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Deconstructing Madmen

Mapping the Relevance of Asian American Literature

The difference between mad people and sane people...is that sane people have variety when they talk-story. Mad people have only one story that they talk over and over.

—Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* (1976)

AN ADMISSION: I have always felt an uncomfortably close connection to President Richard M. Nixon.

Unable to deny his involvement in the Watergate break-in at the Democratic National Committee (DNC) headquarters and faced with impeachment by the U. S. House of Representatives, Nixon tenured his resignation on August 9, 1974. Almost a month later, on September 8, 1974, Gerald R. Ford assumed the nation's highest office. While the country was predictably focused on the *domestic* drama of Nixon's ignoble fall from grace, what was equally pressing was the concomitant ongoingness of the Second Indochina War *abroad*. To wit, despite the 1973 withdrawal of U. S. troops and concomitant ceasefire as per the January 27th Paris Peace Accords, North Vietnamese forces continued their campaigns down south (in the Republic of Vietnam). In neighboring Laos, the covert conflict between the Royal Lao Government, CIA Special Activities, the Hmong, and the Pathet Lao persisted. And in close-by Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge—emboldened by Nixon's illegal countryside bombings and American foreign policy folly—were gaining considerable ground against pro-U. S. Lon Nol forces.

These specific military histories—which lay bare a geopolitical expansiveness that potently militates against the neatly contained nomenclature suggested by “the Vietnam War”—are on the one hand immediately linked via misguided anticommunist Cold War objectives and injudicious collateral policy. On the other hand, what remains largely obscured in the dominant U. S. imagination is the political fact that the Vietnam War was—by way of various wartime Southeast Asian fronts and military bases in Japan, South Korea, the Philippines,

Guam, Hawaii, and Thailand—a *full-scale Asian-Pacific war*. Indeed, notwithstanding recent declarations by the Obama administration that the twenty-first century is “America’s Pacific Century,” and regardless of the ubiquity of China as vexed and veritable catchall for global capitalist enterprise, the Vietnam War as multivalent conflict accentuates the centrality of Asia in twentieth-century U. S. war-making and American foreign policy. The proof of such “Pacific sites” and America’s expanded Asian-focused “sights” is discernible in a brief listing of past/present conflicts, which in dizzying fashion span Southeast Asia, East Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East: the Philippine-American War (1899 – 1901), World War II (1941–1945), the Korean War (1950–1953), the Vietnam War (1959–1975), the Persian Gulf War (1991), the Iraq War (2003–2011), the War in Afghanistan (2001–2014), and Syrian airstrikes (in the present).

At the risk of sounding opportunistically self-important, and in the face of what *New York Times* foreign correspondent Sydney Schanberg termed the distanced problem of “other people’s wars” in his assessment of America’s involvement in Indochina, this history of militarized conflict and US war-making is responsible for bringing me—and my twin brother, Charles—into being. Situated within the context of continual Southeast Asian conflict, in the interregnum between Nixon’s presidential resignation and Ford’s executive-level ascension, we were born on September 2, 1974, in Udon Thani Province, Thailand. Located 279 kilometers (173 miles) from Laos, Udon Thani is presently a major city in the Isan region; in the 1960s and 1970s, Udon Thani Province was the militarized home of Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base. It was here that US airmen worked closely with their multiethnic Southeast Asian allies. The headquarters for the C.I.A.-owned Air America fleet, the base was a primary training ground for Cambodian, Thai, and Laotian pilots and military personnel. To be sure, Udorn Royal Thai Air Force base was by no means a military anomaly; it was one of several bases located in Thailand that, due to cartographic proximity, strategic convenience, and political willingness, made possible Nixon’s illegal bombings of the Cambodian countryside, illicit U.S. missions over North Vietnamese targets, and clandestine C.I.A. munitions runs to Laos. Most famously, Udorn Royal Thai Air Force base was the primary launching hub for large-scale humanitarian evacuations involving Air America helicopters in the days, weeks, and months after the so-known “Fall of Saigon” on April 30, 1975.

Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base was where my biological parents—a Cambodian woman and an American GI—met. Both were married at the time their wartime affair began: my then-mother-of-five was “on base” because her husband, a Thai pilot, was stationed there to continue his military training. My Massachusetts-born then-father-of-two, an Air Force man, was responsible for repairing planes and providing munitions support. Given the surreptitious nature of their relationship, it is not surprising that our birth was not so much celebrated as it was temporarily tolerated. My adoptive parents—Ginko and Charles Schlund—were also “on base.” Like my biological father, Charles was an Air Force repairman born in the Bay State, though he spent his formative years in a small New Hampshire town: his primary job also involved loading cluster bomb munitions. Echoing maternal resonances, Ginko was—similar to my biological mother—a military bride who was eleven years old when the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. If the conditions surrounding our birth were admittedly *inauspicious*, our adoption proved quite *serendipitous*. Ginko and Charles had spent the first thirteen years of their marriage in search of children. In 1975, they found two mixed-race love children—war babies. In May 1975, the Schlunds moved stateside, and the rest is my personal “history.”

During his 1968 presidential campaign, Nixon repeatedly stressed the need to “Vietnamize” the war in Southeast Asia; arguing that the United States could no longer afford to fight “other people’s wars,” Nixon’s Vietnamization policy struck a welcome chord to a U.S. public already weary of conflict which, by its end, would witness the deployments of an estimated 2.15 million Americans, 58,000 U.S. fatalities, and 2–4 million Southeast Asian deaths. Such “Vietnamization” took the form of U.S. troop withdrawals and the centralization of operations in the Republic of Vietnam. And, as my family history makes clear, this policy took shape in peripheral deployments (e.g., to bases not in the Republic of Vietnam) and increased military training of Southeast Asian allies.

Despite the seeming de-escalation of direct U.S. war efforts “in-country,” “Vietnamization” as foreign policy focus was most certainly not peaceful in scope nor was it humane in practice. A foundational aspect of this policy was what Nixon characterized to his chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, as “the Madman Theory.” According to Haldeman, Nixon stated,

I want the North Vietnamese to believe I've reached the point where I might do anything to stop the war. We'll just slip the word to them that, 'for God's sake, you know Nixon is obsessed about communism. We can't restrain him when he's angry – and he has his hand on the nuclear button' and Ho Chi Minh himself will be in Paris in two days begging for peace.

On one level, Nixon's "Madman" strategy, predicated on a by-then established use of mass warfare and nuclear deterrent as a means of ensuring U.S. power, is very much relevant to my family's history, which—as I hope to have made clear—intersects with wide-ranging conflict and refracts twentieth-century anticommunist obsession. On another level, like mistaken notion of a singularly bound "Vietnam War," the "Madman Theory" embodies on closer glance a multifaceted policy of irrational violence consistent with a now-familiar war of attrition. Whereas Southeast Asian civilians and "enemy combatants" tragically encountered militarized pandemonium on the ground, hawks like Nixon in Washington pursued a Manichean single-minded anticommunist "us versus them" story repeatedly narrated and disastrously reiterated.

The unwaveringly consistent nature of this American "talk story"—which rehearses Cold War understandings of states as either "democratic" or "communist"—brings to light the ways a "Madman Theory" is an apt descriptor of past/present U.S. politics and foreign policy. The inability to veer from established narrative is a hallmark of what Maxine Hong Kingston notes is a troubling symptomatic (and systemic) madness. By contrast, it is through the assemblage of "other people's wars" through "other people's voices" which brings into dialogic focus my family's story and the accounts revealed in Asian American literature. Regarding the former, the linear account I have given is one gleaned from divergent and incomplete accounts concerning why my parents—both biological and adoptive—were in Udon Thani, which necessarily involved their voluntary, compulsory, and confused participation in the Vietnam War. Faced with such narrative inconsistencies and silences, this personal story is one that, in the end, reflects a "sane" account of the traumas of war, the intimacies of adoption, and the paradoxes of militarized relocation.

Finally, in terms of the latter, it is precisely the difficulty of "talk story" vis-à-vis immigration, migration, conflict, exclusion, and discrimination which makes Asian American literature a unique site to deconstruct the

unchanging stories of racist, sexist, homophobic, war-mongering, and xenophobic madmen. By way of conclusion, I return to Nixon, whose presidency has been oft-accessed referent in what is now recognizable as the “Trump Era” in U. S. politics. We are presently living in precious though not necessarily “new” times. We are faced with madmen armed with a single-mindedness that is all too familiar to those of us deemed “on the margins.” And we find ourselves in the midst of a political crisis wherein another president is facing possible impeachment due to alleged campaign malfeasance and obstruction of justice. Yet it is through the tireless telling of alternative stories—at the forefront of profound protest, acts of resistance, and imagined liberation—that we deconstruct, dismantle, and destroy such “madmen.”