

The Girl in the Photograph: The Vietnam War and the Making of National Memory

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Sunt lacrimae rerum...

—Virgil

I am the snow that burns.

I fall

Wherever men send me to fall—

but I prefer it in black, and seek the bone.

—Denise Levertov

The photograph of Kim Phuc, the so-called Napalm Girl, that appeared in newspapers during the last years of the Vietnam War—June 9, 1972 to be precise—shocked the world and still stands as one of the war’s central icons. The horrifying image of a nine-year-old South Vietnamese girl running naked down a road away from an American napalm strike, her child’s body on fire, her arms outstretched, her face contorted in pain, captured international attention. The photograph, which won a Pulitzer Prize and made the wounded child a symbol of the human capacity for atrocity, belongs to a small number of iconic images that have come to represent the horrors of the war’s casualties—and, indeed, of war itself. Kim Phuc, however, survived the devastating burns inflicted by napalm. More than two decades later, living in Canada, she became famous again in the mid-1990s through a second photograph and a speaking appearance on Veteran’s Day at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1996. This new photograph of Kim as the mother of an infant son, as well as her own repeated commentary on it, relocates her in the culture of trauma and testimony that has grown more and more powerful in the United States

since the end of the Vietnam war. Almost twenty-five years after the traumatic event of the napalm bombing, the girl's silent scream that spoke eloquently to the war's opponents is given voice by the language of trauma and recovery; the girl-victim of war's inhumanity becomes an adult survivor, who speaks publicly of her past experience and her hopes for peace in the future.¹

The history of the photograph offers a point of entry into a set of interlocking questions about the place of the Vietnam War in the American national imagination, as well as the role of iconic images in the construction of national memory. It also provides an opportunity to consider the role of public testimony in response to a traumatic event. When thirty-four-year old Kim Phuc speaks at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial wall as the girl in the picture, how do we value the effect of the adult survivor's autobiographical words compared to the wordless horror captured by photographer Huynh Cong "Nick" Ut? The story of the girl and the photograph are bound up with the traumatic history of the Vietnam war as it lives on in national memory—the American body politic, which is also embodied in the memorial wall through the names of those who served and died. The fate of the photograph also took on additional poignancy when it entered into the tangled relations among image, history, memory, trauma and testimony that were brought newly to the front of civilian consciousness with the events of September 11, 2001.

In her much-quoted 1973 essay "On Photography," Susan Sontag made the claim that photographs have more impact on viewers than television because television is a "stream of underselected images, each of which cancels its predecessor." Unlike television, Sontag argued thirty years ago, writing during the war, a "still photograph is a 'privileged moment,' turned into a slim object that one can keep and look at again." The example Sontag chose to illustrate her point was that of Kim Phuc: "Photographs like the one that made the front page of most newspapers in the world in 1971 [sic] a naked child running down a South Vietnamese highway toward the camera, having just been hit by American napalm, her arms spread wide open, screaming with pain—were of great importance in mobilizing antiwar sentiment in this country from 1967 on. And each one was certainly more memorable than a hundred hours of televised barbarities" (136).² While it is true that the prize-winning photograph acted to crystallize antiwar sentiment and may even "have stopped the war," as many antiwar veterans claimed, the fate of this particular photograph somewhat undermines Sontag's opposition between the two

mediums' ability to affect public opinion. Kim's suffering was captured and published movingly in a still photograph—and the still is what became the iconic image—but the photograph also immediately became a *story*, and as a story it has also *from the beginning* been featured as television reporting.³ (In fact, the picture appeared in newspapers the day *after* it broke on television.)



(Figure 1: Reprinted by permission of AP/Wide World Photos)

Put another way, while the still captures the “privileged moment,” and the responses to its reproducibility power the drive to political action, television, as we’ll see in a moment, with its tendency to repeat and revisit stories, puts the moment into narrative motion.

In her account of the photograph, Sontag identifies the napalm as American (this is unusual) and the highway as South Vietnamese, thus keeping track of political responsibility and geography—but she refers to Kim as a *child*, not a girl. In the captions and published reactions to the picture I’ve catalogued, it seems hard to find nation and gender together in the same description. Here’s a more typical version of how the picture

has been classified: “Famous photo of Vietnamese child, burned by napalm.” “AP photo of a young girl, running naked from fire became famous.”⁴ Kim tends to be characterized as a child, the incarnation of innocence, and as such stands for the injustices of war. The photograph almost immediately moves into a circuit of reproduction—the circulation of the image—that becomes independent of its subject. A comment about the photograph by the writer Studs Terkel in a magazine surveying the “photos of the century” in 1999 makes the translation explicitly: “This is the metaphor for one of the crowning obscenities of our century. The kid in that plane that dropped the bomb probably didn’t see this little girl, did not know it hit her or destroyed the world in which she lived. This is what terrorism is all about. The impersonal aspect of it” (80).⁵ (Terkel here makes the connection to terrorism specifically through the girl before September 11; he will also do so after September 11 as well: “Unless we learn what it is to be that bombed child—whether it be in Vietnam or Iraq—we learn nothing.”)

The potential for turning the image of Kim into a story about the horrors of war was exploited early on. The original television reporting took place on June 8, 1972 on the nightly news. On CBS, commentator Roger Mudd showed the filmed footage of Kim running down the road along with other children and relatives, accompanied by South Vietnamese soldiers. The dropping of napalm bombs is presented as accidental, and Mudd comments that “many were burned horribly.” He stumbles over the word “visibility,” as he observes that “visibility was poor, the weather bad” by way of explaining how the bombers could have missed their target.⁶ The South Vietnamese army was trying to drive the Communists out of villages along the road where they were thought to be hiding out. The story was reported routinely as part of continued coverage of the war, the first televised war in history.⁷ Kim is not singled out in this initial broadcast: “Some stripped bare,” Mudd says (when only Kim was naked), “only to find the napalm still burning on their backs.” In the lower right hand corner of the screen is the daily report on American war casualties—eleven, that day.

Two months later, again on the nightly news, Dan Rather picks up the trail of Kim Phuc through the photograph. He recalls the accident and its injuries, evoking the photograph (though not identifying the photographer, whose prize will come the following year). “An AP photographer, who saw the mishap, took this now famous but still tragic picture of a young girl horribly burned, running naked.” In Rather’s update, a white circle is drawn around Kim, selecting, literally *targeting*, the girl from

among the children as the heroine of a tale with a happy ending—a story that is crafted to make sense in American narrative terms. Remember the little girl who was burned when South Vietnamese planes accidentally dropped napalm in a village northwest of Saigon? Good news. “At the time, there was a great deal of doubt about whether she would live.” Then Rather presents another photograph of Kim Phuc in the hospital standing between two nurses. “She’s able to smile now,” Rather points out cheerfully, “her burns are healing, and doctors say she may be released from the Saigon hospital by this fall—in time for school.” This act of storying, of denationalizing the victim—she’s no longer named as South Vietnamese—is a crucial step in the process of creating a universal version of suffering designed for an American audience. In Rather’s narrative rendering, Kim becomes just another kid going to school (just like yours)—a plucky survivor of what might have been a complete tragedy, a happy camper. Despite the reference to the burns covering most of her torso, the camera focuses on the smile, which will continue into adult life (as will the scars from the burned flesh).

Since the mid-nineties, the photographs of Kim as an adult—as well as a documentary film and a book—have continued the work of television reporting in prolonging and transforming the biographical portrait into a North American narrative of postwar reconciliation between the United States and Vietnam. The iconic image of the Napalm Girl now *coexists* in the public spaces of memory with a counter-iconography, as Kim Phuc offers herself up as an intercessor, or agent of forgiveness. In 1995, Joe McNally, whose assignment for *Life* magazine had been to follow up on the lives of people who had been subjects of Pulitzer Prize photographs, explains that he needed to reference the original image in his reprise: “I said to her, ‘Kim, to make this picture work, I have to be able to see the scars.’ And she knew that.” She had been nursing her son, the photographer explains, and that activity “gave us a very natural way to show her life, her positive nature, her love for this new child and still show the scars that war had left on her physically” (<http://www.pdonline.com/legends55/editorial/6.htm>). In *Life*, *Classic Photographs*, where the image was collected at the end of the century, McNally recalls the short in similar language: “I was nervous,” he recalls, “I knew I had to see the scarring—otherwise there would be no touch point to the original photograph. . . . She understood. She could not have made me feel more comfortable” (149). As Kim cradles her infant son, pressing her gently smiling face against the baby’s smooth skin, the intricate mapping of scars that cover her left arm and most of her torso stand out like a strange

language of hieroglyphs. Through the scars and the traumatic memory they carry, the silent girl war icon becomes a maternal voice for peace. Displayed at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles (October 1996), the new mother and child photograph is mounted to the right of the original—inviting the viewer to read the transformation on the gallery wall like a page in the book of survival narratives, from trauma to recovery.⁸



(Figure 2: Copyright Joe McNally)

Kim's Story: The Road From Vietnam appeared in 1996. Created by Shelley Saywell, a Canadian filmmaker, the documentary opens with a shot of bombs released from a B-52, four canisters of napalm spiraling down to earth. The narrator describes what the images show in color—"a firestorm of napalm is captured on film." Then comes the tape of the girl running down Highway 1, her mouth stretched open in agony. The voice-over continues: "And an image is frozen in history." This biographical memoir in film proposes to tell the story of a wordless photograph and to enlist the subject of the photograph in its unfolding. "This is the story behind the picture that touched the world." Even before the title and credits for the film roll, we have seen footage both of the photo and of the *scene of the photograph being taken*.

The narrator emphasizes Kim's voluntary participation in the narrative process: "Kim Phuc, now a mother, wants to tell her story for the sake of her son—one day." *Kim's Story*—the film—is the account of an identity reconstructed through first-person testimony. It is driven by a mother's desire to have a document for her child to know her by; he already recognizes her suffering through the scars on her back, scars that when he touches them, make him say "Mom hurt." (For the child, of course, the mute scars belong to the mother's, not the girl's body. The second photograph in which Kim as mother cradles her infant son while displaying her scarred back is featured in the film.) This structure of personal transmission—justifying one's autobiographical existence by relation to a significant other—that is historically common to women's autobiographies, is doubled here with an equally powerful public mission. Kim's willingness to tell her story is cast as an escape out of her "private battles on the road to forgiveness—forgiveness that requires a public forum; forgiveness that can "help in a much wider healing." Kim, who had made known her desire to see the wall, has been invited to speak at a memorial service on Veteran's Day in Washington in 1996. "The world remembers Kim Phuc," the man introducing her says; this is the man—Jan C. Scruggs, president of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund—who was the force behind the creation of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The camera follows Kim to the first step of this journey of reconciliation at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial wall—and the last scene of the movie.

Who is Kim as she now remembers in the presence of veterans, and for the future viewers of the film? "As you know," she says addressing the audience of veterans in uniform and their families, "I am the little girl who was running to escape the napalm fire." This kind of collapsing of past and present tenses is typical of traumatic memory, memory that recurs in visual form—like the televised version of the photograph, which runs through her head at the end of the documentary. At the end of the *Kim's Road*, as taps is heard, the camera stays focused on Kim's face against the background of names on the black granite wall, as she fights back tears. This is almost the only time in the film that Kim isn't smiling (sometimes she smiles through her tears).¹⁰

The girl identifies herself in the present not the past tense, the temporal freeze of traumatic memory. As she is quoted elsewhere with the republication of her photograph: "I see the bombs. I see the fire. I run and run."¹¹ As in the display at the Museum of Tolerance that juxtaposes the photograph of the burning girl with that of the healed woman, the viewers

see not just the little girl whose picture we now recall to memory, but the woman she has become, the photograph *and* the photograph's story. Throughout the documentary we are confronted by the juxtaposition of girl and woman; the silence of the girl and the speech of the woman who both is and isn't still that girl.

By choosing to end her film at the wall, Saywell deliberately forges not only a visual link between two women of Asian descent, Kim Phuc and Maya Lin; she joins two women who have played an important role in keeping alive in American memory a war fought in Asia by the men who were its soldiers. These women do not, of course, have a monopoly on the Vietnam story, which has been memorialized in various media, but their acts of testimony continue to shape the collective American unconscious about the war. I want briefly to sketch out now some of the connections I see between Kim Phuc's role as mediator and Maya Lin's as shaper of traumatic memory through the monument she created, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The performances of both women make it possible for a highly emotional public response to the war that divided the nation.

Maya Lin was a very young woman when she lived through the making of the memorial and the range of public and publicized responses to it—notably, the virulently negative ones. An Academy Award winning short film about her working history as an architect—*Maya Lin: A Strong Clear History*—documents movingly the violence of reactions to the design. In a chapter about the memorial in her book, *Boundaries*, Lin comments on the effect watching the film had on her memory of that experience: “It wasn't until I saw the documentary,” she observes, that she “was able to remember that time in my life” (4:08). In a strange parallel with Kim's story, it's through a public and visual document, a biographical record made by another for an audience, that the artist was able to take the measure of her private (and to quite different degrees, of course, *traumatic*) experience. Lin recounted what she felt when she looked at the site chosen for the monument. “I had a simple impulse to cut into the earth. I imagined taking a knife and cutting into the earth, opening it up, an initial violence and pain that in time would heal” (4:10) but that “leaves a memory, like a scar” (“Making” 35).¹² In Lin's vision of how the cut would work over time, wound and trace would co-exist: “The grass would grow back, but the initial cut would remain a pure flat surface in the earth with a polished, mirrored surface, much like the surface on a geode when you cut it and polish the edge” (4:10). For Kim, the pain continues in her life both in her memory and her body, even though she

is determined in her discourse about herself to put suffering behind her. As one of the American surgeons explains to his famous patient when he examines her for the benefit of the camera, the pain comes from “nerve endings trapped into a scar.” It’s as though despite the fact that Kim “has adapted to her injury,” the experience lives on embedded in her flesh twenty-five years later. In an article in the *New York Times* about her appearance at the wall, Kim describes the nature of the suffering: “When the weather changes, the pain comes—like I am cut, cut. . . . I try to keep down my pain, thinking to control my pain” (Sciolino 20). In this important sense, we have to rein in our comparison. Kim’s aching body is *not* like the earth Maya Lin cut into; *not* a rock that can be polished. On the other hand, perhaps we can usefully say that the memory of the war lives on in the nerve endings of the national body; in America to talk of Vietnam is immediately to conjure pain and suffering. In both cases, however, the language of human suffering and political history relies on the metaphors of wounds and healing, scars and memory that characterize the discourse of trauma in contemporary American culture. We must move on it is said over and over again in public spaces; it’s a time for healing. It isn’t difficult to see the appeal of the language of injury, which is also to say of trauma, indeed the need for the wounds of the body to heal. The question arises, however, as to the spread of the rhetoric through those metaphors to political crises—like the war in Vietnam or Sept. 11—which require political analysis rather than the readymade comfort of cliché. When “applied to the nation, “the healing process,” Marita Sturken observes, “connotes not remembrance but forgetting, an erasure of problematic events in order to smooth the transition of difficult narratives into the present” (74).¹³ Kim recognizes the horrors of the war: “Behind that picture of me, thousands and thousands of people, they suffered more than me. They died. They lost part of their bodies. Their whole lives were destroyed, and nobody took that picture.” But despite the fact that she calls the war “a stupid war,” the rhetoric of future peace leads her to turn away from her own pain and toward forgiveness: “We cannot change history,” Kim Phuc says to the audience gathered at the wall, imagining what she would tell the pilot who dropped the napalm bombs, if she were to meet him face to face, “but we should try and do good things for the present and for the future to promote peace” (Sciolino 20).

I’ve been suggesting that this is an American story. I should add here that crucial to that nationalization of suffering are its Christian underpinnings. Kim’s conversion (from CaoDai) to Christianity—her sense that

God *chose* her by ensuring her survival—has played an important role in her story. “But God saved my life and gave me faith and hope” (1).¹⁴ In an interview featured in the film, Kim is quoted about the pain of her scars: “‘They are like a knife,’ she says smiling. ‘They feel like they are cutting me.’” But she also adds, pointing to divine Providence: “God used me that day . . . my feet were not burned, and so I could run out and be there for that photo” (Schultz).

Even before her own use of Christian discourse, before the second photograph was taken, casting her in the Madonna role, antiwar artists incorporated Kim’s photograph into Christian iconography. In Jerry Kearns’s *Madonna and Child* (1986), the artist superimposes the outlines of Kim’s torso on Andy Warhol’s *Marilyn Monroe* (part of his *Death in America* series), as though the girl’s scream were emerging from Marilyn’s brow.¹⁵ In And Juan Sanchez’s painting, *It Is Beautiful to Love the World with Eyes Not Born* (1987), the photograph is torn and fragmented, the image of Kim Phuc is separated—the two halves kept apart by a snapshot of smiling children in what appears to be a hospital in Nicaragua; a colorful, sweet-faced Madonna holding a fully clothed little Christ child appears above the children; below Sanchez has painted a crucifix and the stigmata-marked hands of Christ.¹⁶

Images of Kim associated with war and atrocity continue to appear in the prolonged aftermath of the Vietnam war as it becomes a cautionary chapter in American history. Judy Chicago incorporates the image of Kim into her *Holocaust Project* (1985–1992), as a figure of unjust suffering; this importation can be seen as part of an American narrative of traumatic history in the twentieth century, which connects through the thread of the wounded innocents, genocide, and catastrophe: the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, and September 11. A similar use of the girl on fire appeared in a graphic novel by cartoonist, Peter Kuper. The narrative about the Gulf war is called “Bombs Away” (1991), and the drawing looks very much like Judy Chicago’s little silhouetted figure. In both cases, the tiny human body in flight is a vulnerable target, overwhelmed by nightmarish explosions.¹⁷

In her testimony as a survivor, Kim speaks for peace. The caption below the new photograph of Kim as mother reads: “I know my picture did something to help stop the war. My son’s Vietnamese name, Huan, means ‘prospects.’ I have to show him what happened to his mom, to her country, and that there should never be war again” (*Life Special* 44). The McNally photograph won a World Press award. Both photographs of Kim carry this message: never again. They warn, they admonish. This notion

of warning, of reminder, of instruction, is also the meaning of the word *monument*.¹⁸ Like the memorial itself, Kim Phuc's testimony points to the desire to connect the remembrance of past suffering with the process of working for future peace culture. "We cannot change history." Kim says. But the fixity of trauma captured in the photograph and its material, bodily, legacy can't help returning in the compulsion to turn trauma to good account by turning it into story. Never again means always still.

The speech at the wall, of course, is especially freighted because of the controversy over the war that was relived in responses to the memorial itself. The design had been criticized on several accounts, the most radical of which was that it represented only the American side of the war. In the documentary, Kim's physical presence at the wall emphasized that absence in a palpable way. More generally, however, the resistance to the memorial was expressed in the violence powering the *language* of those who objected to the monument's design (and in particular around certain design features). The V produced by the cut in the earth, for instance, was famously read by some as a "black gash of shame"—black as the color of dishonor, the V as the triumph of the peace movement. Others, self-consciously or not, through the very idea of the gash and the V as the mark of the female body—combined with the feminine typically associated with Asia—seemed to experience the design with a visceral revulsion (Hess 268–69; Sturken 51–53).¹⁹

In many ways, as I've been suggesting, it is possible to make a fruitful connection between the resistance to Maya Lin's memorial design with discomfort produced by the iconic photograph of Kim Phuc in dealing with the trauma of a controversial war, first and foremost on the level of female bodiliness. The original photograph caused anxiety because the girl was naked and because it was impossible not to see the mark of gender. "It almost didn't run," senior photo editor, Horst Fass says in the film: "An Associated Press staffer thought newspaper editors would find the girl's nakedness offensive." Fass explains that New York had rules about exhibiting "frontal nudity" and airbrushed out the shadow in the photograph that suggested the existence of pubic hair on the nine-year-old girl. The combination of female embodiment and Asianness also made it easy for some to dismiss the image just as the design for the monument was rebuffed—on racist grounds. The most egregious case was the infamous quip, trivializing the horror of burning flesh and eliminating American responsibility for the dropping of the bombs: "This Pulitzer prizewinner was called a fake by General William Westmoreland, who suggested the girl in the picture was burned "in a hibachi accident" (*Time*

62). (The photographer, Nick Ut, describes the burns in disturbingly close language: “Her whole back, neck and arm were black like a barbecue” [*Life Special* 44]).

Lin’s articulated vision of the V produced by the V of the monument’s vertex, the place where the walls meet, was textual and even literary. “The memorial,” she writes, “is analogous to a book in many ways. Note that on the right-hand panels the pages are set ragged right and on the left they are set ragged left, creating a spine at the apex as in a book. . . . [The scale] creates a very intimate reading in a very public space, the difference in intimacy between reading a billboard and reading a book” (4:14). Lin’s use of the metaphor of the spine of the book returns us to the human body: the body wounded and dead, and the live body reading. During the hearings about the design of the memorial, one of the men from Veterans Against the War described the effect of the wall as a place of memory: “I go there, I remember.” The remembering, however, requires a public monument that somehow protects as it houses private experience; this is precisely what happened when Kim spoke and remembered at the wall.

The design of the wall never ceased being controversial; part of the explicit concern about Lin’s model (when it wasn’t seen as too concretely sexual) was that it was too abstract, too remote from the war experience. Lin recalls being asked by one of the veterans what she thought the reaction to the wall would be. “I was too afraid to tell him what I was thinking,” she writes, “that I knew a returning veteran would cry” (4:16). Public weeping is not an activity we associate with men. And yet this is precisely what happens. This is what the architect intended and said she hoped for, since she imagined the design as “experiential and cathartic” (4:16). Like the returning soldiers and the many American visitors looking for the names of their loved ones, Kim Phuc wipes tears from her eyes as she stands against the wall, reading not her name, of course, or those of her family and friends who died in Vietnam, but upon seeing her history in the eyes of the men looking at her, weeping. In public, she cries for the men, authorizing their tears. Throughout the film, Kim cries—as does her audience—every time she tells the story of being the girl in the picture. But the woman in the second picture is committed to not crying: “Every time I took a shower and saw the mirror,” Kim reminisces in the *Life* magazine special, “Caught in Time,” “I cried. My mother said, ‘If you love us, don’t cry anymore. We love you. We can take care of everything but the pain. You alone have to suffer it.’ I love them, so I don’t cry anymore. I try, I try” (44).²⁰

Are the woman and the soldiers crying the same tears? What about the veterans and their loved ones in the audience filmed at the spectacle, not to mention the film's spectators watching at home or at school? To what degree is the trauma of bodily injury shareable? Is it possible to cry and maintain a critical edge, remembering that one never occupies, as Primo Levi famously admonished, the other's place? I confess that every time I've watched the final scene of *Kim's Road*, where to the background of taps, the color-filmed sequence of the napalm assault runs through the adult woman's memory (even as the little girl runs from the fire)—as created by the film—I've come close to tears, despite my resistance to the patriotism of the setting and the solemnity of taps. I don't share Kim's Christian need to forgive, and I don't think we should forget the political will that created the war. But perhaps the tears Lin hoped to provoke at the wall are both personal and political—or because she didn't want the wall to make a statement that could be taken up by either side, these are more the tears of Aeneas contemplating the representation of the Trojan wars during his stay in Carthage: "Here, too . . . there are tears for passing things; here, too, things mortal touch the mind" (*Aeneid*, I, l. 654-56). *Lacrimae rerum*. . . .

The power of the original photograph resides in its refusal of sentimentality, which is due not only to the figure of the girl at its center, but also to the figures surrounding her—the other wounded children and family, and the soldiers in uniform who accompany them on the burning road. The presence of the soldiers, the contrast between their armed bodies and the naked girl underscores the avoidability of the disaster—this is a manmade, not a natural horror. As John Lucaites and Robert Hariman astutely argue, the presence of the soldiers ambling down the road, "as if this were an everyday experience," shows that "what is shown is repeated and repeatable, behavior" (43). The force of the image is such that spectator is forced to feel implicated if not in the creation, then at least in the perpetuation of the war. The girl's trauma—the extreme physical assault on her body—is thus both hers and not hers: the trauma also touches the spectator whose safety is by definition complicit with what the girl has lost: civilian protection.²¹ This is a version of the secondary trauma of witnessing: the passive wounding of a collective body.

A memorial to a war negotiates the relations between life and death, civilian and soldier, survivor and victim. How in the context of a war whose justification had divided a nation could those relations be negotiated in a permanent space? The design for the memorial was chosen anonymously. But that didn't keep people from commenting, often

negatively, on the meaning of the architect's identity once it became known and public: "Isn't it ironic," Lin was asked, "that the war in Vietnam was in Asia and you are of Asian descent?" Lin in turn asked the veterans if her race mattered. "It was then that I realized that people were having problems with the fact that a 'gook' had designed the memorial." Lin concludes her essay about the making of the wall with a meditation on identity: For some people, she writes, "I am not allowed to be from here; to some I am *not really an American*. And I think that feeling of being other has profoundly shaped my way of looking at the world—as if from a distance—a third-person observer" (5:06). It is perhaps the outsider in the form of a woman who comes from elsewhere—artist and translator between cultures—who is destined to be the ultimate custodian of wounded but also reparative memory.

"So many people die in Vietnam and America," Kim Phuc exclaims in the film, reading the names of the dead Americans engraved on the wall, "Why they have to suffer like that?" she asks, tears in her voice. Once the silent image begins to speak and offer personal testimony that blurs the distinction between perpetrator and victim, American and "gook," national political accountability becomes transmuted by Christian forgiveness, and horror becomes domesticated. We are invited instead to consider not the political decisions that created the war, but the words of a woman who has survived because God chose her to do his work, the work of peace.

The wall designed by Maya Lin and the act of memorialization it performs frame Kim's journey. The narrative in fact builds to a climax once Kim arrives at the wall and delivers her address to the veterans; this is the cathartic experience Lin says she imagines the veterans will have at the wall (and that viewers are meant to have, too). Months from becoming a Canadian citizen, Kim travels to the place where America remembers its dead from the Vietnam War and expresses thankfulness to God for her life. The memory inscribed on her back and alive in her head is a trauma both private and public, national and international, lived in the body and captured on film. The memory of the war is footage in her head and ours, though ours is not attached to our bodies. We too can remember through the photograph—but for how long? How does the photograph perform its work of testimony compared to the wall, site of commemoration and remembrance?

Maya Lin draws the contrast herself, somewhat differently, comparing the name on the wall to a photograph, defending her design against the accusation of "abstraction," and arguing that the name can represent a

universally shared experience: “The ability of a name to bring back every single memory you have of that person is far more realistic and specific and much more comprehensive than a still photograph, which captures a specific moment in time or a single event or generalized image that may or may not be moving for all who have connections to that time” (4:10).²² Where and how will the memory of the war remain alive? Image or monument? Film or stone? The documentary about Maya Lin’s work records the testimony of a woman at the hearing in Washington over the design of the memorial who drew the comparison: “I speak as an individual, a member from the general public. What are the memorable images from the war? A guerilla shot at point blank range? A naked girl, afire, running, screaming down a dusty road. I think Maya Lin was right in going beyond these kinds of images. She resolved all the pain and conflict of that unhappy time in a simple message of sacrifice and quiet heroism.” Or perhaps, as I’ll suggest in conclusion, this is a false opposition; perhaps we need both image and monument.

Despite the capacity for manipulation that the image presents, the image of the girl persists in its iconic fixity, even under the press of postmodern culture—most famously, in *Wag the Dog*. In Barry Levinson’s 1997 political satire, an eerie pre-figuration of the Clinton scandals (but whose basic concept remains painfully current, given the charade surrounding the hunt for “weapons of mass destruction”), a representative of the White House (played by Robert De Niro) is hired to find a way to distract the public from a presidential sex scandal. He hires a Hollywood producer (Dustin Hoffman) to create a fake war that will seem real to the public by making a television movie of it that will pass as the news. In the initial conversation between De Niro and Hoffman, De Niro explains why he needs the producer’s services. He recalls for Hoffman’s benefit, slogans of past wars, and as he speaks, black and white images flash quickly making his point: the marines raising the flag at Iwo Jima, Churchill making the V for victory sign with his fingers, and the Napalm Girl. “You remember the picture,” De Niro says blithely, “fifty years later, you’ll have forgotten the war.” The point is made cynically, but at the same time the power of the simulacrum perversely testifies to the resistance of the original image—to the still horror of black and white. The trailer for the made-for-television phony war builds on the image of a girl running from a burning village. The icon is kitchified for the update: the girl, clothed and slightly older than the original, wears a kerchief on her head to suggest Eastern Europe, and she carries a little kitten to certify vulnerability.

Fittingly, perhaps, the icon representing the Vietnam war is the picture of a victim—and on the scale of vulnerability, what more poignant than a child, a wounded child, and a child who also happens to be a naked girl on a burning road?²³ But does she just happen to be a girl? Sontag, we saw, described the picture as being that of a child. There are other figures in that photograph that equally grip the imagination—notably, the one of Kim’s brother, his mouth open in silent terror, an expression resembling the mask of tragedy.²⁴ And yet, as was true of the nightly news broadcasts, it’s the girl who gets targeted as the “story,” and the story is one that appeals to Americans—a cute, cheerful child survivor with a story created by and for the media and whose motto, Jan Scruggs says when he introduces her at the wall, this time identifying American responsibility (“An American commander ordered South Vietnamese planes to drop napalm”) is: “try to keep smiling.”²⁵ Why shouldn’t the abject war no one is proud of, that produced no images of male heroism, be embodied by the image of a nine-year-old girl in pain, suffering caused by an accident—and then, almost sublimely, a woman who provides an image of forgiveness?²⁶

In the summer of July 2001, another photographic and publishing event intervened to affect the course of Kim’s story. An exhibit opened in New York corresponding with the publication of three books: *Love*, to which Kim Phuc has written a prologue, *Friendship*, and *Family*, which contains a third photograph, another mother/infant pose but in black and white taken by a woman Canadian photographer, Anne Bayin, around the same time as Joe McNally portrait. The acronym of the event, which self-consciously modeled itself on Steichen’s 1955 *Family of Man* is M.I.L.K., which stands for Moments of Intimacy, Laughter, and Kinship.²⁷

The Bayin photo is featured by *Ms. Magazine* as a “Ms. Moment.” The caption emphasizes the journey of Kim’s life as allegory: “From Hell to Hope” (Dalal 20).²⁸ This is the only photograph in the entire M.I.L.K exhibit that bears any marks of physical pain. The original photograph, however, appears as a snapshot and memory prompt in the prologue to the *Love* book where Kim, in dialogue with Bayin, concludes, “Remember how powerful a picture can be. More powerful than any bombs. As powerful as love” (see <http://www.annebayin.com/milk.htm>). Blown up over the entrance to the show, which was located in Grand Central Station, presiding over the automated information screens updating commuter schedules, were two huge poster-size images, one of Kim nuzzling her newborn (without her scarred back showing), and the other of a Caucasian man nose to nose with his crying infant in a celebration on

international parenthood beyond trauma and bathed in love. A music video celebrating the power of love ran in one of the exhibition halls. I stood for a while watching visitors to the exhibit file past the photographs; as far as I could tell, no one lingered over the maternal portrait, or appeared to recognize the strangeness of the scarred body.

In her book devoted to telling the Kim Phuc story, *The Girl in the Picture*, Canadian journalist Denise Chong recounts a trip she made to the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly American War Crimes Museum) and finding the famous black and white picture of Kim as a child missing. On the wall of photographs depicting civilian war casualties, however, she finds instead the “color portrait of Kim and Thomas, which appeared in *Life*” (369). “In the baby’s smooth skin,” Chong writes, “her scarred skin seems reborn” (370). As a mother, Kim Phuc, now a goodwill Ambassador for UNESCO, goes around the world retelling her story—in person. She has even appeared on Oprah, Chong relates, where everybody cried.

In characterizing the Kim Phuc of the second photograph, comparing her silent scream to the language in which she has told her story of survival, I have been emphasizing what’s become a rhetoric of traumatic memory in contemporary American culture. In telling (and retelling) her story in public, the scarred woman the injured child has grown into typically adopted the popular discourse of recovery that tends to eradicate the traces of suffering (the “steady reminder of her injury” that the doctor in the film traces along the nerve endings of her body) in favor of transcendence. Recently, however, Kim Phuc described the survival experience in a manner that acknowledged the persistence of traumatic effects in her life:

I didn’t tell anyone there” [she says, describing her early years in Canada] that I *was* the girl in the picture. It had cost me too much already, *but I found out that the picture wouldn’t let me go. I had flashbacks. . . .* I decided eventually that I would try to use the picture to create something positive, and as I was thinking about going public when the reporters beat me to it and found me. . . . I realized that the picture is a really powerful tool to promote peace and that in a free country I could control the picture, rather than being controlled by it. . . . My mission is to spread the message of forgiveness. *If the little girl in the picture can forgive, than I think everyone can.* (O’Connell; emphasis added)

The generic message of forgiveness is the one Kim Phuc delivered at the wall, though a skeptical reader might wonder for whom forgiveness is

intended beyond the pilot who has claimed to be the one responsible for the air strike. Should he stand in for a catastrophic American foreign policy?²⁹ Absolution by metonymy?

But what's really fascinating about this interview—not least because in contrast to all the earlier testimony, the language is so polished—is less this familiar spin on forgiveness than the split Kim Phuc describes between the photograph and herself: “If the picture can forgive. . . .” This separation, the dissociation of the adult woman from the iconic image of her traumatized past self, may be the mechanism through which recovery can begin to take place. The adult woman wants to control this picture—keep it in its place—but the trauma it embodies has a will of its own: “I had flashbacks.” The sight of soldiers on the subway reactivates the pain contained in the photograph and captured in the scars that map the trauma on her back. (The photograph that accompanies this interview, in which Kim plays with her young son while her husband looks on in the background, is a rare glimpse of Kim Phuc in a meditative, unsmiling moment.) The unspeakable pain caught in the original photograph finds traumatic expression through this discourse—an account of survival not overlaid with the rhetoric of religious salvation (although it is present in other parts of the interview)—an experience “frozen in time” and figured iconographically.³⁰

In the later version of her *New York Review of Books* essay on photography revised in the book *On Photography*, Sontag argues that what “determines the possibility of being affected morally by photographs is the existence of a relevant political consciousness” (19).³¹ While the original photograph fixes a shameful moment in American history—what Sontag has more recently called the “signature Vietnam War horror-photograph from 1972” (*Regarding* 57), but a moment of political activism in which people were still moved by images; the story, subsequent photographs, and documentary, belong to an era in which we slake our thirst for meaningful action with M.I.L.K. I had begun to fear that the success of the second and third photographs would displace the first from its iconic place in history, when history itself intervened on Sept. 11, 2001.

After the attack on the World Trade Center, two British newspapers of very different journalistic styles, *The Mirror* and *The Guardian*, drew analogies between the attack and the Vietnam war. *The Mirror* produced a stunning juxtaposition: poised above the famous photo of Kim Phuc is another woman, who appears to be Asian, escaping from the burning towers, covered in dust. The visual relation is rendered politically in an

adjacent column where the journalist argues against the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan, citing the failure of similar tactics in Vietnam.³² In another headline story, the analogy is literally writ large: “This was not Pearl Harbor. . . . It was the entire tragedy of Vietnam crammed into a few hours.” The analogy is fleshed out in the text, though I find the logic mystifying, unless you eliminate all distinctions between perpetrators and victims: “If you want a true analogy,” the reporter Tony Parsons argues, “then black Tuesday was like the entire trauma and tragedy of the Vietnam War crammed into a few horrific hours. That’s no exaggeration” (16). No? Parsons does it by the numbers—how many died in a few hours scaled to the losses of the war over many years. While I can’t agree with this reasoning, I do read this visual reminder as an implicit renationalizing, and rehistoricizing of the image, underscoring, as the *Guardian* reporter, Mark Lawson, points out simply, the importance of history and hence captions as reminders to viewers of how and why things happen: “The picture of the girl dashing screaming from the napalm has most power if you know what war it’s from” (10). The *Guardian*’s article—“The Power of a Picture”—showed several images of the devastation (including one of a man jumping, flying, almost like the image featured in the story of the plane heading for the towers), but it does not reprint the famous picture, assuming it exists in collective memory.³³

The association between Kim Phuc and the injustice of war was also made in England before September 11. The photograph of the girl was reprinted in an article reporting on the plight of the “terrified Catholic schoolgirls” in Belfast, connecting their picture with those of Kim and the little boy from the Warsaw ghetto with his hands in the air; as well as the baby being carried out of the Oklahoma bombing and the father trying to protect his son during the Intifada.³⁴ In this article, “the child in the picture” becomes generic: “What the pictures we cannot forget do,” journalist Christopher Hope argues, “is to expose the fact that hope has been betrayed again and again. They make us remember how we would have felt. After all, we were children once. They make us remember a time when we expected better of people like us” (3). Again, the ugly facts of political history get taken up into a universal psychotherapeutics in which nostalgia replaces analysis.

Sometimes the image, caption, and deployment of the image seem to belong to conflicting universes. Not long after Sept. 11, the stylized outline of Kim running from the napalm against the background of an American flag appeared on a sticker with the caption: “Not In My Name.” The text reads: “If I could talk face to face with the pilot who dropped the

bomb, I would tell him that we cannot change history, but we should try to do good things for the present.” These are the words Kim Phuc spoke at the wall. I looked up the sticker’s provenance on the website address—artfromtheheart—: it belongs to “Incite: Women of Color Against Violence, Bay Area” (<http://artfromtheheart1.tripod.com>).³⁵

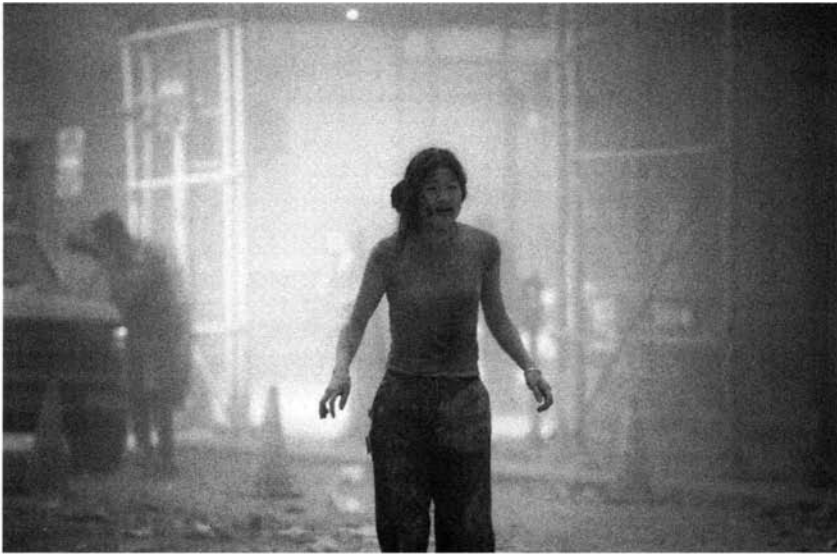
The fact is, however, that the picture of the girl *did* change history.³⁶ But how are we going to remember it? How will *visual* history seen from the end of the twenty-first century remember September 11? Will it be the image of the wounded towers that we saw repeated over and over on television? Or a still image of patriotic response? In the black and white moving inserts from *Wag the Dog*, an image of the marines raising the flag at Mount Suribachi in the Pacific appears after that of the Napalm girl—and Winston Churchill making the V for Victory sign. Indeed, the two Pulitzer-prize winning photographs often appear together. Even if the contrast is not spelled out, the difference between triumph and abjection couldn’t be clearer. The flag-raising photo was made into a postage stamp when the war was over. The U.S. stamp commemorating September 11 is also that of a flag raising: the picture of three firemen raising the flag at ground zero. The analogy—the visual intertext—was clear. What of the towers, the flames, the people jumping? The cover of *Newsweek* on September 24, 2002 produced an interesting compromise: the men in heroic posture in the foreground; the flaming towers at the top. As of summer 2003, the flag prevails.

But all is not said and done. The anniversaries as well as the future memorial to commemorate the losses of Sept. 11 will necessarily revise memory and decide on its icons, as national memory evolves, remembering and forgetting. Anticipating the first anniversary of the catastrophe, the *New York Times Sunday Book Review* (September 8, 2002) featured a summary of books related to September 11. Highlighted above the omnibus review was the haunting figure of the dust-covered woman that the British newspaper had juxtaposed with that of Kim Phuc.

Will others make the connection between the unnamed woman’s blood-stained face of shock as she staggers away from the site of the Twin Towers and the horror-struck girl running from American napalm?³⁷

As we saw earlier, Joe McNally, the photographer sent by *Life* magazine to follow up on the famous subjects of prizewinning images, said about his task: “I knew I needed to see the scarring—otherwise there would be no touch point to the original photograph” (*Life: Classic* 149). McNally used the phrase “touch point” to mean point of reference; he needed to create a concrete way for the viewer to connect to the original

photograph through the sequel. He also needed to *touch* the viewer—perhaps to reproduce in the viewer the visceral shock of the original, the shock created by seeing a naked girl on fire. Without the touch point of the icon, the photographer worried about the viewer who lacked the initial traumatic response to the scandal of the image: a little girl running naked down the road, her mouth screaming pain, accompanied by soldiers. Without knowledge of the first image, the viewer of the mother and infant photograph might merely see a puzzle: the intricate mapping of skin that looks like an unusual piece of fabric.³⁸ By choosing to place Kim in a beatific pose that carried its own powerful iconographic history, McNally doubled the iconic weight of his image.



(Figure 3: Photograph by Robert Stolarik/Gamma)

If we return now to the closing scene of *Kim's Road*, we can see the intertwined strands of traumatic memory at work both through the photographs and the monument.³⁹ The woman the girl in the photograph has become revisits the televised film of her childhood wounding that recurs like the fixed sequence of a nightmare—a nightmare still alive in her body as well as her mind. But along with Kim Phuc on her pilgrimage to the wall, veterans and their families return to weep there as they meditate upon their own histories; tourists deposit flowers (and flags) reflected by the black granite's polished surface.⁴⁰ As it publicly com-

memorates the collective suffering produced by the nation's war, Maya Lin's memorial also makes room for individual stories, the singular destiny attached to a single name: both the tear that rent the nation and the tears that cannot forget that wound.

Notes

1. The diagnostic category of "post-traumatic stress disorder" was listed in the American Psychiatric Association's manual in 1980 as a result of studies of the psychological effects of war among Vietnam veterans (Herman 26–28). In many ways, the discourse on trauma that has become a familiar part of American culture was given legitimacy in the aftermath of the war. There's an interesting irony in the fact that Kim, as we'll see later, participates in the language of injury and healing that gained prominence in the post-Vietnam decades.

2. When the essay was collected in the 1977 book *On Photography*, Sontag made a few revisions that I will include here. They are subtle but interesting: "Photographs like the one that made the front page of most newspapers in the world in 1972—a naked South Vietnamese child just sprayed by American napalm, running down a highway toward the camera, her arms open, screaming with pain—probably did more to increase the public revulsion against the war than a hundred hours of televised barbarity" (18). The word "memorable" has disappeared from the later text, probably because the line of argument Sontag is following here has more to do with the political effect of images on the moment and for public mobilization rather than the lasting effect in national consciousness.

3. Marita Sturken in *Tangled Memories* makes the case about the photograph on similar grounds to Sontag's, but she focuses on the question of the expression on Kim's face and the afterlife of the image: "The film image of the napalm strike is more confusing than the still and does not capture the expression of the face of Kim Phuc as clearly. Most significant, photographic images in general have a greater capacity than moving images to achieve iconic status. Still images are widely distributed in books and other publications, so people are more likely to own copies of them; moreover, they possess an ability to connote completeness and to evoke the past" (90). In thinking about iconic images, two related strands emerge: the effects of the image in the immediate political context and the place of the image in the historic national archive, in the preservation of national memory. Both Sturken and Sontag describe the girl as running "toward the camera." The fact of her facing the camera—meeting the viewers' eye, pleading mutely for help—is also key to the image's power to move.

4. These characterizations come from the description of television news segments established by a news service at Vanderbilt University.

5. In the same section of commentary, opera singer Beverly Sills also universalizes about war from the photograph in which the girl and her specific wound drop out: "This photograph, more than anything I remember, speaks the horrors of war" (80).

6. The television footage is available from Vanderbilt Television News Archive.

7. The following day the *New York Times* reported the story in much the same language, emphasizing the mistake, and making the raid an entirely Vietnamese affair, although the possibility of American participation crept in: "From the ground it was unclear whether the air controller was American or South Vietnamese" (9 June, 1972, A1, 10).

8. In their important essay on this photograph, "Public Identity and Collective Memory in U.S. Iconic Photography: The Image of 'Accidental Napalm,'" John Lucaites and Robert Hariman argue, "The substitution of photos provides a double compensation: Kim has been given a beautiful child to replace her own damaged childhood, and the second image is given to the public in recompense for its past discomfort. The baby also replaces the other children in the original scene—those running down the road and those who didn't make it. The war is over, and children who could be running in terror for their small, vulnerable lives are now sleeping quietly in their mothers' arms. Moreover, where the earlier children were Kim's siblings, and so the sign of collective identity, this child is her child, her most dear possession and a sign of proprietary relationships essential to liberal individualism. The transformation is complete: from past trauma to present joy, and from the terrors of collective history to the quiet individualism of private life" (48).

9. Having defected to Canada from Cuba, where she had been sent by the Vietnamese government to pursue her studies, Kim makes the journey to the United States—described as a "pilgrimage"—where she encounters for the first time (with the camera recording) the people who saved her life—the doctors and the photographer, who was in fact the person who took her from the burning road to a hospital twenty-five years earlier. It's in this process that Kim learns for the first time what happened to her. The camera visually situates Kim far from Vietnam at home in Canada, writing in a notebook while snow—a signifier of geographical distance—falls outside the window.

10. As reported in the *Times*, "She pressed her hand to her stomach and clenched her jaw over and over to keep from crying as taps was played" (12 Nov. 1996: A20). I have to confess that when taps was played in the documentary, I could feel myself choking up: my somewhat sentimental responsiveness to taps comes not from its military origins, however, but from the fact that it was played every night at the summer camp I attended throughout most of my childhood.

11. The Vietnamese language does not have a past tense per se, although it has other markers of past time. This linguistic factor probably affects Kim Phuc's discourse in English; but it's also true that for her the trauma remains in a present tense.

12. Lin uses somewhat different language in an essay published in *The New York Review of Books* right before the appearance of *Boundaries*. Lin states that the essay about the monument was written in the fall of 1982 as the memorial was being completed and then put it away and never looked at it again.

13. Sturken's chapter in *Tangled Memory*, "The Wall and the Screen Memory," offers a brilliant analysis of the politics of national memory at work in the reception in the short and longer term of the wall.

14. Cao Dai is a combination of Buddhism, Islam, Confucianism, Christianity, Geniism, and Taoism—a religious practice established in South Vietnam in the 1920s.

15. In her splendid book, *A Different War: Vietnam in Art*, Lucy Lippard locates Kearns' image in an American cultural context: "Kim Phuc's torso is imposed like a burning mask or tattoo . . . in a multifaceted commentary on the '60s, on our creation of heroines, fantasy 'material girls,' the victimization of idolized women, popular culture, the golden gloss of the American dream (in life and art), and the reality of the Third World" (106–07).

16. Lippard reads the painting as a "complex global palimpsest" in which the juxtaposition of Kim's image with the Nicaraguan children offers a comment on the political bridge between the two contexts: "the same people who conducted the 'pacification' programs in Vietnam were supporting the counterrevolutionary mercenaries killing Central American civilians" (106).

17. John Lucaites and Robert Hariman document the continued recirculation of the photograph in an amazingly wide range of popular venues, including cartoons.

18. After explaining the derivation of *monument* from the Latin *monere*, Charles Griswold comments on the Mall's rhetoric as a whole: "It follows that the Mall says a great deal about how Americans wish to think of themselves. In still another formulation: the Mall is a sort of political mandala expressing our communal aspirations toward wholeness" (83).

19. When asked in an interview whether she thought the memorial has a female sensibility, Lin replied, "In a world of phallic memorials that rise upwards, it certainly does. I didn't set out to conquer the earth, or overpower it, the way Western man usually does. I don't think I've made a passive piece [she added], but neither is it a memorial to the idea of war" (Hess 272). Sturken acutely summarizes the sexual and psychoanalytic associations of the conflict: "To its critics, this antiphallus symbolized the open wound of this country's castration in an unsuccessful war, a war that 'emasculated' the United States. The 'healing' of this wound would therefore require a memorial that revived the narrative of the United States as a technologically superior military power and rehabilitated the masculinity of the American soldier" (53). (On the crisis of masculinity figured by the war, see Susan Jeffords's analysis 168–69; also Sturken 70). For some diehard critics of Maya Lin's aesthetic, this is exactly what the memorial does: "The VVM is the most prominent national monument of/to our unconscious imperialistic sublime. That it was designed by an Asian-American female also indicates that the IMPUNC is not an exclusively gendered or racial category" (Morris 688). For a sane counter to this cynical invective, see Louis Menand's reading of the monument's politics, "The Reluctant Memorialist: Maya Lin": "The Vietnam Memorial is a piece about death for a culture in which

people are constantly being told that life is the only thing that matters. It doesn't say that death is noble, which is what supporters of the war might like it to say, and it doesn't say that death is absurd, which is what critics of the war might like it to say. It only says that death is real, and that in a war, no matter what else it is about, people die" (277). And this is why, as Maya Lin had known from the start, people cry when they confront the monument.

20. Three photographs accompany the *New York Times* article reporting Kim Phuc's appearance at the wall. The original photograph, a close-up of a meditative headshot, and an image of Kim wiping her eyes with a handkerchief, as she bows her head, standing next to an erect, expressionless, Caucasian soldier in uniform. The article ends with Kim's summary of her life. Explaining that her name means "Golden Happiness" in Vietnamese, Kim concludes: "My character is not sad, not angry. In my house, I'm always laughing, smiling, smiling" (Scolino 20).

21. "The photo that will be reproduced many times," Hariman and Lucaites argue against received wisdom, "is itself not the record of a unique set of circumstances, but rather a dramatic depiction of those features of the war that are recurring over and over again past the point of caring" (43).

22. The tension between realism and abstraction played itself out between the partisans of Lin's monument and those who insisted on adding a statue of soldiers, soldiers who looked like the men who fought. That led to the creation of another statue representing the nurses.

23. Arguably, the Eddie Adams image of a Vietcong suspect being shot in the head pointblank by a South Vietnamese police chief also has come to stand as an icon for the horrors of the war—and played a role in making the public disgusted with the war. "A filmed version of the startling event was shown on international television"—but as in the case of the Kim Phuc photograph, the still photograph fixed the image in the American mind (Karnow 518).

24. And many reactions to the photograph comment on the suffering of children—a kind of generic innocence, from which all markers of race and responsibility have also conveniently been erased. In one of its publicity flyers for an Associated Press show in which a series of iconic photos are presented serially, as if on a roll of negatives, the brother with his mouth open ends the series—the rest of the image is cut off to fit the size of the page (Newsmuseum, May 15-Sept. 26, 1998).

25. Throughout the film, Kim alternately dabs at her eyes to stay the tears and smiles, smiling through the tears. Only the French have resisted the appeal of the tears. Reviewing the film that was televised in 1997, the reviewer concludes that the filmmaker has presented "a remarkable person who has drawn extraordinary strength from her suffering," but "This strength was somewhat ridiculed, alas, by the tear-jerking scenes at the end of the film" (Hartmann 19; my translation). In line with this politics, the image the newspaper used to illustrate the story on iconic photographs is taken from the film, not the photograph; this version of the photograph emphasizes the presence of soldiers and—including some to Kim's

left, as well as a photographer loading his camera; these figures are not part of Ut's cropping, and therefore serve to express the French view of the war in Vietnam that they no longer feel responsible for. In this sense the photograph and the war are part of not just American national memory, but international politics.

26. Although Sontag in her essay characterizes the napalm as American, most descriptions of the photograph elide that fact, emphasizing the accidental nature of the event. This from *Life* magazine, which tells the story of the picture with this caption: "The war and Kim Phuc—memories masked by a smile." The language of reporting has the heat of the napalm seeping into its adjectives: "The searing photograph of children fleeing after an accidental South Vietnamese napalm strike appeared around the world last June." By this time, the girl's smile has become a significant part of the reporting—a full page of the girl smiling appears on the page that follows the reproduction of the original bombing scene. The commentary creates a narrative from pain and horror to "an easy cheerful smile" (29 Dec. 1972, *Life*, "The Year in Pictures": 54).

27. I was struck by the resemblance between Bayin's posing of Kim and the detail of a Bellini painting, "The Presentation in the Temple," commented upon by Julia Kristeva as an example of mother/child separation—and bonding—where the "Virgin is holding and lifting her swaddled child, who adheres to the hollow of her body, skin against skin, flesh against flesh, branches of the same trunk" (*Desire* 258). An iconic, iconographic maternity.

28. "Everyone wonders what happened to that little girl," Phuc is quoted as saying, "I've lived my life with scars. I never thought I'd have a future, a family, and love in my life, but that's what this picture represents" (20). Once again, the narrative naturalizes the trauma by placing it in a language of intimacy and recovery.

29. For instance, Tom Buerkle wrote, "Her image has become a symbol of the barbarity of war that transcends debate about the rights or wrongs of U.S. intervention in Vietnam." (*International Herald Tribune* (<http://iht.com/IHT/TB/00/tbo62900a.html>)).

30. On the iconicity of traumatic memory, see van der Kolk and van der Hart.

31. In the 1973 essay, this sentence does not appear. The sentence that follows this in the later version is similar to the one in 1973: "Without a politics, photographs of the slaughter-bench of history are not identifiable as such" (137). Revised: "will most likely be experienced as, simply, unreal or as a demoralizing emotional blow" (19). What Sontag seems to have understood in retrospect was the degree to which the response to the photograph depended on the power of the growing antiwar movement, in a kind of post-facto development. Put in other terms, the trauma of the image changed history. Writing in England the previous year, John Berger in a short piece titled "Horror Pictures," a commentary on a collection of images (some from Vietnam, possibly that of Kim Phuc), worries about whether such photographs of suffering and agony that appear in the newspaper lead to action. They are "arresting," he says; we are "seized by them." They jolt us out of our lives, our daily existence. But the "reader who has been

arrested by the photograph may tend to feel this discontinuity as his own personal inadequacy,” and may just shrug off the need to act. Berger also points out the disquieting reality that newspapers will often print horror pictures of events, “which, editorially, they may, in some cases, continue to justify and support” 195; rpt. with revisions in *About Looking*.

32. See Routledge 17.

33. The reporter, Mark Lawson, argues that in the case of the New York skyline, captions aren’t necessary, or rather “the images are the captions,” because the skyline itself was already “such a famous picture that the photos of its destruction are purely visual” (10).

34. Marianne Hirsch’s essay, “Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory,” offers a probing meditation on the constant recirculation of a limited number of iconic photographs of trauma—such as the sign over the gates at the entrance to Auschwitz. I am indebted to her discussion of the contradictory ways in which such images function—both as a form of “protection and a refusal to confront the trauma of the past” (29).

35. I’m grateful to Elizabeth Abel for sending me this sticker as well as other articles about the photograph that appeared on the West coast, and even more so for her astute readings of this essay in several versions back.

36. The irony of this statement was brought home for me by a participant at “Texts of Testimony: Autobiography, Life-Narratives and the Public Sphere,” where I gave a version of this paper in August 2001; I’m grateful to Elspeth Graham and Timothy Ashplant for inviting me to participate in their conference. I presented this essay as the Addison Locke Roach Memorial Lecture, Bloomington, Indiana, October 2002. I thank Susan Gubar for her role in this invitation. I also wish to thank Shirley Lim for inviting me to present my work in an early stage at “American Literary Studies in Asia: Transnational Teaching and Research, International Conference,” Hong Kong, January 2001.

37. Thus far, there have been no photographs from the war in Iraq that seem likely candidates for iconicity—in part because the kinds of “collateral damage” that produced the photographs of the Vietnam war have been kept out of circulation. The only candidate for a widely circulated image was the toppling of Saddam’s statue that appeared early in the war—and that seemed a repeat of other political scenes familiar from regime change in Eastern Europe. One picture caught on television and given a lot of play showed American soldiers draping the flag over Saddam’s head—and then quickly removing it when reminded this was a war of liberation not occupation. But it’s too early to know for sure.

In an article titled “Veil of Secrecy Around Village Hit in U.S. raid,” the following suppression of images was described with no context or explanation: “‘Stop right there,’ said Specialist Arthur Meyers of New Jersey. ‘If you take a picture, I will break your camera’” (25 June, 2003, A12). Three photographs by a *Times* photographer, Tyler Hicks, accompany the article, however: one of American soldiers seen from the back at a distance, one of women and children pushed out of their home, and one of a young Iraqi man, lightly wounded by

shrapnel, who had lost his wife and daughter in the missile strike. What are the pictures we are not seeing?

38. Elizabeth Abel has suggested that the scars on Kim Phuc's back evoke the display of scarred backs of whipped slaves. She speculated that the display of riddled skin might produce an unconscious echo in the mind of the viewer (personal communication, 30 January, 2003). In literature, Toni Morrison in *Beloved* reads the scarred back as the traces of a kind of national memory; and in *The Woman Warrior* Maxine Hong Kingston fictionalizes the scars on the apprentice woman warrior's back as a text of revolt and protest. On reading "the literal signifiers of pain and violence that make an immediate appeal to the bodily memory of the viewer," see Bennett.

39. I wish to thank Catherine Gallagher for her critical comments on an earlier draft of this essay; she led me to rethink the relation between the Kim Phuc photos and testimony and the wall's testimonial function in American national life. I'd also like to thank Jay Prosser for sharing his expertise in photography with me—and for his help in tracking the British connection to this material. And Margaretta Jolly for hers.

40. As James Tatum observes in his moving essay, "Memorials of the America War in Vietnam," interpreting the effects of monuments to war through the lens of *The Iliad*, "the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington soon became famous for inspiring diverse responses to the same monument in the same space" (636–37).

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