam to accompany him on a reporting assignment. Beyond this, however, she provides no further details about who he is, or what he does when they are not together. In fact, Nga is the one to reveal her husband's identity: the bureau chief for *Time Magazine* in Saigon, John Larsen (225). Since Larsen wrote Nga's part, she presumably wants the reader to know this fact but chooses not to reveal it herself. A likely motive for this is that, like many poets in *Visions of War, Dreams of Peace*, Larsen believes that her readers will not be interested in knowing personal details when she is the one to tell them and would prefer to read about events that they perceive to be more closely related to the war.

However, she includes it in Nga's part because she feels that critics will be more open to receiving personal information when it is told by a Vietnamese woman.

The withholding of personal details is also used strategically by Larsen to make herself appear more trustworthy and sympathetic. In "Assignment," after hearing about her impending move to Vietnam, she writes that the extent of her knowledge about the country comes from hearing a speech from Madame Nhu during college, seeing a photograph, and watching television. However, in John Larsen's memoir, he shares that he and Wendy had travelled to Saigon for their honeymoon in November 1966 (J. Larsen). Wendy Larsen has first-hand information about life in Vietnam, yet she conceals this from the audience and instead speaks only about second-hand accounts. By claiming to know less than she does, Larsen implies that she encounters Vietnam as a blank slate, and any feelings that she holds towards Vietnam are formed based on the experiences she documents in *Shallow Graves*. John Larsen's memoir also reveals other details about their lives in America: he is the son of Roy Larsen, the famous CEO of *Life, Inc.*, the company that publishes *Time Magazine*. Both he and Wendy, who met as classmates at Harvard, lead privileged lives. Larsen's exclusion of these details in *Shallow Graves* is likely an attempt to present herself as an independent and legitimate contributor to Vietnam War literature, without readers questioning her background and connections. Therefore, Larsen makes the tradeoff of documenting less of her life to attain objectivity, literary authority, and independence instead. This is a choice that many American women make, as evident in *Visions of War, Dreams of Peace*.

Larsen's writing, besides containing few personal facts, also lacks strong emotional reactions to her experiences. The reader must infer how she responded to the events she describes, based on detached descriptions. For instance, after she finds out about her husband's

assignment to Vietnam, it is reasonable that she is apprehensive about travelling to a war zone.

However, she does not describe her emotions directly, and instead writes:

Vacationing in New England
 Two weeks before we left,
 We got the news:
 Our predecessor had been captured
 A prisoner of the Khmer Rouge
 Held somewhere in Cambodia. (6)

Her description of the fate of her predecessor implies anxiety about her own fate after she travels to Vietnam. However, Larsen decides not to write about this anxiety itself and conceals it within a piece of objective evidence. Similarly, in “The Noodle Cart,” Larsen’s last poem set in Vietnam, her only comment about her departure is “Once I knew we were leaving / I wanted a noodle cart” (95). The rest of the poem is spent describing noodle carts to the reader and explaining her interest.

I loved the way the vendor
 Knew his clients
 Knew their favorite noodles
 What they like on top
 Like a waitress knowing you like your eggs
 “sunny-side up” in an American coffee shop. (95)

She makes no mention of her feelings about returning home, even though that is the more important event in her life. Therefore, Larsen restrains herself from speaking directly about her true emotional state, and instead expresses her emotions in a convoluted manner by tying it to information about life in Vietnam. We can infer that she is reluctant to leave Vietnam, since her first reaction is to attempt to bring a Vietnamese relic to America, one that she is very attached to. However, she does not directly discuss her more complex feelings about Vietnam, instead deflecting them onto her emotional attachment to the noodle cart, which she can explain more simply to her American readers, using the analogy of an American coffee shop. In both poems,

she writes about defining moments of her life, yet she holds herself back from commenting on it directly.

Larsen's reluctance to include personal information or emotional details causes her writing to deviate from the typical autobiography, and venture into the realm of reporting. The choice to write in a more reporting-like style may have been influenced by critical responses to other women's war poems, or her husband's success as a reporter. Larsen, as the wife of the *Time Magazine* bureau chief, undoubtedly encountered many Vietnam War journalists, and this may have influenced her approach to writing about Vietnam. Larsen's reporting-like writing style is noted in the *New York Times* review, which states "In sections of less subjective reporting, Wendy Larsen is at her best," and gives an example where she reproduces a song written by a Vietnamese bar-girl (Abrams). Though the quote is critical of Larsen's writing, it simultaneously affirms her approach, indicating that the best way for her to write a war poem as an American woman is to emulate an objective, reporting-like style. Therefore, Larsen appears to be aware of and responsive to critical expectations when she wrote *Shallow Graves*.

Larsen's writing style in *Shallow Graves* also holds many similarities with nonfiction writing, ranging from the prose-like verse to the way she handles outside sources. The poetry is very plain and consists entirely of straightforward sentences, which do not encourage the reader to look for hidden meanings or imagine alternative interpretations. This lack of ambiguity is another similarity between Larsen's poetry and reporting, which is expected to be direct and to-the-point. Therefore, Larsen's writing reflects her purpose of appealing to her reader's logic rather than their emotions to convince them of the authenticity of her work. Larsen also frequently includes direct reproductions of texts written by the Vietnamese people she encounters and uses them to add historical significance to her writing. These excerpts break the

continuity of her narrative since she often includes them with no relation to the rest of the story. For example, in “Bar-Girl’s Song to a GI,” which Abrams gave as an example of Larsen’s “less subjective reporting”, Larsen retells a song she heard:

I love you beaucoup.
 You love me titi.
 You give me baby.
 I give you V.D. (33)

However, in the neighboring poems, there is no information about the person who sang the song, nor Larsen’s reaction to it. Larsen chooses to present the song as a standalone artifact of Vietnamese history and excludes her own presence from this moment, giving up her literary spotlight to shed light on an issue caused by the war. The bar-girl’s perspective is worthy of being included because she is a victim of the war, but Larsen’s perspective is not, since she is unaffected by it. Like the other American women in *Visions of War, Dreams of Peace*, Larsen has difficulty accepting the spotlight in her own writing and feels that it should be given to someone who has suffered the consequences of war more directly.

While Larsen’s dedication to providing first-hand sources from Vietnamese people causes her writing to appear more authentic, it also calls into question whether she is writing at the expense of the Vietnamese people she represents. For instance, in the poem “Student’s Response,” she reproduces a homework assignment from one of her university students who was asked to “compare William Blake’s ‘London’ to Saigon in 1970” (30). In the excerpt, the student laments the corruption of Saigon, asking “Where is the Pearl of the Orient – that sweet name?” and expresses anger at American occupants: “Large foreigners live in her houses. / Men in green uniforms patrol her streets” (31). This excerpt is valuable as it provides a piece of information American readers are interested in – the feelings of Vietnamese citizens toward the war. However, Larsen’s reproduction of this response is a violation of the student’s privacy,

especially considering she is so guarded about her own emotions. It also brings up copyright issues, since she uses it to add depth to her own poetry collection, without crediting the original author.

This moral dilemma further presents itself in “Letter from a Soldier,” where Larsen talks about a woman who receives a letter from her fiancé fighting in Laos.

I heard about the letter
Told her my husband
was doing a story
on the invasion of Laos

When I asked if he could quote from her letter
She took the paper from her pocket
And burned it on the table
With a look beyond disgust. (89)

Here, there is no ambiguity in the fact that the letter’s owner wishes to keep the letter private.

Larsen disregards her wishes and quotes the letter anyway: “We are running scared. We cannot hold the line. Everyone is running. No one even stops to dig in. We call in American support.

Nothing happens. I doubt that I will make it home” (89). Again, this letter is valuable to

American readers because it allows us a glance into the thoughts of Vietnamese soldiers.

However, Larsen includes this letter by directly disrespecting the letter recipient, which shows that she is more concerned with bolstering the value of her own writing than with benefitting the

Vietnamese people. Based on the poem, it is also fair to assume that Larsen did not see the letter before it was burned and constructed the letter herself but presents it as the words of the

Vietnamese soldier. If this is the case, then Larsen has shown that she does not care about maintaining authenticity and is willing to fake it if it benefits her. This disregard leads us to

question whether she incorporates objective snippets in her poetry out of a genuine interest in

providing new knowledge to the American public, or in pursuit of self-serving desires, just as Chattarji complained.

5. The Complicated Relationship Between Larsen and Nga

Given Larsen's treatment of other Vietnamese perspectives in her writing, her relationship with Nga should also be scrutinized. As mentioned earlier, Nga told Larsen her entire life story, but Larsen has control over which experiences *Shallow Graves* ultimately records and how it does so. This creates a deeply imbalanced relationship between Larsen and Nga, where many literary choices seem to solely benefit Larsen. One academic essay points out, "Nga's portion comprises about 170 pages to Larsen's 106, the former purports to cover Tran Thi Nga's extremely eventful life from 1927 to 1980, while the latter covers Larsen's experiences only during the years of 1971-75. That Larsen requires approximately 3/5 as many pages to cover four year of her life as Tran Thi Nga requires for 53 of hers inevitably raises questions about the precise nature of the collaboration" (Uba, 64-65). Larsen assigns disproportionately large literary space to herself, even though Nga's part of the story is more interesting for most readers. Larsen's literary space is often used to capture Vietnamese perspectives without the consent of the original authors. If her primary motivation was to showcase Vietnamese perspectives, she could have given more space for Nga to provide them willingly, rather than forcibly taking ownership for external sources in her own section.

There are also several instances where Larsen uses Nga's presence to fill in gaps in her storytelling. For instance, she addresses her ignorance of Vietnamese culture in the poem "Saving Face," in which she feels helpless amidst a conflict between her servants because she does not understand cultural nuances governing how she should act. However, she rectifies this

situation by clarifying that she “called the office and spoke to Mrs. Nga / the only woman there,” and Mrs. Nga comes up with a solution so that Larsen “saved everyone’s face / and brought peace to my Asian household” (18). Through this first encounter between Larsen and Nga, we see that their relationship arose out of practicality, rather than a personal connection. Larsen does not have to face any consequences of her ignorance, since Nga could step in as a “translator” of Vietnamese culture. This poem suggests that between the two, Nga is the one with greater power and influence, when the opposite is true since Larsen is the one to write Nga’s poetry.

An important moment where Larsen and Nga’s experiences overlap is when both include a poem titled “the Noodle Cart” (95, 220-221). In Larsen’s version, she describes the process of obtaining the noodle cart as a simple favor, “I asked Mrs. Nga to help me find a noodle cart / after a month she said she had. / To buy one, she had to talk a family out of theirs” (95).

Although this description hints that the noodle cart was difficult to obtain, it does not accurately represent the consequences of this request. However, Nga’s poem goes into much more detail:

Every week I went to the same noodle man
 Pretending I went for noodles
 [...]
 After 14 bowls, he told me where to go look. (220)

Furthermore, when discussing the man whom she bought the cart from, she says,

The father refused to sell.
 The son said he had to. The father cried.
 The son told me to sneak back in the evening
 And take the cart. (221)

This poem gives insight into how requests that seem simple to Larsen can have heavy consequences for a Vietnamese family. However, it would seem insensitive for Larsen to describe these difficulties, since she brought them about, and the reader may also suspect whether she accurately represents them. To dispel these suspicions, Larsen feigns ignorance

about this aspect of Vietnamese culture and arranges for Nga to tell the story instead. When the same story is told by Nga, the reader responds with compassion for her difficulties, rather than dwelling on the fact that they took the noodle cart against the seller's will. Therefore, because she can freely manipulate Nga's poetry, Larsen manages to explain the consequences of her actions, without personally facing them.

In these examples, Larsen demonstrates that her relationship with Nga was not on equal grounds from the start since it arose out of a practical benefit. This practical benefit also becomes a literary benefit, as Larsen tailors both narratives so that her actions do not result in negative consequences for her. However, this collaboration seems to strictly benefit Larsen, while creating further imbalance between Larsen and Nga's literary presence. Nga already has proportionately fewer pages allotted her, and Larsen further takes away from her literary space by including poems such as "The Noodle Cart." While the story of the noodle cart is very relevant to Larsen's experience in Vietnam, it is relatively insignificant compared to the other trials and tribulations Nga describes in her section, and it is fair to assume that Nga would not have included it if not for Larsen.

6. Nga's Poetry, Vietnamese Culture, and Helplessness

It is clear from previous sections that while reviewers are more receptive to hearing Nga's story, they nonetheless have high expectations. As a Vietnamese woman, she should represent her country and make her culture accessible and palatable to American readers. Unlike Larsen, Nga does not succumb to these pressures as much in her storytelling. While she does explain aspects of Vietnamese culture, this is only done when it is necessary to understand her personal story. She does not divulge information about Vietnamese perspectives of the war out

of context for the sake of appeasing critical expectations; throughout the entire section, she is indubitably the center of each story being told. The writing of the book also complicates the reading of Nga's poetry. On one hand, Nga has influence over her part since she could choose which stories she told to Larsen. On the other, it is difficult to draw the line between what Nga intends to communicate, and what Larsen assigns to her. Nga is both an author and a persona, and when reading her poems, the reader must constantly question whether they represent who Nga is, or a projection of who Larsen wants Nga to be.

One clear advantage that Nga has as a narrator, compared to American poets, is that she can remain the focal point of each narrative, while still providing readers with the insight into Vietnamese perspectives they are looking for. For instance, the reader learns about Vietnamese perspectives toward war through the poem "The Lament of the Warrior's Wife," a folk poem dating back to the 18th century. While Larsen also includes several folk poems in her poems, they are usually abrupt, with seemingly little connection to her personal narrative. In contrast, the poem preceding "Warrior's Wife" leads up to it by describing Nga's interactions with her mother as a child.

She knew parts of the "Warrior's Wife" by heart
 And made us learn it
 To show how a brave wife behaves
 When her husband goes to war to serve his country. (122)

Therefore, the purpose of quoting "Warrior's Wife" is not to teach readers about general Vietnamese attitudes, but rather to lend insight about Nga's upbringing and her relationship with her mother. Throughout her section, Nga as a narrator does not experience the need to erase her own presence to capture larger "truths" about the war.

The theme of family is also very important throughout Nga's section, as she includes many stories about her family members. Often, she tells stories that she does not remember and

therefore has no direct connection to. For example, in “Politics” she says, “My father told me that when he was twenty / he taught himself French / so he could make more money” (114). In “The Execution”: “My elder brother remembers the day of the execution / in Yen Bai when I was very young,” (116) and in “Son Nu – Mountain Girls”: “My elder sister / will remember / happier mornings / in the highlands.” (117). These stories are at the very beginning of her section, cementing her dedication toward her family as a cornerstone of her writing from the start. In doing so, she shows that her story cannot be told or understood without the context of her whole family, so to deliver an effective “autobiography,” she must include short “biographies” of those who were important to her. This contrasts with Larsen, who makes few attempts to talk about her family. The only times her family is present is when Larsen reproduces their letters, which makes them seem distant and their influence weak. Whether this was her choice or Larsen’s, the book portrays Nga as a character with very strong ties to her family and culture who can tell a more complete story about herself, something that Larsen cannot achieve.

Like many of the women in *Visions of War, Dreams of Peace*, Nga takes on the responsibility of lending her voice to narrate on behalf of the people around her, however she does so without compromising her own presence. Nga constantly includes her family when describing the situations she faces, even when it would be very logical for her to focus on her own emotions instead. For instance, one difficult moment for Nga is when a Chinese general coerces her into marrying him, by holding her father hostage. On the day of the forced wedding, it would be natural for Nga to focus on how the general’s actions are hurting her. In the poem “The Wedding,” Nga does touch on her own reaction to the wedding, saying “I could not say one word to the general. / I cried silently” (162). However, she dedicates just as much of her poem describing the effects of the marriage on the people around her, saying:

Father asked for 30 ao dais,
 All velvets and satins,
 Hoping they could not be made.
 Chinese soldiers went with pistols
 Into the homes of the seamstresses
 Forcing them to sew the dresses. (162)

Therefore, even when recounting a moment where she is the main victim, Nga still takes note of the problems that others are facing, by describing her father's dread of the marriage, and even the suffering of the seamstresses. Like many other women who write about war, Nga feels responsible for capturing the emotions of those around her, who are unable to tell their own story.

At times, the book's heavy emphasis on telling the story of Nga's family opens her up to criticisms from the reader, something that Larsen carefully avoids in her poems. The most prominent example is her discussion of her second husband, Bao. She was in love in him before her marriage to the Chinese general, which she states in "Honeymoon" (165). When Nga returns to Hanoi a few years later, she discovers that her sister had married Bao and has a child with him. After Nga's first husband dies, Bao persuades her to become his second wife⁴, and she writes in "Return to Hanoi" that she thinks it would be a betrayal of her sister:

Bao kept writing for months and months.
 I kept refusing
 Afraid my sister might kill herself.
 She had slashed her wrist once before. (176)

However, in the next poem, after receiving blessings from her father and Bao's mother, she writes:

I said yes reluctantly,
 Not wanting anyone outside the family to know.
 We were married and had two children.
 After the second, we became like brother and sister.

⁴ In this section, she notes that having a second wife is relatively common in this time period in Vietnam. However, sharing a husband with one's sister would have been unusual.

I could not stand my sister's long face,
 Her jealousies, her unhappiness.
 Blood runs thick in my country. (177)

These two poems, when placed side-by-side, depict Nga unsympathetically for marrying Bao, knowing the effect it will have on her sister. The second poem exacerbates this by describing her sister's reaction to the marriage and reminding the reader that "blood runs thick in my country." These details are not necessarily to tell Nga's side of the story and including them only makes the marriage reflect more poorly on her. Therefore, we can see that when writing Nga's section, Larsen does not take as much care to maintain a positive image as she did in her own poetry. At the same time, Nga chooses to reveal this rather shameful story in the first place, showing that she is willing to accept responsibility for her actions in exchange for accurately depicting her sister's perspective.

Nga accepts this responsibility with full awareness of how the American public would perceive her actions. She demonstrates this in the poem "Allison," which describes an American woman who dated her son after they moved to America. Nga does not provide additional details about Allison, which allows her to be a proxy for a general American audience. She describes:

One night Allison said,
 "I accept you as an educated woman
 How could you let yourself
 Become a second wife?" (258)

Her inclusion of Allison's criticism shows that she understands how Americans unfamiliar with Vietnamese culture are likely to respond to her story. However, the book does not attempt to avoid or diminish these criticisms by manipulating the way the story is told. Instead, Nga's section remains steadfast to telling the story as it happened and capturing all perspectives and ends up feeling much more like a sincere attempt to tell an autobiography. Ironically, even

though authorship process of Nga's poems is much more obscure and ambiguous, her section is considered by many reviewers to be more authentic and memorable.

Finally, whether out of a personal sense of obligation or to fulfill readers' expectations, Nga's poetry takes on the heavy burden of memorializing Vietnamese traditions. In the middle section of the book, Nga largely describes the tumultuous events of her own life, which culminates in her moving to America along with American soldiers withdrawing from Vietnam. After delivering the final piece of her story in "The Church", in which she finds a place to live in America, she saves the last few poems of her section to talk about her family and culture. In "Death Day", she writes:

Each year we celebrated my father's death day.
 [...]
 We did this
 to show we had not forgotten him.
 We did this
 to teach his grandchildren
 and his great-grandchildren
 to respect their elders. (261)

Soon after that, in "Tet in America," she discusses her attempts to teach her family to celebrate Tet, even though they do not understand it. She says: "I said I did this not for them / but for our ancestors. / Inside I was sad / feeling myself on a desert / knowing my customs will die with me" (264). The last five poems, following "Tet in America," describe Nga's attempt to have her mother move to America and stay with her. Right after the application is approved, Nga receives notice of her mother's death and carries out a traditional Vietnamese funeral passage. In Nga's final poem, "Washington Pagoda," she states:

I prayed that we children
 Though across the world from one another
 Had followed the ancient traditions
 So her spirit would rest with Father's in Paradise. (273)

In each of these passages, she emphasizes her duty to remember her ancestors and pays tribute to her parents and ancient traditions instead of talking about herself. She realizes that the attempt to preserve her culture is likely futile, as she comments that “my customs will die with me” and that it isolates her from the rest of her family. However, she feels the pressure to maintain these traditions because of her unique perspective as the only person in her social circle who understands their importance.

This cultural duty becomes translated to a literary duty to capture and immortalize these pieces of Vietnamese culture through *Shallow Graves*. However, it is unclear whether this duty stems solely from Nga, or if it is in part assigned to her by Larsen. The final poem of the collection is written by Larsen and titled “In the American Museum of Natural History.” It describes Larsen and Nga visiting the museum together and remarking that there are very few displays of Vietnamese artifacts in the Asian history section. “Leaving the Hall of Asian Peoples, / Mrs. Nga smiles as she says, / ‘I think your country wants to forget about mine’” (278). The placement of this poem seems to suggest that this is the last event to occur before they wrote *Shallow Graves*. Therefore, Nga’s remark seems to be a conclusion of her goal for her poetry – to correct her people’s erasure from history. In fact, this erasure is framed as a continuation of the physical oppression the U.S. caused in Vietnam, as the U.S. fails to own up to the consequences the war left on Vietnam. Just as many American women rebel against the suppression of female voices through writing, Nga’s poetry is larger than herself, she takes on the much larger issue of literary oppression of Vietnamese voices.

Nga, despite this goal, is herself a victim of this suppression. While she succeeds in commemorating Vietnamese perspectives and traditions through writing, she cannot do so independently. Instead, *Shallow Graves* proves that for a Vietnamese voice to be heard, an

American must translate it into something that is more consumable. In the process, Nga lost her individual voice and cannot take full credit for her poetry, nor is her poetry truly representative of a Vietnamese perspective. Though Nga's frustrations regarding the erasure of Vietnamese voices is powerful, it is also a reminder to the reader that she can only express her emotions because Larsen makes space for it in her poem. As evidenced by the positive reviews, the transformed, Americanized version of Nga's story is enough to satisfy readers who proclaimed to seek novel, meaningful "truths." The text becomes a tragic demonstration that readers and authors often care more about the appearance of authenticity, and do not push for true representation of diverse voices.

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