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Title

Review: The Broken Country: On Trauma, a Crime, and the Continuing Legacy of Vietnam, by Paisley Rekdal

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3h23q100>

Journal

Journal of Vietnamese Studies, 15(1)

ISSN

1559-372X

Author

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Publication Date

2020-02-01

DOI

10.1525/vs.2020.15.1.146

Peer reviewed

PAISLEY REKDAL

The Broken Country: On Trauma, a Crime, and the Continuing Legacy of Vietnam.

Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017. 160 pages.

In this powerful work of creative nonfiction, literary scholar and poet Paisley Rekdal brings together two maligned and misunderstood figures of war, the refugee and the veteran. While the American public often thinks of them as separate entities, socially and categorically isolated, Rekdal demonstrates that they represent an assemblage of experiences. This is especially so within the context of the Vietnam War (or the American War, as it is called in Vietnam), a conflict that has produced countless tragedies with no endpoint. That lack of closure is the origin for making multiple connections in a tale without a singular protagonist . . . even if it starts out with one.

A violent moment in a Utah marketplace involving a knife-wielding Vietnamese man who attacks white men—blaming them for the murder of his people—casts initial questions about who he is and why he has committed such crimes. Though many are injured, no one gets killed, and the attacker ends up in police custody. This moment becomes essentially a minor nonevent in a country used to the spectacle of mass gun shootings by lone white male terrorists. The attacker, a homeless Asian man on drugs, consequently becomes a cultural symbol of war, his crime buried beneath everything we associate with Vietnam as well as with Vietnamese people.

There is no further explanation needed, Rekdal notes early on, when people are reduced to social archetypes without historical agency. At the same time, the author asks, When does history become a necessary tool to

Journal of Vietnamese Studies, Vol. 15, Issue 1, pps. 146–148. ISSN 1559-372X, electronic 1559-3738.
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explain why things happen, and when does it obscure or deny us the deeper story we need or want to tell? As revealed in short, impactful chapters, we pose an ethical risk in remembering people's pain in a way that is reductionistic to language, science, or discourse. Making pain legible only seeks to make it comprehensible and comfortable to the "rest" of us believed to inhabit a safe, normal civic life. There is greater danger in not sharing the collective burden of grief, as we are all part of "traumatized communities," she argues (69).

With no personal access to the assailant or to his family, Rekdal is forced to study not an individual person, but the totality of the context in which the man emerged. Combing through newspaper articles and conducting interviews with those who knew the attacker or survivors, the writer-scholar investigates a constellation of points that include race, gender, intergenerational trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicide, incarceration, homelessness, heroism, and pop culture. She examines the lives of other Vietnamese refugees, including a gang of brothers, and the shame they carry from the war.

One major point for Rekdal's astute critiques is that many refugees carry the shame of the ghost country of South Vietnam or the Republic of Vietnam. Though the attacker was born a few years after the fall of Sài Gòn in 1975, Rekdal recognizes that he hails from a country that no longer exists, and the punishment inflicted upon those associated with it potentially explains why many Vietnamese men never recover from war's devastation. Rekdal thus brings attention to the plight of the South Vietnamese veteran who fought alongside the American soldier during the Vietnam War, both having been forgotten and cast aside by society. Thus, the "Vietnam" referenced in the book's title is more than a shorthand of war or even the name of a nation. The "broken country" can be the United States, Vietnam, Chechnya, Cambodia, and so forth. The social anxiety and depression of men from these places forms the crucible for enacting further carnage, not unlike the movie character Rambo, which Rekdal scrutinizes as more than a simplistic trope. The refugee/veteran turned killer is both a real and fictional character, one treated as alien to a country in which he is forgotten.

Despite an outpouring of sympathy, those attacked in the stabbing incident in the Utah marketplace are also forgotten, victimized by a sensational

story they are now a part of, even though they did not choose to be. *The Broken Country* documents, for example, one man's critical injuries as they led to a severe loss of memory and motor skills, and his valiant efforts to recover them. The people around him, however, are confused about how to feel about this man's loss of masculinity and self, as they no longer recognize him (based on the former image they had), and he no longer recognizes himself. Much like the Samuel Beckett play *Krapp's Last Tapes*, the book listens to victims and the confusion that stems from their journey toward healing. The deep trauma and amnesia held by veterans and refugees are never too far from those of innocent bystanders or victims of random violence. There is no limit to or containment of violence, because its meanings are constituted relationally.

This relationality drives Rekdal to bring her own family's history into the narrative. As a mixed-race child from a military family, she connects the dots in her own personal life as a means of illuminating that of the man with whom she is obsessed. Along with incorporating autobiographic details, Rekdal is equally adept at including academic concepts in a highly accessible manner; the casual reader is treated to great theoretical insights by Yen Le Espiritu, Viet Thanh Nguyen, Hannah Arendt, Paul de Man, Elaine Scarry, and Giorgio Agamben. With these elements, Rekdal illustrates the power of metaphor and memoir to expose what we cannot or refuse to see. This book covers so much ground that it could be used in diverse fields such as ethnic studies, gender studies, sociology, English, history, psychology, public health, political science, and anthropology. The rise of critical refugee studies, a field that centers on refugee stories and perspectives, and a general resurgence of interest in the Vietnam War have brought renewed attention to the war and its haunting effects on multiple generations. *The Broken Country* deserves to be read by many to introduce many other narratives and narrators to a communal story that Rekdal begins for us.

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