

**Beautiful Debilitation: War Injuries as Political Currency
in Vietnam and U.S. Relations**

Ai Binh T. Ho

Better Life Lab-New America

Abstract

War-produced disability acts as political currency between the United States and Vietnam. The United States engages with “The Terror of War” and Phan Thi Kim Phuc through the lens of beautiful debilitation. Vietnam salvages beautiful debilitation, borrowing its global power to improve diplomacy and receive post-war aid when reparation is unreachable.

Keywords: disability, Vietnam War, atrocity photography

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In July 2022, Phan Thi Kim Phuc, “the napalm girl,” received her 12th and final round of laser treatment at the Miami Dermatology and Laser Institute, 50 years after napalm rained on her village Trang Bang. Notably, the treatment center is in the U.S., even though Phan resides in Canada. Her last treatment was widely covered by major U.S. newspapers and magazines, demonstrating her staying power within the U.S. imagination. Although the photograph “The Terror of War” has been widely discussed, especially within visual culture studies, I want to explicitly place it within a disability studies context. Within what Helen Meekosha (2011) calls a “southern theory of disability,” Phan’s war-produced debilitation reveals “the role of the global North in ‘disabling’ the global South” (p. 668). Southern disability studies have repeatedly called for the examination of the debilitation produced by global injustice and the war machines of colonialism, occupation, and U.S. imperialism.

This article shifts the focus beyond the production of debilitation on racialized, gendered, and poor bodies in Vietnam to show how the visibility of war-produced debilitation—particularly one that I name *beautiful debilitation*—becomes a political pawn in international diplomacy between former enemies. It is through beautiful debilitation, which promotes the visibility of war injuries through a humanitarian rhetoric of international solidarity and friendship, that the U.S. remakes itself, again and again, as a nation that heals disabled people even as it maims and kills. Despite desires to name the U.S. as a colonialist that utterly devastated Vietnam, Vietnam salvages beautiful debilitation through a *guerilla visibility* in order to promote diplomacy with the U.S., particularly during the postwar economic crisis, food shortages and an uneasy relationship with the Soviet Union. The power of beautiful debilitation remains central to Vietnam and U.S. political relations today, I argue,

as war injuries continue to act as a bridge between the former enemies within the context in which reparation and accountability remain out of reach. Beautiful debilitation grounds the staged retelling of traumatic past, in which the war-injured bodies become ideological battlegrounds.

By illuminating on the suffering, Phan endures as a pawn between the U.S. and Vietnam, I call southern theory of disability to also hold the global South accountable for its role in harming its subjects. Decolonization cannot simply return to the past or practice fast economic progress that produces mass debilitation (through sweatshops, toxic factories, cash crops, etc.). Postcolonial countries participate in the exploitation of their brown and black subjects and the natural world in the relentless quest for wealth accumulation for its elites and global status. Critiquing the production of worldwide disability by the violence and wars provoked by the North cannot alone advance the lives of debilitated people in the South.

The Beautification of Debilitation

The U.S. (and other western nations) created beautiful debilitation—a humanitarian engagement with disability—through its response to “The Terror of War” and Phan’s medical journey. It is through beautiful debilitation that the U.S. lays claim to the infamous photograph and her curative experiences even decades after the war. More than revealing information about the disabled subject, beautiful debilitation explains the viewers’ orientation towards the subject, who is often othered. It is the potential to heal Phan that makes her a ready symbol. Healing her through surgeries and sending money and gifts provides hope for self-healing and suturing the disruption of U.S. notions of wholeness, beauty, and humanity. Thy Phu (2022) names this liberal spectator’s orientation as “*transpacifism*—which consists of humanitarian initiatives carried out under the ethical guidance of the ‘civilian gaze’ conjured by atrocity images, and whose significance reaches across the Pacific and

binds the United States to these sites—served as a means of symbolic reconciliation, acceptable only because it did not seem to do so” (p. 86). Connecting transpacifism to material debilitations politicizes the humanitarian gaze as one that sanctions mass impairments produced by racial-oriented wars. Recognizing beautiful debilitation, then, resists Western theories and epistemologies of disability. Beautiful debilitation narrows the field of vision—there's nothing more to see except this intervenable event. The trace of violence forever marked by the iconic photograph is mitigated by her recoverable body. To be clear, viewers presume a healing within the theater of reconciliation without acknowledging her daily experiences of intense chronic pain, her shame, her rage, her mothering as a burn survivor who cannot feel her children's touch, and her everyday movements and knowledge that result from the napalm burn.

The simultaneous visibility of her pain (mouth-opened screaming, complete nudity, unfolded arms running towards the audience) and the possibility of obscuring her injuries allows Phan to be placed within an individualistic, linear narrative of healing (injured/cured), which the U.S. can readily “fix.” The napalm missed her face, and her scars could be hidden under clothes. Because the war—not her—triggers shock, disgust, and grief, she can embody forgiveness and hope. That is, the napalm injury can be detached from Phan's body to obscure the imperialist war fought in Southeast Asia by the U.S. and its allies. Despite her ability to hide her scars, onlookers can demand to look at her disfigurement. Phan recalls being forced to prove her identity when reporters have located her: “*You* are the girl in the picture?” ... ‘Yes,’ Phuc replied to the men. ‘I am the girl in the picture’ ... ‘But, you look very – *normal!*’ Phuc understood. She drew up the sleeve on her left arm” (Chong, 2000, p. 190). People with disabilities, especially invisible disabilities, know well the demand to prove our disabilities. Within the context of violence, the demand to see her wounds is also a need

to see injustice—to admit to a crime against humanity that ruptures a sense of morality within viewers.

Entering living rooms, “The Terror of War” pushed the war in Southeast Asia into the intimate sphere. The photograph, often credited as the image that ended the war, claimed the middlebrow imagination that upholds the U.S.’s identity as a world leader (Ono, 2022). Moving across national, media, and temporal borders, Phan’s war-produced debilitation attached to narratives beyond the confines of her body. The symbolization of her napalm burns requires the production of intimacy. Since the initial publication of “The Terror of War,” the western media has been obsessed with learning Phan’s name and healing trajectory, emphasizing individualism and intimacy, rather than the reality of mass debilitation. The use of her first name, Kim Phuc, in academic and popular writing goes against standard style of using an individual’s last name after the first reference. “Kim Phuc” is how she is known around the world, suggesting an intimacy between Phan and anyone who speaks her name. Guy Westwell (2011) shows that *The New York Times (NYT)*, in initial publications, promoted “a redemptive ending for the photograph in which U.S. aid and infrastructure results in Kim Phuc's survival, recovery and recuperation”: on June 11, *NYT* named the girl in the picture as nine-year old Kim Phuc. Then, on August 9, it featured a picture of Phan smiling at a nurse at the Barseky Center in Saigon on its front page. With the headline “Napalm girl recovering in Saigon,” *NYT* declared that Phan “has almost recovered from her burns as a result of the work of U.S.-trained Vietnamese plastic surgeons working at the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funded hospital” (p. 413). The mention of “U.S.-trained” surgeons, U.S. money, and the name of the medical center indicate that Phan’s healing is only possible through U.S. intervention. The Barseky Unit, named after Arthur J. Barseky, the lead surgeon in the Hiroshima Maidens project, was

constructed in 1969 to treat Vietnamese children and train Vietnamese doctors and nurses. When *Life* magazine published its annual “The Year in Pictures” issue in December 1972, it featured a single entry related to the war: a two-page spread of a portrait of a smiling Phan inset with the famous picture of her running naked as napalm seared into through her flesh under the headline “The War and Kim Phuc, Memories Masked by A Smile.” *Life* declared “Her scars are healed, and she is going to school again,” indicating a return to normal (pp. 54-55).

The medical interventions, from the initial treatments in Vietnam to the final laser treatment in Florida, fulfills the fantasy of the U.S. liberal savior within a medical humanitarian framework. The declaration that Phan was “healed” seems fictitious given the fifty-year span of her treatments. The emphasis on “recovering,” “almost recovered” or “healed” suggests a promise of cure to heal and beautify the subject *and* the onlooker. This healing relationship between Phan and individual viewers allows Americans to see themselves as paternalistically responsible to the rest of the world, holding tightly to its liberal identity.

Beautiful debilitation positions maiming within a neoliberalist framework that prioritizes a linear and individual rehabilitation, obscuring accountability for collective injuries and deaths.

According to Samuel Moyn (2010), “a genuine social movement around human rights made its appearance” only in the 1970s.¹ One of the key catalysts, he explains, was the U.S. “liberal shift in foreign policy in new, moralized terms, after the Vietnamese disaster” (p. 8).

¹ Moyn argues that while the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was introduced in 1948, human rights remained on the periphery, “failing to interest many people . . . at the time or for decades” (7).

Moyn adds that President Jimmy Carter adopted human rights as the guiding rationale of foreign policy.

The urge to name, personalize, and gender one victim of war reduces the war into a manageable intervention, providing a promising future for a single individual rather than taking responsibility for the millions injured and dead. The effort to individualize war-produced debilitation creates intimacy between Phan and the spectator, which domesticates the disabled subject and encourages a relatability that many maimed people cannot access. That is, the beautification of disabled people simultaneously others and domesticates them. There is only one “little girl” in need of help, as evident in Hariman and Lucaites’s (2003) description of the photograph:

The little girl is naked, running right toward you, looking right at you, crying out. The burns themselves are not visible, and it is her pain – more precisely, her communicating the pain she feels – that is the central feature of the picture. Pain is the primary fact of her experience, just as she is the central figure in the composition. (p. 40)

Despite the presence of other children in the photograph, the description repeats the singular pronouns of she and her. The paternal gaze on Phan falls under what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2009) categorizes as the sentimental visual rhetoric of disability, which invokes pity, inspiration, and contribution by positioning the disabled subject in a diminished or childlike role.

It is not only Phan’s debilitation that becomes symbolic. Phan’s gender enhances her vulnerability, and thus impacts the viewer's relationship to her. Her racial femininity is symbolized and weaponized within U.S. military narratives and popular culture, a legacy of

colonialist discourse in which the global South is presented as feminine, helpless and childlike, and thus, legitimize the need for paternalistic intervention from the global North. Marita Sturken (1997) explains, “As a young, female, naked figure, Kim Phuc represents the victimized, feminized country of Vietnam” (p. 92). Phan personifies Vietnam as naïve, helpless, in need of paternal protection permitting the “white savior” discourse of not only the “Vietnam War” but also wars and imperialism in general. Writing on disability in Palestine, Yasmin Snounu et. Al (2019), writes, “the U.S. in particular, contributes to the disablement of Palestinian people . . . Then, the United States sends developing countries funding for disability projects” (para. 12). Beautiful debilitation calls on liberal humanitarianism and justifies liberal wars, rather than demands accountability for all people affected by warfare.

Phan’s feminine vulnerability offers healing and redemption for the emasculated U.S. male veteran and the U.S. at large. While the Vietnam-U.S. War remained a highly contested and politicized issue in the 1970s, it was subjected to a revisionist project designed to reclaim credibility for the military and rebuild national self-esteem in the 1980s. The focus shifted away from the war itself (and its political, geographical, and symbolic complexity) to the experience of veterans. As Keith Beattie (1998) notes, “healing the wounds” became the dominant metaphor for rendering the war less divisive a decade after its end (p.142). The U.S. news media also transformed Phan from a war victim into a “Vietnamese Marilyn,” according to Judith Coburn (1989) in *The Los Angeles Times Magazine*’s “The Girl in the Photograph: 17 Years Later.” In the same article Coburn adds, “From Kim Phuc’s wounds have sprung a passion to be normal,” by which Coburn means a feminine desire to marry and have children (para. 46). Phan’s Asian feminine beauty directly comes from her racialized helplessness that can secure white masculinity within the military industry that both produces and challenges notions of masculinity defined by the shifting fulcrum of violence and

morality. Alongside the 1955 humanitarian project “Hiroshima Maidens,” in which the U.S. financially supported plastic surgery for twelve Japanese women disfigured by the atomic bombs, Phan’s role exposes medical humanitarianism as a gendered, racialized arm of the U.S. war machine. The U.S. engagement with military debilitation—a medical and aesthetic intervention towards normalization—reveals that it reconciles the national wound of controversial military interventions by beautifying Asian female bodies. Significantly, the cosmetic projects foreclosed discussions of massive and ongoing debilitations produced by the war in Southeast Asia and the atomic bombs as well as the Japanese women’s and Phan’s daily endureances of ongoing pain and stigma.

Throughout my discussion on Phan’s beautiful debilitation, I have pointed out the length of the medical process, her chronic pain, and mental anguish within the context of imperial militarism. Attending Phan’s individual experiences of survival does not depoliticize her napalm injury. On the contrary, the failure to attend to the lived realities of disabled people of color elides their daily experiences of navigating structural injustice. For example, while Mimi Nguyen (2012) cogently shows Phan as an agent of liberal empire, “negating murderous structures of race and coloniality as the present of liberal violence” and “redeeming empire from being held hostage to a shameful, irreversible past,” she does not acknowledge the conditions that demand this labor from Phan (p.130, p. 86). Phan did not readily choose to become an ambassador of liberal empire. Poverty, lining up weekly for food, clothes, and diapers for her baby, and her uncertain refugee status motivated Phan to sell her story: “Driven by [her and her husband’s] desperate financial straits and their guilt at being unable to send money to their families in Vietnam, Kim Phuc relinquished her plans to ‘stay quiet’” (Chong, 2000, p. 357). Phan’s biography, *The Girl in the Picture* (2000), opens with Phan hiding, full of anxiety, in her Toronto apartment from journalists who have

discovered her address. She laments to her husband that the “journalistic hounds” felt like “a bomb falling out of the sky,” equating the trauma of being a propaganda victim with being physically injured by war (p. 6). It seems an unlikely coincidence that she and her husband gained permanent residence in 1995 (three years after they entered Canada) shortly after she re-entered public life (p. 357). The precarious condition in which Phan speaks reveals that she remains under duress in her host country, resisting the teleological immigration narrative from poverty and illness to the wealth and health in a Western nation. The limited framework of her role—one of forgiveness and grace—also shows the labor demanded of the Vietnamese female refugee to uphold the U.S.’s identity as a humanitarian leader and Phan’s duties as financial and cultural caretaker of Vietnam and her family.

Southern disability studies can simultaneously address war-produced disability (both the direct injury caused by the war in Southeast Asia and the injuries produced by exile, poverty and racism in host countries) as collective by nature and attend to the voices and interiority of people living in pain. I am cautious about how the focus of debilitations produced by the North might not make room for some illnesses, such as cancer, fibromyalgia, and sexually transmitted diseases. The elision of the interior lives of disabled people has ethical and material ramifications, including bolstering negative stereotypes of disabled people, omitting the epistemological value of experiences of disabled people in the global South, and ignoring crucial legal and social infrastructure for disabled people. Furthermore Eunjung Kim (2011) warns that the geographic spatialization might limit discussion of bodies altered by violence to be “symbols of injustice and violence” (p.101). Decolonializing projects must attend to social hierarchies, including gender, class, ethnicities, ableism as it criticizes oppression produced by colonialism. The focus on maiming produced by the North does little to hold the South’s governments and societies accountable towards debilitated

subjects. In the next section, I show how the emphasis on national progression as a newly independent nation excludes and harms so many of its subjects, repeating structures of colonial violence and way of being albeit new names, maintaining power and resources for few.

Guerilla Visuality

The communist regime, like western media, exploited Phan through the framing of beautiful debilitation that mobilizes her victim status as proof of U.S. colonialism. As the U.S. detaches its culpability from Phan's body, Vietnam depends on Phan's body as evidence of war atrocity within a victimizing framework that absolves Vietnam of wrongdoing. Rather than outright dismissing the humanitarian narrative of beautiful debilitation crafted by the U.S., the Vietnamese state assembles a guerilla visuality by repurposing beautiful debilitation formed and disseminated by Western media. Guerilla suggests an unequal power relationship within a geopolitical collision that results from necessity and lack. As such, guerilla also implies a temporality of cause and effect, existing as a response *after* a deployment of violence from the more powerful. As the term guerilla alludes to militarism, guerilla visuality operates with the specter of disability as a weapon in the “memory war” (V. Nguyen, 2016, p. 33). Constructed out of beautiful debilitation, guerilla visuality anticipates a humanitarian response. Originally nameless in the Vietnamese public, Phan’s power comes from Western responses (her injury is too common to carry such weight in Vietnam). Debilitation’s visibility in public memory is a relatively new part of Vietnam’s postwar development. Analyzing revolutionary photographs from the Vietnam-U.S. War, Thy Phu (2017) shows that “[b]ecause injured and dead bodies were considered dispiriting and demoralizing, they were rarely seen, and pulled from circulation if not censored outright as unsuitable for revolution, perhaps even as counterrevolutionary” (p. 304). She explains that Vietnamese

photographs from the war follow a “revolutionary looking,” which is “a practice that . . . attends to the importance of repurposing salvaged material, making do with the resources available in one’s environment,—and alternately acknowledging and disavowing injury” (p. 316). In postwar Vietnam, I argue, *displaying* injury is a “revolutionary looking” in the memory war, repurposing the hegemony of human rights—the “lingua franca of the new world order”—to court partnership with the U.S. (Douzinas, 2000, p.32).

During and after the war, Vietnam saw the undeniable power of the mobilization of beautiful debilitation on the global stage with international attention and emotional connection to Phan Thi Kim Phuc. While the U.S. extended President Richard Nixon’s 1964 trade embargo to all of Vietnam until 1994, the image of Phan and other photographs of victimization brought reporters and humanitarian aid to Vietnam. With the power to maintain Western wandering attention, Phan was made into an official war victim to negotiate a reconciliation between Vietnam and the U.S. and its allies. Phan (2017) recalls a government official telling her, “You are very important now! . . . Your government needs you, and you must comply” (p. 93). Officials tracked Phan down when she was nineteen—nine years after she was captured on camera running from the napalm strike—with the goal of leveraging people’s emotions towards her to sponsor a new narrative of victimhood and friendship in order to influence the U.S. and its allies to lift the embargo and provide aid and investments (p. 89). She promoted Vietnam’s legibility on the global stage as a symbol of the sympathetic victim in need of foreign aid rather than as a hostile or morally corrupt communist country to avoid. Phan’s ambassador role reflects Vietnam’s larger effort to court U.S. diplomatic ties. In the same year, Vietnam also invited the first delegation of American veterans to Hanoi (Weinraub, 1981).

Phan’s debilitation, thus, became objectified and appropriated by dueling nationalist

projects. The Vietnamese government workers provided her with a script that emphasized her happiness and success under communism despite the U.S. produced injury, a narrative from which she could not deviate. While she could speak about the physical suffering from her napalm burn since it was caused by an imperial force, she was chastised “for embarrassing the regime by speaking of the difficulties of life in postwar Vietnam” even as her family did not have enough to eat (Chong, 2000, p. 201). Phan (2017) reflects, “During those interviews, government-assigned translators continued to convey to the journalists views on the war, on the napalm attack, and on postwar life in South Vietnam, none of which reflected my own” (p. 92). The full-time role as official war victim eventually forced her out of college despite her tremendous effort to become a pediatrician and her repeated pleas to stay in college. When she hid from officials, they harassed and threatened her parents. Phan’s impoverished life and her struggles as a hostage of the state reveal the exploitation of her war-injuries for a nationalist agenda. The tenth anniversary of the Fall of Saigon, in 1985, intensifies this interest to an intolerable level and Phan finds herself paraded by the Vietnamese government to endless groups of foreign media: “Beginning in the spring of 1985, the pace of Phuc's interviews with foreign journalists intensified as never before....some one hundred and fifty foreign journalists, mostly American, came to Ho Chi Minh City” (Chong, 2000, p. 245). Despite living in Vietnam, Phan performs for American journalists, who document for the U.S. general public.

Vietnam deploys beautiful debilitation as a guerilla visuality that echoes strategies adopted during the war, in which Vietnamese people repurposed salvaged U.S. weapons and materials. As a result, the success is limited as the strategy maintains the U.S. global reputation as a human rights leader. While guerilla visuality might be read through a resistant framework, particularly as a postcolonial deployment of debility as evidence of violence

produced by the global North, the interiority of Phan's struggles as a propaganda tool problematizes the dichotomy of global North/South as producers of harm. Furthermore, official recognition of war-produced debilitations does not always extend to Vietnamese civilians or veterans who served for South Vietnam. Pham Van Quyen, Nui Thanh District's Chairman of the Association of Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin, explained to me in June 2023 that the Vietnamese government only recognizes (and thus, provide aid for) individuals who served on the Communist North military and their direct descendants as potential victims of Agent Orange. Indeed, recognizing and responding to the maiming power of war machines of colonialism, occupation, and U.S. imperialism does not translate to necessary government assistance, disability laws, and social acceptance for disabled people of the South.

Debilitation and Diplomacy

Above, I detailed how the former enemies deployed beautiful debilitation through Phan's napalm injuries before political normalization in 1995. After two decades, beautiful debilitation remained an important political tool when Vietnam became a U.S. strategic partner in 2016, ending the arms embargo. Rendering the "Vietnam War" a thing of the past in the address to the Vietnamese people in Hanoi on May 24, 2016, President Barack Obama named debilitation as an opportunity for reconciliation, healing, and progress:

In this way, the very war that had divided us became a source for healing. It allowed us to account for the missing and finally bring them home. It allowed us to help remove landmines and unexploded bombs, because no child should ever lose a leg just playing outside. Even as we continue to assist Vietnamese with disabilities, including children, we are also continuing to help remove Agent Orange — dioxin — so that Vietnam can reclaim more of your land.

We're proud of our work together in Danang, and we look forward to supporting your efforts in Bien Hoa. (para. 13).

Obama's speech highlights the two issues that remained important to the U.S. after the war: the missing U.S. servicemen and the ongoing Vietnamese debilitation from U.S. war materials. The emphasis on U.S.'s "help" in reference to U.S.-produced debilitations masks its own war crimes and ongoing contributions to the killing of Vietnamese people living on the toxic, bomb-filled land even as it acknowledges them. The construction of war, debilitation, and death as "a source for healing" utilizes beautiful debilitation to define the U.S.'s beauty and morality as it accepts Vietnam as a new market for its weapons industry. If there is a perpetrator within the humanitarian rhetoric of this speech, it is Vietnam, who cannot care for its innocent children and has failed to uphold basic human rights, such as freedom of speech and religion. The widespread belief that "Western countries are . . . heaven for disabled people while non-Western countries are . . . hell" supports Obama's tone of superiority and generosity (Kim, 2011, p. 94). Obama's references to children—eight times in the speech—emphasize that only a particular type of visuality can facilitate reconciliation between former enemies—the beautiful debilitation of the vulnerable innocents like Phan Thi Kim Phuc. He names children as victims of U.S. war remnants as if bombs and Agent Orange, dropped by the U.S. military, discriminate by age. The figure of the disabled child functions as a symbol of Vietnam, needing paternal protection. In the same speech, Obama—like a father—warns Vietnam to uphold human rights in order to maintain normalized relations. He lightens the chastisement by adding that "The rights I speak of I believe are not American values; I think they're universal values written into the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They're written into the Vietnamese constitution . . . That's in the Vietnamese constitution" (para. 29). The former president's reference to human rights and, more

specifically, Vietnam's violations of human rights, calls on universal humanitarian ethos and affirms U.S. global dominance built upon its identity as a nation committed to rights, freedom, and capitalist prosperity that is antagonistic to Communism. Obama's speech rewrites the Vietnam-U.S. War as "we-win-even-when-we-lose" account of the war, in which the U.S. has been recuperated as a moral leader who is "so proud to help train [Vietnam's] peacekeepers" (Espiritu, 2006, p. 329; para. 36). Obama's emphasis on U.S. assistance and threat if Vietnam does not uphold "universal values" decontextualizes the history of chemical warfare and imperialism. In *From Enemies to Partners* (2017), Le Ke Son and Charles Bailey explain that "ask[ing] the U.S. government to help overcome the consequences of Agent Orange" and "su[ing] the U.S. chemical companies" are "contradictory and counterproductive." The authors recommend pragmatic procedures because legal actions are more likely to "trigger adverse reactions from some U.S. government agencies" (p. 17). While humanitarian aid might be the most practical avenue for receiving funding to respond to postwar destruction, it is not redress, particularly as the U.S. refuses to acknowledge responsibility.

Guerilla Visuality at the War Remnants Museum: A Contemporary Example

In the context of the U.S.'s refusal to accept accountability and asymmetrical political power relations, Vietnam continues to repurpose beautiful debilitation to inspire, to call on an international civic culture, and to embody a postcolonial Vietnamese identity. It is important to note that Vietnam simultaneously continues to pursue legal redress. This section shows how the War Remnants Museum, a state-sponsored museum in Ho Chi Minh City, depends on a guerilla visuality of beautiful debilitation to reveal the epistemic violence that compels postcolonial nations to rearticulate narrow conceptualization of disability. The colonial imposition of Western framework of disability, what Xuan Thuy Nguyen (2023) calls

“epistemic injustice,” reflects an ongoing articulation power that plays out in both the cultural and political arenas (p. 109). In addition to numerous photographs of Vietnamese debilitated by the war, the Museum includes disabled people to foster tangible interactions between the visitors and disabled Vietnamese, echoing the beautiful debilitation exchange between Phan and Western audiences. At the gift shop in one of the two entrances, impossible to miss, disabled people make and sell beaded items. Unlike the example of Phan, whose injuries can be hidden, their disabilities (presumably produced by the war) must be visible to act as evidence of the war’s ongoing harm. This type of evidentiary documentation, which rarely occurs in museums, resembles courtrooms’ eyewitness accounts. Phan’s scars can be hidden because people already have proof of the napalm strike. The museum director Huynh Ngoc Van explained that since 2011, the museum had integrated a “life exhibition” of disabled people as another way to convey the consequences of the war. In addition to their presence constructing and selling beaded objects, “On Saturdays and Sundays they come to perform their music, singing to the visitors. And sometimes, we also invite them to see the visitors, tell them their stories and play music for the visitors.” Huynh added:

You know this is kind of . . . a life exhibition, so people can see them and talk to them, can hold them, love them, and share with them. Their life has changed so much after what came in the museum. They became . . . happy, more confidence. They married each other and now we have four children. . . . And they feel . . . helpful because when they talk to other people they can share with them the experience to overcome their difficulties in their life and people can learn from them.

Huynh’s description, which presents the museum as an important place for disabled people to make a living, find romantic connections, heal themselves, and promote change as

teachers, hints at the ways their lives exceed the scope of their roles in the museum. They, like Phan, also serve as hospitable and gracious Vietnamese ambassadors, entertaining and sharing stories with visitors. As representatives of Vietnam, they perform the pedagogical work of advancing a narrative of Vietnam's innocence, pacifism, and victimhood. The labor must remain invisible in order to maximize the emotional power to make visitors feel natural and warm affiliations with them. Instead, the visible labor is their craft-making, which presents their work ethic as a defining characteristic of Vietnamese people (willing to do factory jobs outsourced by developed nations) and marks them as inspirational. Their willingness and desire to work conveys a determination "to overcome their difficulties" rather than a sense of indignation and resentment. Their roles as craft-makers and entertainers reinforce the notion that it is the role of disabled people to warm the hearts and open the minds of abled people, whose ability to appreciate disabled people serves as proof positive of their compassion and supreme moral compass. Unlike some photographs of disabled Vietnamese that featured the most evocative disabilities to shock viewers into a response, these ambassadors' bodies do not trigger shock or disgust. Beautiful debilitation shows the potential for wholeness and the idealism of family, harmony, hope, and humanity despite the presence of injuries, allowing the possibility for the beholder to identify with the wounded subject. As Anne Cheng (2019) writes, "To be able to identify beauty (in the guise of judging it) is to have already experienced the self-identification and disidentification of beauty" (p. 209). They are, in many ways, just like the (assumed) able-bodied viewers—they work, love, marry, have children. They can be your friend—go on, talk, hold, love, and share with them.

The inclusion of debilitated people creates a museum experience that closely aligns with another museum program that connects U.S. veterans from the Soldier's Hearts with former Vietnamese veterans and war prisoners. In December 2016, Van recounts that the

U.S. veterans travel with Vietnamese veterans and stay in their homes: “they became friends. . . . I think my museum is kind of a bridge between former enemies—Vietnamese veterans, American veterans, Korean veterans, Australian veterans.” These curated interactions continue postwar Vietnam’s diplomacy with the U.S. in the 1980s, during which state officials found Phan and hosted the first delegation of veterans to which Foreign Minister, Nguyen Co Thach announces, “Tell your people we are friends, we are not enemies” (as cited in Weinraub, 1981, para. 4). The museum director recounts that U.S. veterans shared with her that despite having lived with postpartum depression for thirty years, after “3 days in Vietnam everything has changed so much, and they feel very happy, and they feel open, and they love Vietnamese people.” These curated engagements between Vietnamese war victims and veterans and U.S. veterans that spans decades and the promise to heal Americans in just three days, mirrors the reconciliation between Phan Thi Kim Phuc and John Plummer, who claimed to be the officer who ordered the napalm strike on her village, against the national backdrop of veterans Day ceremonies in 1996. She opened her arms to the sobbing veteran and said, “I forgive, I forgive” (Gearan, 1997, para. 57). The controversy around Plummer’s apology, namely that he did not order the air strike as he had claimed, significantly demonstrates the (necessary) hidden complexity of war-produced debilitations.

The Possibility of Photographs of Debilitation

On the fiftieth anniversary of the “The Terror of War” in 2022, Phan Thi Kim Phuc wrote an opinion article for the *NYT*. Aptly titled “I Am Not ‘Napalm Girl’ Anymore,” Phan pivots her role from a visual object to a teacher. Phan discusses school shootings: “We may not see the bodies, as we do with foreign wars, but these attacks are the domestic equivalent of war.” Phan references the common images of debilitated or dead foreign bodies that have become shorthand for the violence, corruption, and poverty of the global South. Within

disability studies, disability in the global South has often been represented as a metaphor for poverty, violence, and colonialism (Davidson, 2008; Sherry, 2008; Shirley, 1983).

The Canadian citizen names the Uvalde, Texas school shooting, continuing her role as an ambassador of “peace, love, hope and forgiveness” within a U.S. sociopolitical context. By placing U.S. gun violence within the context of “foreign wars,” Phan, whose racialized body registers global South debilitation, emphasizes debilitation and deaths produced in the U.S. The comparison of the foreign bodies and U.S. children challenges the U.S. position as a world leader in disability rights and liberal morality underlining U.S. international diplomacy, especially with Vietnam. Ultimately, Phan destabilizes the hierarchy between the U.S. and “foreign” nations in human rights discourse.

Phan calls for photographs of the “aftermath of a gun rampage,” citing looking as the first step to end gun violence. What types of photographs are necessary to move the audience to act towards gun control? Will the photographs show children spread out on the floor covered in blood and bullet holes? Will the photographs show children in caskets—dignified and beautiful—and utterly immobile? Images of debilitation and death have tremendous political and representational power because the human body is the most universal lexicon. The debilitated body promotes an unmatched intimacy and a visceral disruption of that intimacy as we confront the breaking fantasy of bodily wholeness. The tension between the familiarity of the body and the shock of its rupture triggers a wave of emotions—pity, grief, rage, shame, fear. The visibility of bodily injury carries the weight of truth to give the victim moral authority over the more powerful person, institution, or nation.

Many prominent photography scholars, such as Susan Sontag (2004) and John Berger (1973), express deep suspicion of photography’s capacity to propel political change. And as I

have described with Phan Thi Kim Phuc and the life exhibition of disabled people in the War Remnants Museum, the body's universalism makes it vulnerable to objectification according to the desires of onlookers and curators. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag (2004) asserts that the circulation of suffering photographs is racialized: The "exotic—that is, colonized—human beings: Africans and denizens of remote Asian countries were displayed like zoo animals in ethnological exhibitions" (p. 72). Ultimately, Sontag focuses on the ocular power of Western viewers who fail to identify with the seen object. Sontag's argument, while cogent and significant to visual culture, is more interested in Westerners' looking habits than the suffering of others. Sontag describes the other through the analogy of animals.

Dehumanization informed by coloniality and racialization underlies her arguments. The suffering of some people—in and outside of the U.S.—is more photographed simply because we are more exposed to harmful and deadly environments. Staying visible in and traveling through photographs can be the only way marginalized people remain alive even as they are presented as maimed or dead. Justice becomes possible not in the present moment of reality, but rather in the future realm of what Ariella Azoulay (2008) names "the civil contract of photography" as the title of her book. Furthermore, marginalized people from the global South often lack the cultural means (such as literature, film, art) to protest. Even lynching photographs that were circulated as a tool of terrorism and community formation among white oppressors shift to become resistance to this form of violence as Amy Louise Wood (2009) details in *Lynching and Spectacle*. So many marginalized subjects occupy the space of this witnessing residual—unacknowledged but existing.

As Phan suggests, people need more, not fewer, engagements with the photography of atrocity in order to reject claims of propaganda, dismissal, or authorized erasure. Looking must account for the specificity of geopolitical power, racial, gender, age, and circumstance.

Eunjung Kim (2011) suggests that we can move beyond symbolization of disability by becoming “intimate with the subcultures of disabled people locally,” learning “how people creatively navigate their inaccessible environments with accumulated expertise and strategies,” and “make connections among diverse, imaginative, conflicting, and ambiguous self-representations of disabled people around the world” (p. 104). Learning to call out the many debilitating violence of a society and honoring the lives of disabled people as complex and whole might be difficult work, but it is critical to reducing harm to vulnerable people. Photographs of disabled people, to begin with, can reveal sites of violence and permit deeper conversations about the lives of people wounded by such violence. We, too, must be careful with dissemination of injured or dead bodies as they can be triggering to populations already predisposed to harm. This article has demonstrated the problems of using disabled people as symbols of a violent historical event—the dissemination and discussion of atrocity photographs must give space for debilitated people to speak. This ensures that both disabled and deceased individuals are treated with respect, allowing people to access the resources they are entitled to in order to thrive.

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