

Everyday Ethics Across the Curriculum Initiative  
Report on English 255: Discourses on the Viet Nam War  
Fall 10  
Bunkong Tuon

Allow me to share with you an anecdote. When I was in junior high school, I saw the film *First Blood* and was captivated by its main protagonist, Viet Nam War veteran John Rambo, and his struggle to adapt to civilian life after his tour in Vietnam. Maybe it was because I was the only Cambodian student in a predominately-white school in a city fifteen minutes outside of Boston, that I identified with the alienation of John Rambo, played by Sylvester Stallone. In 1985, Hollywood came out with *Rambo: First Blood Part II*. In this sequel, John Rambo returns to Vietnam to rescue American POWs and annihilates every Vietnamese and Russian enemies in the process, while somehow finding time to fall in love with a beautiful Vietnamese freedom fighter. Once again, I found myself rooting for Stallone's character.

Now, twenty five years later, I find this past, this aspect of myself, perplexing. It's an odd story. What did a Cambodian kid have in common with John Rambo, a member of the elite US Army Special Forces (The Green Berets)? The answer is: very little. Yet, somehow, I was able to identify with Rambo and see the Vietnamese as "the other," whose country borders Cambodia and whose racial-physical appearance is more closer to mine than Stallone's.

What happened? I asked myself. Why didn't I stop to consider the stories of these Vietnamese people? The answer is simple: Hollywood. In most Hollywood-made Vietnam films, the hero is, typically, an American soldier. The Vietnamese are either sadistic torturers, such as those in *First Blood Part II* and *The Deer Hunter*, or victims, like the women and children caught in the crossfire in Oliver Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July*. In Francis Ford Coppola's Vietnam film *Apocalypse Now*, Southeast Asia is a nightmarish landscape of mist and fog, where the farther you go into mainland Southeast Asia, the closer you get to man's "heart of darkness;" in the second half of the twentieth-century, Conrad's Captain Kurtz awaits you, apparently, in the jungles of Cambodia. In short, not many Hollywood films speak of the Viet Nam War from the perspective of the Vietnamese and their neighbors.

My class "Discourses on the Viet Nam War" is, therefore, a social/cultural experiment, where my students and I attempt to unlearn what Hollywood has taught us. Yet, I was careful not to inundate the class with only readings by the Vietnamese. I didn't want students to misconstrue the class as a propaganda platform and misread me as a Vietnamese teacher trying to convince them that America's mis-adventure in Viet Nam was misinformed. Also, it is not ethical to tell the story of the war solely from Vietnamese perspectives simply because Hollywood has been telling it from American perspectives. Rather, I want to include as many perspectives as possible within the time constraints of a ten-week term.

I began the class by reminding students on the first day that the Viet Nam War has been called by many names: The Conflict in Viet Nam, The American War, The Second Indochina War, “Nam,” and so on. The diversity in naming this historical event attests not only to the confusing nature of the war but also to its many sides. With this in mind, the class has been considering as many of these sides as possible—through the diverse political, ideological, and moral perspectives of US soldiers, a war correspondent, an American novelist, an African-American poet, a Vietnamese Buddhist poet, widows of soldiers from all sides of the war, the father of a South Vietnamese refugee, and a former member of the National Liberation Front (a Viet Cong). I also included popular music by such as artists as Bruce Springsteen, The Doors, The Animals, Country Joe and the Fish, and Sergeant Barry Sadler of the Green Beret.

With funding provided by the Michael S. Rapaport Ethics Across the Curriculum Initiative, I was able to procure films and scholarly texts about the Vietnam War and its literature, which tremendously helped me to structure the class in terms of its thematic survey of the various perspectives on the Viet Nam War. Such films as Oliver Stone’s *Born on the Fourth of July* and *Platoon*, Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*, Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket* gave students a sample of Hollywood films about the war. Documentaries such as *The My Lai Massacre* and *Vietnam: a Television History* gave students the historical and cultural perspectives of the war. Barbara Sonneborn’s *Regret to Inform* shows the effects of war not only on the soldiers but also the wives, children, and friends they left behind. Ha Thuc Can’s *Dat Kho* gives students a Vietnamese perspective of the war, as we witness how a family, representative of the nation, is torn apart by both North and South Vietnamese forces.

My moral-ethical imperative is to give each perspective a fair treatment, not privileging one over others but, rather, examining all perspectives with a critical and passionate conviction.

With the class’ emphasis on the different sides of the war, we were destined to encounter challenges that are both exciting and daunting, challenges that stemmed almost entirely from differences in religion, culture, and life experience between the world of the texts and the world in which the students and I live. Because of time constraints, I will not be able to go into details these teaching moments, but I do want to identify them briefly, so that, if time permits, we can talk about them during Q & A.

Some of these teaching moments are as follows:

--Thich Nhat Hanh’s Buddhist philosophy on the interconnectedness of being, where the self is intricately linked with the other: we tried to understand an atrocity from the perspective of the perpetrator.

--The unfamiliarity of Vietnamese culture—such as Vietnamese dishes, holidays, festivals, and New Year celebration; romantic love and arranged marriages; roles of men and women in Vietnamese society. We tried to put ourselves in the writer’s position and asked what we would

write about if our homeland were ravaged by war, our families and friends killed or separated, and we can never return to our home.

--The strangeness of life in war: How is family affected by war? What does it mean to take another human life? How do we experience and remember national traumas such as 9/11 or the Fall of Saigon? What decisions do we have to make to ensure our own survival? Is torture necessary? What are its repercussions? How do we make sense of a scene where children are kicking around a human skull as if it were a soccer ball?

--The foreignness of the other: Who are the Viet Minh and the Viet Cong? Why did people join the Resistance movement/Communist movement? What does it mean to be the “winner” (or “loser”) of a war? How does a nation rebuild itself after a half century of warfare? What common experiences do Vietnamese and American soldiers share?