Quan Manh Ha and Cab Tran (eds). *The Colors of April: Fiction on the Vietnam War's Legacy 50 Years Later*. ISBN 978-1953103574 (Three Room Press, 2025), 306 pages

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The Colors of April is a pioneering anthology that amplifies the voices of both Vietnamese authors (through English translations) and Vietnamese American authors (written in English), in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the conclusion of the Vietnam War. This book deviates from the dominant narratives surrounding the war in American discourse, which either frame it as a civil war between the communist North and the democratic South, with the United States positioned as an essential ally to prevent the spread of communism throughout the Eastern hemisphere, or conversely, as an "American tragedy" full of blunders and missed opportunities. *The Colors of April* challenges both of these Americentric perspectives by centering a wide range of Vietnamese and diasporic Vietnamese American experiences, foregrounding their narratives of displacement, trauma, and memory—specifically the ways in which these experiences are both remembered and erased—thus providing insights into diverse lives that have actively engaged with this tragedy, and are still being impacted by it. At times the stories provide a blurring of identities, conflating or converging ideological, geographical, and linguistical divides into a dizzying, multifaceted Vietnamerica.

Regarding the Vietnamese American experience featured in the book, there are stories that fearlessly challenge the American Dream by presenting it as an illusion that needs to be literally immolated. For instance, Viet Thanh Nguyen's "The Immolation" depicts two teenage boys—Lộc and his unnamed narrator friend—marginalized and labeled as "freaks" by their

high school peers, yet the story affirms their intuitive agency and anarchic self-expression. Similarly, Lộc's tragic father, who sets himself on fire in front of the US Capitol to protest the United States' abandonment of South Vietnam (an act of sacrifice that both echoes and inverts Venerable Thích Quảng Đức's self-immolation in June 1963 to protest the South government of Ngô Đình Diệm), is intimately commemorated via his dental X-rays, backlit and framed as "modern art."

Similarly subversive are stories by Vietnamese American writers that challenge the dual American ideas of salvation and assimilation. Barbara Tran's haunting "Laws of Motion" depicts a young woman adopted and raised in a small town in Michigan where she is considered a "saved child" by her white adoptive mother. While accepted and lovingly raised by this mother, Tran's protagonist recognizes the discomfort other community members feel in her presence—forcing her to question the type of presence she adds to this hegemonic community: balanced or unbalanced. Gin To's "Bad Things Didn't Happen" illustrates a spectrum of youthful American identities that yearn to escape the oppressive shadows of their Vietnamese heritage. For example, Mars, a Vietnamese transnational and transgender, plans on publicly announcing their preferred gender and sexual preference at a large gathering. Mars grapples with their multi-transgressive identity, which, while accepted in a permissive American environment, is considered "counterintuitive" in traditional Vietnamese culture, and also too "spontaneous" for a Vietnamese American environment hellbent on survival via heterosexual marriage and filial obligations. Similarly, Moonshine, the daughter of Mrs. World, the hostess of many elaborate and esoteric parties that bring together both impressionable Midwesterners and visiting friends from Vietnam, must also wrestle with her mother's performative Vietnamese virtues and her friend's "American" desires. The party at the heart of the story serves as a comic set piece displaying the various shadings among cultures and generations, including the poignant scene of Mars and Moonshine smoking secretly in Mrs. World's

bathroom, which allows Moonshine to "flush her tightly wrapped imperfection down the toilet," safely from her mother.

In parallel with incisive, nuanced critiques of the American Dream in juxtaposition with Vietnamese expectations, some stories interrogate the role of propaganda, particularly through the influence of photography and media in advancing political agendas. Lê Vũ Trường Giang's "A New Perspective" portrays Job, an American war correspondent struggling with the psychological trauma of his wartime experiences in Vietnam. Reflecting on his assignment, Job recalls his leader's instructions: "Now your job is to use your camera to take winning shots of our company during raids—the kind of photos people will remember about this war." While he recoils from the brutality of the conflict, Job is compelled to document these atrocities for public consumption—an act that seeks to both reinforce American heroism and obscure the horrors of war. Interestingly, one could say that this is the propaganda tactic employed by the Communist, who captured battle scenes in black and white film as a way to exalt the Vietnamese struggle and deemphasize the grisly aspects of combat.

While Lê examines propaganda through the perspective of an American, he is in fact a Vietnamese author living in Vietnam. If fiction and translation are comparable modes of textual ventriloquy, Lê persuasively imagines the trauma of an American—his cultural other. Phùng Nguyễn, a diasporic author and South Vietnamese veteran writing in Vietnamese, in "Oakland Night Question," pushes the notion of the other further by examining his narrator's dual alienation. His narrator is a stranger to both his own traumatic past and the present of his younger, more assimilated compatriots—who retain their Vietnamese heritage but also thrive in American culture. The author's satirical take on Communist indoctrination, "Even a crazy one like Kình could learn to shout slogans after only a few months of joining the Front," reflects a direct counterpoint to Lê's critique of American propaganda. It's as if both Lê and Nguyễn,

writing from their respective ideological positions, are each defined by their projected view of the other even while attempting to transcend their bias.

The prevailing American media and historical narratives frequently depict the Vietnamese communists as barbaric and sub-human, while state-sanctioned Vietnamese literature similarly vilifies the Americans and anti-communist Vietnamese as bloodthirsty invaders and traitors to the homeland, respectively. Some stories in *The Colors of April* actively contest these entrenched stereotypes, emphasizing that the war's devastations have affected millions, irrespective of their political or ideological affiliations. For example, Nguyễn Thị Kim Hòa's "A Rockfall Dream" and Bảo Thương's "The Passed Season" both pertain to siblings faced with the agonizing problem of choosing sides, leading to familial tensions that lasted long after war's end. These narratives highlight the profound human suffering experienced by all, while questioning the oversimplified binaries of "us" versus "them." But while both stories illustrate similar subject matters, their translators' approaches vary. For example, in "The Passed Season," certain Vietnamese linguistic elements are preserved, compared to "A Rockfall Dream," which arguably reads more like an original work of fiction, as the translation of the latter story seems more "assimilated." Specifically, in "The Passed Season," even the somewhat awkward-sounding title tries to capture the condensed Vietnamese syntax. Instead of translating it as "A Season That Has Passed," or "A Season That Was No More" (from the original "Mùa đã qua rồi"), the translators convey the irrevocable idea of one "passed" or missed opportunity. (There is little distinction between definite and indefinite articles in Vietnamese). In addition, while the translators provide a footnote defining *ngụy* as "puppet, illegitimate, or fake," its recurring integration within the English translation allows the reader to see both its insidious impact and full-frontal violence on the losing side, as *ngụy* conjures the many ostracized faces of the other, amplifying many modes of contextualized wrongness beyond its stated definition.

There exists no clear resolution in many stories. The past continues into the present and shapes the future. For example, in “What the War Left Behind,” Nguyễn Minh Chuyên recounts the long-lasting physical and psychological effects of Agent Orange. In Vương Tâm's “The Blood Lily,” a female veteran is haunted by the overwhelming memory of losing her lover, who was killed by a bomb thrown into a tunnel. But despite the ineffable tribulations the war has inflicted on the Vietnamese, *The Colors of April* affirms efforts, however painful or slow, to make peace with the past. Notably, the anthology features characters mostly absent from previous narratives about Vietnam, such as hopeful queers, enterprising beauty queens, literally flaming graffiti poets, autonomous war orphans, nuns and monks, and self-directed Amerasians. Ultimately, the anthology accentuates the powerful role that literature can play as both a scholarly and political tool, celebrating the humanity often effaced in the tumults of war.