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Power and Gender Relations in *When
Heaven and Earth Changed Places*

Le Ly Hayslip published *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* in 1990, and three years later, she published her second memoir, *Child of War, Woman of Peace*, as a sequel to her first book.¹ The appearance of these books marks an important milestone in Vietnamese American literature because they present the earliest voice of a woman in the Vietnamese American memoir genre. As is true of so many Vietnamese people, Hayslip's life, destiny, and family situation changed radically during the war and in its aftermath. Philip H. Melling observes that, in American literature about Vietnam, "the Vietnamese have been culturally undermined"—they are portrayed merely as "figures of darkness and obscurity who live on the wrong side of history, the bearers of a primitive and fallible wisdom who have fallen prey to an atheistic mission and a communist myth" (32). This attitude toward the Vietnamese during the war, Viet Thanh Nguyen argues, effectively "served the interests of the United States" because it allowed the United States to dominate the discourse on war politics (*Race*, 111). That dominance in the discourse by the United States, a Western power, placed or attempted to place the Vietnamese people in the position of subordinates or of subalterns. It is this aspect of the Vietnam War and its aftermath that is a major focus in this examination of Hayslip's *Heaven and Earth*. Hayslip's first book appeared a few years prior to the normalization of diplomatic relations between Vietnam and the United States in 1995, and it helped the reader understand the tragedies incurred by the ordinary

Vietnamese during the war and to appreciate a basic human need for postwar reconstruction and reconciliation.

This article treats primarily *Heaven and Earth* with a focus on power relations. Hayslip became a victim of political turbulence, male exploitation, and abusive power in wartime Vietnam. As a non-enfranchised woman during the French colonial period and later during the Vietnam War, Hayslip experienced social changes from semi-feudalism into colonialism. These changes characterize the power relations between the subaltern Hayslip (a female peasant and later an occasional prostitute) and the principals on all sides of the conflict, mostly male soldiers, in *Heaven and Earth*. Hayslip's coauthored memoir illustrates an individual writer's significant attempt to survive the overt exercise of power upon her own person during the Vietnam War—to work her way through the conflicting uses of propaganda to promote and justify the massive uses of that power, and to construct her personal view on the chaos wrought upon her life and upon the life of her homeland by that war.² It is only in this large context of the impositions of power witnessed during the Vietnam War that the title of Hayslip's first memoir can be understood.

Within all social relations and interactions, power is exercised in order to affect other individuals and their behavior, so *power* can be understood generally as a cause-and-effect relationship in which an agent uses authority to influence other groups or individuals intentionally. This general understanding of the term *power* lies behind the analysis that follows; it includes in its meaning or application the advantage taken by a technologically, militarily, or politically superior class upon the subaltern classes. Sallie Westwood draws attention, however, to two major aspects of this broad definition of *power* that will be useful here: first, "power as a 'thing'" is usually signified by the notion of *a capacity* to impose one's will; second, the "exercise of power [... is] relational" (1). This article considers the complex social and historical circumstances prevailing in Vietnam during the war, as revealed in Hayslip's *Heaven and Earth*, and it treats the imposition of power experienced by the author as a subaltern under the so-often adverse circumstances that Hayslip describes. The focus is upon the power relations between the principals who exert their influence and the subalterns who must suffer that imposition of power. Readers see this exertion of power from the point of view of a Vietnamese female peasant, and from her perspective, the damage caused by power exercised by the communist forces who opposed the U.S. efforts.

Animalistic Metaphors and Physical Appearance

Memoirists, like poets and writers of fiction, rely on such literary devices as metaphor and simile to portray people, articulate emotional states, or narrate events. Throughout *Heaven and Earth*, Hayslip employs metaphors with artistic finesse to capture the essential characteristics of the people with whom she interacts. As a peasant girl growing up in a small village in Central Vietnam, Hayslip had never seen “men of another race,” and her first impression of European and American soldiers is associated with the power that she attaches to their physical appearance (14). At first, she perceived them as belligerent and threatening non-human creatures who appeared suddenly and anachronistically upon the land, amid the Vietnamese landscape so loved by her peasant folk and their deceased ancestors. In her view, the French soldiers who had entered the village during the French colonial period were “giant snakes with many heads” whose “spittle flew into the village and splattered people with blood.” They resembled the “giant men,” “snake-monster[s],” and “demons” described in Asian tales for children (3, 4). Later, the specter of American soldiers inspecting her village created a more frightening memory; they appeared as giant creatures in black boots, “even bigger than the Moroccans who occasionally haunted my dreams” (43). The sound of one of their motors was like “a tiger growling in a cave,” and children were taught to stand still at the approach of the Americans—“the way one learns to stand still in the face of an angry dog” (43, 44). By describing the appearance of Western soldiers in animalistic terms, Hayslip emphasizes her powerlessness and that of other villagers who wanted only to live peacefully in their village, embraced in the arms of Mother Earth. Nguyen notes that Hayslip’s memoir emphasizes the contrast between the “technologically advanced, masculine body” of Western invaders and the “natural body of the woman,” which symbolizes her homeland, and the United States believed that Vietnamese femininity and nature would be subjugated by U.S. masculinity and military might (*Race*, 113).

For Hayslip, there obviously is a strong correspondence between physical appearance, technology, and power. In making these equations, she is in agreement with such critics as Bonnie Berry, who affirm that “[l]ook-based social stratification refers to the socially constructed placement of people into greater and lesser power strata based on physical appearance” (23). For the context of the Vietnam War, I would add to Berry’s assessment that look-based power also is determined by uniforms and military paraphernalia as well as by physical size. Donald E. Pease observes that U.S. imperialism or intervention is strengthened by its “superiority of military and political organization as well as economic wealth” (22). Although

Hayslip, due to language barriers, did not communicate with the American soldiers verbally when she was a child, she did form strong perceptions of them as invasive and aggressive “giants,” identifiable through their physiques, clothes, and weapons. In other words, she began to perceive the power of the American soldiers over her people through their non-verbal communication—through the way they looked and the way they bore themselves, and what they wore or carried—and through the symbolic meaning of their military presence upon Vietnamese soil.

Likewise, the ARVN forces, who received aid from the Americans, are likened by Hayslip to “elephants” and “vultures” equipped with “boats, planes, tanks, trucks, artillery, flamethrowers, and poisons” to fight against the Vietcong, who opposed them primarily through “cleverness, courage, terror, and the patience of the stones,” because they were technologically disadvantaged (Hayslip 68, 81, 41). Hayslip juxtaposes her civilian agrarian culture, characterized by its simple farming tools and rice production, to the advanced technological culture brought by the Americans and shared by their Republican allies, characterized by warplanes and helicopters “whining and flapping like furious birds” (43). Thus, imaginatively, the young Hayslip perceived the military power and advantages that the Americans and the South Vietnamese soldiers had over the Vietcong and particularly over the poor peasants, and she conveys the perception to her readers that they are reduced to the status of subalterns. Using her cross-species comparisons, she illustrates how she and the villagers become terrified at the approach of either the American or the Republican forces because they generally “bullied us like cattle” or “acted like pirates” (48). She describes herself and her villagers as “red ants” being trampled by a “raging elephant”—her very graphic metaphor for the American and Republican troops moving among the villagers. Hayslip’s memoir is fraught with such animalistic metaphors, and she uses them with impressive artistry (68). All of these metaphors cast the Americans and their Vietnamese allies in the mold of power wielders within the animal kingdom.

Vietnam is an agrarian country, and traditionally the Vietnamese worshipped the gods and goddesses of nature and prayed for bountiful crops and less-severe natural disasters. In rural areas, this practice continues even today in the postwar culture. The gods and goddesses are conceptualized in tangible forms, and animism retains a crucial value in Vietnamese folk religion and superstition. For example, in folk iconography, the god of the forest is conceptualized as the tiger because the tiger represents the supreme power in nature. Less powerful animals, such as elephants, dogs, and snakes, also appear on shrines or pillars at temples and on village community halls as important conceptualizations of the secondary

forces of nature.³ Hayslip's portrayal of the Americans metaphorically as power-endowed animals dramatizes the contrast between the powerful aggressors from abroad, or from the forests, and the powerless villagers from the local rice paddies. According to Elizabeth A. Stanko, such powerlessness as that experienced by Hayslip's villagers "is not a *possession* of an individual, it is relational, and socially [and culturally] constructed" (53). Unarmed and submissive peasants were terrified when confronted by these almost godlike "animalistic" soldiers, knowing that they might become angered and destroy the entire village, just as the powerful natural forces of the forest, the water, and the air had done periodically in times past.

Violence and Gender Relations

In *Heaven and Earth*, the relationship between power and gender is complicated by the war, the politics, and the culture of the time. Hayslip portrays her role as a woman in a patriarchal world dominated by men and in a war caused by men. The perception, charged by her personal, subjective imagination, is a response to power—" [a] power that at first appears as external, pressed upon the subject, pressing the subject into subordination, assumes a psychic form that constitutes the subject's self-identity" (Butler 3). In her consciousness, she is well aware of her social status as a dependent and subaltern, due to her gender, in her subordinate position in power relations with men within the traditionally patriarchal social and political milieu of Vietnam. In an interview conducted by Khanh Ho, Hayslip states that she, an "old-fashioned" woman, does not advocate "women's rights" and that "a woman is always underneath a man" (Ho 113). The word *underneath* graphically images the status ascribed to women in the social hierarchy constructed in traditional, patriarchal Vietnamese culture. Her phrasing implies that power and authority are viewed as given naturally to men. In her memoir, she affirms "that it's a man's world and that men make war. Both [men and war] have caused me more than enough trouble in my life" (Hayslip 63). Therefore, Vietnamese women, such as Hayslip, whose traditional domain is not the battlefield, become victims of men at war and of men's wars.

Throughout her first memoir, Hayslip relates her life's various experiences as a victim of male violence, giving them particular descriptive attention. Westwood, following a long-established precedent that links Venus with Mars (love with war), affirms that sex and violence constitute a "powerful couplet" because they join "in the crudest forms of coercion, terror, and torture—often through the act of rape in times of war and communal strife" (93). Many of the men with whom Hayslip interacts, both American and Vietnamese, manifest the power or authority that

forces her to comply with their orders or to satisfy their desires, and she repeatedly illustrates the fact that many “men in my life had always used their power to get what they wanted” (Hayslip 276). Hayslip’s *Heaven and Earth*, even while describing abuses by the Vietcong in graphic detail, goes further to expose the abusive power of the Americans and the South Vietnamese Republicans, which causes her book to remain unwelcomed by a large percentage of the members of the Vietnamese American community. Living and writing in the United States, she does not feel guilt or shame for her previous life, neither first as a Vietcong sympathizer nor later as an occasional prostitute. She attempts neither to conceal her peasant background nor to construct herself as a heroine who triumphantly survives the misfortunes and injustices perpetuated upon her in her early life. Occasionally, she seems to downplay certain incidents, but she discusses embarrassing issues and acknowledges complicity when they become factors.

Life narratives often are political in nature. However, in the interview with Khanh Ho mentioned above, Hayslip states that she never intended for her books to be construed as focusing on politics or the war *per se*. She reaffirms that she writes, instead, about the “human experience” from a “perspective based on old traditional Vietnamese thinking” (Ho 109). Nevertheless, as Alfred Hornung and Ernstpeter Ruhe illustrate in their book *Post-colonialism and Autobiography*, autobiographical writing, “in its widest definition [.] seems to provide a convenient genre to embrace the crossroad cultures from East to West and to launch an emancipatory political and cultural program” (3). For such reasons, as they note, the scholarship on Hayslip’s memoirs often focuses on the very visceral political issues that relate to her physical victimization, or to the nexus between the discourse on the Vietnam War and the “representation of women’s sexual trauma” (Bow 171), but usually without providing sufficient consideration of the Vietnamese cultural values that Hayslip takes care to incorporate into her books. Many critics attempt to impose absolute standards of ethics upon incidents in Hayslip’s writings when she, by her own admission, attempts to mediate the incidents by placing them within a broad cultural frame of reference. Asked what her memoirs can offer specifically to American readers, she affirms that her purpose is to help that audience understand Vietnamese cultural values because most Americans have sought to view the war and its aftermath from only one point of view, that of authors who think that an American audience “wouldn’t understand the other side” (Ho 107). It is, therefore, important to consider power and the abuse of power in Hayslip’s first memoir within the context of Vietnamese culture, which is relatively unfamiliar to general American readerships. She experienced the war at first as a traditional Vietnamese

woman caught up in the power structures created by conflicting political interests and agendas during the war. Although the political background in her writings does exist and cannot be ignored, in the analyses that follow, her subaltern voice and humanistic perspective will be respected, especially in her descriptions of the many and varied power relations on both sides of the political conflict in the Vietnam War.

According to Renny Christopher, *Heaven and Earth* does not attempt to confront the Vietnamese patriarchal system (75), but her observation is misleading. Hayslip, at the beginning of her memoir, devotes several pages to the lives of her parents, grandmother, and relatives, and to the legends of Vietnamese heroines and the expectations established by the society for a typical woman. This is an important aspect that needs to be discussed. Vinay Bahl points out that an individual's subjectivity is formed through "social order and social institutions," which is undeniably true. Therefore, the development of one's consciousness is subjected to social interaction, material culture, and cultural values (359). Based on Hayslip's descriptions of her grandmother, mother, and sister, it can be inferred that Vietnamese society ascribes certain narrowly defined abilities and responsibilities to women, while it ascribes more broadly defined power and authority to men. For example, her mother's virtues include her "Buddhist ears," and her strong, beetle-nut blackened teeth show that "she was an independent, healthy person fully capable of tending to her family" (Hayslip 2). Within the Vietnamese social order, Hayslip's mother had constructed herself as an exemplary matriarchal figure. In traditional Vietnamese culture, the asset that a woman of virtue must guard most adamantly until she marries is her virginity, which then is honorably offered only to her husband. Therefore, Hayslip was taught by her mother how to prepare herself to become a "virtuous wife and dutiful daughter-in-law and how to take care of the family I would have one day" (10). Obviously, the role for which Hayslip, as a typical Vietnamese woman, was trained to fulfill was that of attending to her husband and children. Men, however, were trained to exercise power and authority over the family and in the society. A wife should remember that her husband "always comes first" and that she never should interrupt him while he is speaking, even if he is wrong (12).

Sexual Exploitation and Masculinity

In both of her memoirs, Hayslip writes about her various sexual encounters, but she never vituperates against the men for their lecherous acts, probably because, rather than to personalize her experiences, she prefers to contextualize them as

those of a woman within the male-dominated Vietnamese society of the 1960s. Hayslip's early silence, which signals internalized experiences that are articulated only later in her memoirs, is associated with violence and with her consciousness of being a subaltern. In her memoir, Hayslip contrasts *a man's power to destroy* with *a woman's duty to nourish*, or as Milton J. Bates puts it, "[w]ar, aggression, and violence are masculine in their scheme of things, while peace and nurturing are feminine" (139). This concept is stated emphatically by Hayslip's father, when he says to her: "you were born to be a wife and mother, not a killer. That is your duty" (Hayslip 200). As noted above, a Vietnamese woman must protect her chastity, virtue, and well-being against all pre- or extra-marital sexual temptations or entrapments because her duty is to uphold life, womanhood, motherhood, and family: "A woman may do many things, but the first thing god equipped her for is to bring forth and nourish life, and to defend it with a warrior's strength" (70). In *Heaven and Earth*, most male figures whom she encounters represent abusers of power, and usually they are either rapists or sexual exploiters who exert power in order to "assert their manhood" (Bates 144). Hayslip insightfully states that a man beats his wife to exercise his "male power" (28). Westwood, in a work cited above, argues that men use violence to affirm their identity, and violence, which expresses strength and physicality, is employed at the moments "when power is in jeopardy" (22).

Heaven and Earth offers many tangible examples of the abstract ideas upon which Hayslip and Westwood are found to concur. When Hayslip is detained at the My Thi torture camp as a suspected Vietcong operative, her interrogator draws a knife and threatens to vivisect her nipples if she refuses to divulge information about Vietcong activity: "Go back to yourself. Think about what these things [a knife, straps, and electricity] could do to your body. How would your boyfriend or husband or baby like you without nipples, eh? Or, perhaps, I'll cut some skin off your ass for some sandals, or maybe throw a few of your fingers to the guard dogs" (Hayslip 82). Here, the sadistic interrogator focuses on the parts of her body that produce and nourish life—her buttocks, hands, and breasts. If any of these parts of her body were deformed, she would become less appealing or even dysfunctional as a nourishing woman. Such literary critics as Viet Thanh Nguyen and Leslie Bow have focused on the representation of the female body in Hayslip's memoirs as the target of most of the crimes, violence, and punishment committed against her.

In her description of herself as the sexual victim of two Vietcong rapists, Loi and Mau, Hayslip uses simile effectively to emphasize her situation as an alleged "traitor" whose powerless life is in the hands of a "ghost" and a "butcher" armed

with a rifle and a knife—symbols of male power and violence: “Loi turned and I heard Mau laugh like a ghost. Loi’s hands [...] jerked me to my feet like a puppet. [...]. His rifle was gone, but a knife gleamed evilly in his hand. He looked me up and down the way a butcher eyes a roast” (Hayslip 92). In this frightful scene, the rifle and the knife both stand as standard symbols of the phallus. It should be noted that Hayslip, here for the first time, depicts a male member of the Vietcong as an animalistic, devilish figure, just like the male American and Republican soldiers she earlier had perceived in that fashion: “the shadow of Loi’s face—inches away, grotesque and distorted, scarcely human—blotted out the stars,” and she turns away to escape “his face and evil breath” (93). Graphically, Loi is perceived by his victim as a non-human being with serpentine physical features, a saurian symbol of satanic defiance and blind power. To borrow John Scott’s terminology, Loi uses “corrective influence” (13), or power resources that function to impose punitive sanctions, in order to subject the subaltern Hayslip, using his physical strength and capacity for doing harm to her, to his control in a classic power relation between a male principal and female subaltern.

In their article about women’s experiences of sexual abuse, Liz Kelly and Jill Radford state, “Men, who as the perpetrators of sexual violence have a vested interest in women’s silence, have [...] constructed ‘knowledge’ about sexual violence, crime and women’s sexuality,” so that they can employ them and their threats as effective means to control women, and thereby both enforce their desire and penalize women for resistance (20, 29). Kelly and Radford emphasize that power, violence, and sexuality are closely interrelated because they are fundamental and crucial factors in examining male domination. Thus, the physical power deriving from men’s biological endowments is strengthened by psychological force, and “sexual violence is the outcome of men’s power as men [...] and women’s resistance to it” (37). Hayslip’s memoir is fraught with incidents in which male violence and sexual abuse manifest themselves. She is silenced, however, by the power of those men who take advantage of her body and female sexuality: they threaten to do further harm to her if she dares to expose their violent, lecherous acts. After Mau rapes her, he warns, “But say one word to her [Hayslip’s cousin Thum] about any of this and we’ll burn her house down with both of you inside” (Hayslip 94). Her first, married employer had a clandestine affair with her, but in front of his children he “cursed and gave me a rude gesture” (107), lest she might tell them about their father’s extramarital affair. It is typical in the memoir that Hayslip is forbidden by her exploiter to vocalize any reaction to the traumatic experiences inflicted upon her. The male perpetrators, subsequent to their acts, use the threat of either physical

or verbal violence to coerce her silence and protect themselves from accusation or defamation through exposure.

Hayslip admits that the male wagers of war have made her “their victim,” because men make war (97). The word *victim* properly implies the power relationship between the exploited and the exploiter, and in a wartime situation, women like Hayslip, who have been raised according to the traditional social values that her culture defines as properly feminine, can be subdued and subjugated through assault and exploitation by males—by men both from other cultures and from her own culture. Although Hayslip is violated physically, she is mentally strong enough to overcome the sickening experience perpetuated upon her body by Loi and Mau. Her true strength reveals itself in her subsequent transformation into a resourceful and resilient woman: “From now on, I promised myself, I would only flow with the strongest current and drift with the steadiest wind—and not resist” (97). Without resistance, Hayslip compromises with the dominant wielders of power, especially with Vietnamese men and their perception of women as powerless, subservient, and sexually available victims. Chandra Talpade Mohanty notes that considering women as “archetypical victims freezes them into ‘objects-who-defend-themselves’” and transforms men into “‘subjects-who-perpetuate-violence,’” although it is unarguable that male violence defines a woman’s social position. This assumption suggests that men and women, like actors in a play, already are assigned specific roles before they actually enter into a discourse on social relations. However, Mohanty reminds us that women not only “are produced” through gender status and sexual-political interactions but also are “implicated in forming these relations.” As this observation seems plausible, any interpretation on gender relations in Hayslip’s first memoir must be contextualized within a specific political and historical circumstance (178, 179).

In *Heaven and Earth*, when Hayslip recounts her own and other Vietnamese women’s sexual encounters with American males during the war, her stories also develop and illustrate the themes of gender politics, the victimization of Vietnamese women, and the sexual exploitation of the female body by American males.⁴ Westwood argues astutely that women’s bodies and not the authors’ written texts are the actual “bearers of the inscriptions of sexualities” and that “[j]ust as sex can never be liberated from power [,] it is an enactment of power and is constituted via discursively constructed sexuality” (83). This certainly is true in the incidents that Hayslip recounts: she only transmits the inscription of violent acts upon her body onto the pages of her memoir, and these inscriptions all-too-often have been etched violently.

Hayslip writes that most American men who abused and exploited Vietnamese women sexually were “greedy, horny, and dangerous,” like the American boyfriends of Hayslip’s older sister, Lan. Hayslip plainly states that sex became an obsession ingrained in the minds of American soldiers and officers because “it seemed as if the Americans thought of nothing but sex. [...] We wondered what kind of lives their wives must have lived in the States” (227, 177). Like Rollo May, Hayslip concludes that sexually exploitive power is the most detrimental kind of abusive power because the principal unleashes coercive force to exercise his authority over the subaltern at so basic a biological level. Such exploitive power is, of course, inherently gendered because it is considered the “‘masculine’ way of dealing with women sexually” (May 105). This fact, illustrated by Hayslip’s sexual experience with American soldiers, adds validity to the argument made by Anne McClintock in her book *Imperial Leather*: there is a strong nexus between “imperial power and resistance; money and sexuality; race and gender; [violence and desire]” (5). Hayslip examines openly how lecherous acts and sexual exploitation so blatantly, and often so proudly, prevailed among American soldiers stationed in Vietnam, and how many Vietnamese women either chose or were forced to satisfy these foreign soldiers’ carnal needs or desires.

In *The Wars We Took to Vietnam*, Milton J. Bates devotes a chapter to “The Sex War,” which can be considered an apologia or defense for the sexual exploitation practiced by American men during the war. In the 1960s, the United States witnessed a sexual revolution, which entailed not only an increase in non-marital sex that defied the stricter sexual mores established by earlier generations but also a redefinition that reconstructed or reconstituted American notions of masculinity and femininity. The Vietnam War played a role in the sexual politics of the period: “[r]ecruiting posters promise to ‘build men,’” a phrase infused with the obvious promise of gender or sexual enhancement that would motivate young but post-pubescent American males to join the military; the philosophy implied in such slogans was based upon the premise that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a man.” To become a soldier, therefore, was a means by which boys could become more viril and masculine, and by which women, it would seem, could acquire the same characteristics of strength if they chose to join the military (133, 140-141). Nguyen comments that “Hayslip [in her memoirs] depicts the American belief that masculinity and technology, embodied in Americans, can control femininity and nature, embodied by the Vietnamese” (“Representing,” 617). Moreover, being an American soldier meant being “masculine, heterosexual, technological, violent, and consumerist” (623). From this observation, Bates argues that American soldiers

fighting in the Vietnam War always struggled between “attraction and fear” and that their resolution of this dilemma often ended in rape because rape became a possible expedient to reconfirm and reinforce the power of their masculinity during warfare: “By dominating Vietnamese women physically, they may have [affirmed to themselves] that they could prove that these inscrutable creatures were ‘just women’ and ‘mere gooks’” (144).

In his famous book *Orientalism*, Edward Said argues that Oriental women’s sexual subjection to Western men “fairly stands for the pattern of relative strength between the East and the West and the discourse about the Orient that it enabled.” Said explains that the West sexualizes and feminizes the East, perceiving the East as a place where a “male-power fantasy” is fulfilled (6). Said’s observation of sexuality and power relations helps explain American soldiers’ sexual acts during the Vietnam War. In Hayslip’s memoir, the act of rape gave soldiers the sense of masculine superiority that military slogans seemed to promise and that military culture in fact promoted: the soldiers’ duty was not to cultivate equality but to exercise power. This fact is analyzed in depth by Brenda M. Boyle, in *Masculinity in Vietnam War Narratives*, which argues that “in the American tradition[,] war has been offered as a forge for monolithic masculinity, or a single, bounded and coherent form of behavior enacted solely by men” (5). Hayslip rationalizes that the Americans’ exploitation of Vietnamese women was an expression of the American concept of male sexuality as they attempted to escape the realities of their experiences as combatants in the U.S. military in Vietnam, by seeking something more fundamental “elsewhere in their lives” (281). More boldly stated, descriptions of Vietnamese women raped by American soldiers permeate Hayslip’s memoir because rape in war, as also affirmed by Susan Brownmiller, “reveals the male psyche in its boldest form, without the veneer of ‘chivalry’ or ‘civilization’” (33). Rape is an ultimate expression of dehumanizing abusive power over a vulnerable subaltern. It represents an unleashing of animalistic violence upon a victim reduced to the status of prey.

The masculine patterns of behavior discussed above, by Bates, Nguyen, Said, Brownmiller, and Boyle, are discernable in great detail in the memoir, as Hayslip either experiences or witnesses American soldiers inflicting animal-like sexual violence and aggression upon Vietnamese women, apparently exercising the male prerogatives constructed as part of their wartime culture. To a male American soldier, his experience in Vietnam seemed incomplete if he was not involved in at least one sexual encounter, whether through consensual sex or rape. For example, while Hayslip is outside the Freedom Mill Post Exchange, Big Mike, an American

military policeman, approaches her with a straightforward, shameless proposition that she agree to let two young marines who have been in Vietnam for a very short time “boom-boom” her before they get on an airplane to return to the United States (Hayslip 257). Big Mike even offers her a large sum of money for this sexual favor because he trusts Hayslip but not other prostitutes who might carry sexually transmitted diseases. She agrees and says to herself, “Just lie down and let these two American boys be men” because Big Mike had told her that they wanted to leave Vietnam with “a souvenir” and “a story to take home” (257, 258). The two young marines are timid teenagers, and their sexual experience with Hayslip is awkward. She feels sympathetic for the red-faced marine, whom she calls a “poor, sad little fellow who [...] was just so grateful that he had beaten the odds and finished his tour and had now left his seeds in a final, nonlethal explosion: a gift to a local girl not much younger than himself as a remembrance that their paths, like it or not, had crossed and changed them both forever” (260). As Hayslip looks back at the incident, she surmises that American male soldiers believed that their manhood or adulthood could not be affirmed without some type of sexual experience with Vietnamese women. They all seemed to equate the implied message posted on recruiting posters with exercising sexual prowess among the Vietnamese women, enacting thereby an important rite of passage prescribed in the cultural code that developed among the soldiers caught up in the war. It appears that this culture of sexual mores defined how they should act as “real men” in a war zone, and in Vietnam, a sexual industry developed to accommodate this culture. As readers discover in this incident from her book, Hayslip became drawn inadvertently into this industry, and she understood the significance it held even for the most naïve recruits.

Rethinking History and Reconciling with the Past

The issues relating to the uses and abuses of power that Hayslip exposes in her memoir did not end, as had been anticipated, for U.S. policy makers in April of 1975. According to David L. Anderson, even long after the U.S. military and political failure had been sealed in Vietnam, “American leaders faced repeated questions on where, when, and why to engage U.S. power” (126). In the 1960s and 1970s, military power and abusive power were exercised not only by the Americans but also by their South Vietnamese allies, whom the Americans supported with their financial and military aid, and they also were exercised by the opposing Vietcong and NVA forces, both during the war and in its aftermath. Later, in the first Persian Gulf War, and in the subsequent wars that followed in Central Asia and the Middle

East, some commentators in the media and the government noted ominously that the U.S. history of an unguarded use of military power seemed to be repeating itself. Indeed, military engagements that at first were cast as narrowly defined and temporally limited eventually required, once again, as in Vietnam, ever deeper and broader involvement.

The first edition of Hayslip's *Heaven and Earth* was published in 1990, fifteen years after the war ended, still before the diplomatic relations between the United States and Vietnam had been normalized. Her memoir makes a strong political statement, as she later affirms herself in the afterword to the 2003 edition. One question must be asked: how could "rethinking history" help both countries reconcile and heal war wounds, and help Vietnamese refugees reconcile themselves with the communist victors in their homeland, especially when the Vietnam War is characterized by its "formless[ness]," as Phillip E. Melling describes matters? (3). To members of the Vietnamese American community, who still harbor a strong anticommunist sentiment, and who have resorted to various forms of protest against the Vietnamese communist government (either through demonstrations or through the media), Hayslip's memoir implies that harboring continued hatred prevents one from gaining any peace of mind. Her early experience with two young Vietcong soldiers, Loi and Mau, discussed above, by no means implies that *all* the communists were rapists and murderers in the war. Loi and Mau merely were average, poorly educated men who happened to hold power over Hayslip momentarily, and who used that power to satisfy their sexual desires while punishing her for alleged disloyalty. So too, the fact that some ARVN and American soldiers exercised abusive power over many Vietnamese women by no means implies that *all* Americans assigned to service in Vietnam were "baby killers." If Hayslip was a victim of Loi's and Mau's molestation, and she now is able to forgive them, then why can so many Vietnamese Americans not "forgive" the crimes that some of the communists did to people in the South, which many refugees claim to have witnessed. To the contrary, the Vietnamese Americans never have demonstrated against the U.S. government for having sent to Vietnam a number of American soldiers who apparently were sex addicts, rapists, and killers, as described in Hayslip's memoir. By exposing the abusive power that men of all sides exercised on her body, Hayslip illustrates a culture of war that developed in Vietnam during the war, in which partisans of all persuasions took part.

In the afterword to the 2003 edition of her book, Hayslip says that *Heaven and Earth* represents her attempt to look back at the past from the perspective of a "mature woman" trying to "make sense of [her] life" and history (369). Although

her memoir is fraught with scenes of the abusive use of power, incidents of war crimes, and violent sexual exploitation, she has obtained peace within herself, and she has revisited Vietnam in order to reconnect herself to her homeland, acted as a spiritual therapist for many American veterans who suffer from PTSD, and found cultural and charitable organizations to help both countries heal their war wounds and better understand each other. One of the reasons she is able to move beyond hatred and seek harmony lies in her understanding of the realities of the culture of war she experienced. She shows sympathy and forgiveness to American soldiers fighting the Vietnam War because they, like her, were victims of the U.S. government's misguided political policy and military agenda. Renny Christopher states in her analysis of Hayslip's memoirs that it is crucial to differentiate "American officialdom from American soldiers." The young soldiers, as did Hayslip, came most often from poorer backgrounds, and thus they, too, were "victims of the hierarchy" (71).

Hayslip herself calls the average American soldiers "victims" who answered their country's call, and she identifies with them in their victimization and exploitation by their own political leaders (227). This fact reflects the sentiments of protests voiced in the United States in the antiwar movements launched by civilians and veterans against the war. Thus, power and resistance to the exercise of power are two poles of a conflict in Vietnam that must be discussed together. James Miller and John Thompson point out that, at its start, the majority of the Americans supported the war; however, impatience and frustration developed because the White House and the Pentagon did not accomplish their mission as quickly as they had promised, and the Vietnam War eventually became, at the time it ended in 1975, the longest war in U.S. history. Fear and paranoia pervaded the country as the number of troops sent to Vietnam increased, as the number of casualties on both sides surpassed all bounds of reason, and as draftees learned to face the war with only one thought: "to survive clashes with a shadowy enemy and get home alive" (284-85). American G.I.s, as Hayslip well perceives, "faced death every day [more than] three thousand miles from home," while faith in the justness of their cause evaporated (226). The American public was at least passively aware of the moral decay, drug addiction, and sexual decadence that prevailed among the thousands of American soldiers stationed in Vietnam, and that all Americans at home witnessed daily on the six-o'clock news, reported by such trusted journalists as Walter Cronkite—the personal atrocities of war that their friends, relatives, and sons both experienced and perpetrated half a world away in Vietnam.

Conclusion

Hayslip's memoir exposes the crimes and violence inflicted either upon her body or upon her country by all parties involved in the Vietnam War, resisting rendering a judgment on the war that might be accepted as politically correct by any of the strict partisans. Viet Thanh Nguyen points out that both the United States and Vietnam "were guilty of nationalist solipsism during and after the war"; however, the postwar United States allows an open discourse on the war from all political sides, while postwar Vietnam permits only perspectives that conform to the tenets of communist ideology and the principles of national revolution against American invaders mandated by the government ("What," 21). Hayslip's *Heaven and Earth* delineates the uses and abuses of power upon her individual psyche, and most specifically upon her individual person as a subaltern, victimized by those who use and abuse power on each side of the conflict. It is a powerful human document and a significant contribution to the corpus of Vietnamese American literature.

In her first memoir, Hayslip attempts to be fair to all sides in her narration of the events that defined the substance of her life-experience in war-torn Vietnam. It is her personal, humanistic perspective that often is criticized negatively by readers seeking to find stronger justification for their own partisan positions in her writing, but it is her humanistic perspective that gives great human value to her book for the broader audiences whom she addresses. Hayslip is to be praised for her skill in personalizing political abstractions and focusing attention upon the individuals who acted out their lives as subalterns against the backdrop of the power politics that actually produced and directed the events in the Vietnam War. As she illustrates so well, the American G.I.s, on the one hand, and the Vietcong and NVA soldiers, on the other, served as instruments of the partisan forces in conflict with each other during the war, and the Vietnamese peasants (the subalterns) were caught between those forces, as victims of both. Hayslip's humanistic perspective has much to offer readerships on both sides of the ideological divide. Her story reveals the fact that the peasantry were treated as subalterns by partisans of all political persuasions, even as the ideologies of these persuasions proclaimed both freedom and liberation as their central principle. *Heaven and Earth* is a vehicle through which Hayslip articulates this important insight, while avoiding histrionic recrimination, and while suggesting at least subdued amity in the end.

Notes

1 The titles are shortened to *Heaven and Earth* and *Child of War* throughout this article.

2 Leslie Bow presents an interesting discussion on the problems of co-authorship in Hayslip's two memoirs in her book *Betrayal and Other Acts of Subversion: Feminism, Sexual Politics, Asian American Women's Literature*, pp. 133-135.

3 See Lorna Dale, *Gods and Spirits of Vietnam* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997).

4 The theme of victimization of the female body is discussed thoroughly in Viet Thanh Nguyen's *Race and Resistance*.

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