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Heaven and Earth: An Exploration of Race, Representation and Spectatorship

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Growing up in a predominantly white, middle-class neighbourhood in Toronto, I learned that I was “different” from the other students in my elementary school. I was aware that my ethnic background was Vietnamese but I did not see this difference as something problematic, questionable or undesirable. While we spoke Vietnamese at home and ate rice instead of spaghetti or potatoes for dinner, I did not feel particularly unlike my friends from school. It is not my intention to reduce or simplify the dissimilarities between my Caucasian counterparts and myself to just the food and language but to my eight year old self, those were the glaring differences.

Around that time, a few of the other students took it upon themselves to highlight the more disturbing distinctions that they found marked on my body. They pulled the outer corners of their eyes taut and called out “slant-y eyes” before running away to play. Along with my eyes, I felt that my almost black, stick-straight hair and my yellow skin became disparate parts that represented my whole.

As I became more aware of the significance that my race and ethnicity took on outside of me, I had trouble making sense of what that meant for me. I understood these bodily markings as something beyond my control but for those around me, they were a point of contestation. It seemed as if my physiology and its cultural baggage was a personal challenge to them – by locking eyes or by simply existing, I had impelled a confrontation, a battle. However, at home, this privileging and fixation on ethnicity and

its signifiers was cynically regarded and accepted as a fact of life. Although my parents had experienced discrimination and racism throughout their lives in Canada, they had hoped such incidents would be few and far between for their children, but they knew our ethnicity would still be an issue, major or minor, throughout our lifetimes.

Although my parents were sensitive to our Vietnamese heritage, they did not speak of it in essentialist terms. Our heritage was rich but it was not the core essence of our being. As I grew older, I was more cognizant of my race and ethnicity and I sought representations of my culture in mass media – television, film and music, not to validate my culture and I numerically but merely to see familiar faces. Unless its context was the Viet Nam War, Vietnamese people very rarely ever made it to our television and movie screens. The chance of catching a glimpse of an Asian person was greater but still exceptional. As Asians, we were always relegated to the background, to roles that facilitated the protagonist/subject on their narrative journey. We would provide spiritual wisdom, “Oriental” food, groceries, laundry services, musical (piano or violin) accompaniment, or as spectacular kung-fu obstacles.

War films that dealt with the experience in Viet Nam proved to be a site of tension and conflict because they seldom portrayed the experience from the perspective of a Vietnamese person. My parents were always disappointed in the (mis)representation of the war because for them, it is not the Viet Nam War but the American War. Also, the portrayals of the Vietnamese were less than positive. As bell hooks writes in “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators”, visual pleasure in the context of these films was “where looking was also about contestation and confrontation” (309). Although

she writes to articulate the black female viewing experience, her work applies to that of the Asian spectatorial experience and specifically, the Vietnamese experience of watching such films as Heaven and Earth (dir. Oliver Stone, 1993) that attempt to “give voice” to or represent Viet Nam and the Vietnamese. She elaborates, “Then, one’s enjoyment of a film wherein representations of blackness were stereotypically degrading and dehumanizing co-existed with a critical practice that restored presence where it was negated” (309). Watching such films highlights the Vietnamese viewer’s position as that of both One and Other. The film positions the viewer to identify with the character(s) on screen while disrupting this identification through moments of “rupture when the spectator resists ‘complete identification with the film’s discourse’” (qtd. in hooks 309). The ruptures have a two-fold purpose: to create distance between the viewer and the filmic text, enabling critical assessment and also, to underscore the ways in which the Vietnamese character is made foreign to the Vietnamese viewer. It is beyond the scope of this essay to polemically chart “the oppositional gaze” of the Asian spectator; however, it is appropriate here to examine how race and representation intersect in the instance of Oliver Stone’s Heaven and Earth.

In her book, The Viet Nam War / The American War: Images and Representations in Euro-American and Vietnamese Exile Narratives, Renny Christopher attempts to situate the conflict in Viet Nam for both Americans and Vietnamese exiles out of the confounds of American mythology. She notes:

The American tendency to call the war ‘Vietnam’ or ‘the Vietnam War’ obscures the fact that there was a series of wars in Southeast Asia ... The Second Indochina War is the war between the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North; henceforth abbreviated DRV) and the Republic of Viet Nam (South; henceforth abbreviated

RVN) ... In Viet Nam, the war carried on between 1961 and 1975 is usually called the American War. (311)

Her statement points to the American project of “Americanizing” the experience of the war by removing the agency of Viet Nam or the Vietnamese to endure those years in conflict and supplanting the American subject in its place. She adds:

The real war in *Platoon* and in American culture is not the historical war fought on the battlefields, but rather the ongoing meta-war, which attempts to erase Vietnamese from their own reality and make them part of the American reality ... U.S. discourse about the war seems most comfortable when it can centre exclusively on American issues and abstract “Vietnam” the war from Viet Nam the country. (4)

Oliver Stone attempts to rectify this problem in his filmic adaptation Heaven and Earth from Le Ly Hayslip’s two autobiographies When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: A Vietnamese Woman’s Journey from War to Peace (1989) and Child of War, Woman of Peace (1993). As the third film in his Vietnam trilogy (Platoon and Born on the Fourth of July are his other two films), he endeavours to represent the “authentic” Vietnamese experience of the war through the female protagonist Phung Thi Le Ly Hayslip. It is important here to draw distinctions between Le Ly in these two different texts: the written autobiography and the film. In her essay, “Third World Testimony in the Era of Globalization: Vietnam, Sexual Trauma, and Le Ly Hayslip’s Art of Neutrality,” Leslie Bow elaborates further on this method. She writes:

Throughout this essay I make a distinction between Hayslip, the author who constructs the narrative, and Le Ly, the representation of herself as the character who plays out the action in the narrative. The fact that these two entities are often presumed to be identical testifies to the strength of realism as a genre and the illusion of unmediated access to the subject of the first-person narrative. (190)

While both Leslie Bow and Renny Christopher credit Hayslip's autobiography in their work for its contribution to the canon of Vietnamese exile writing, as it offers what Bow refers to as "an alternative view – that of a Vietnamese peasant woman" (170).

Christopher adds, "[S]he speaks from a position that is systematically erased from the discourse on both of the warring sides – the Viet Cong and the U.S. – RVN alliance.

Through her book, and her life, she turns that victimization into a force for healing and reconciliation" (71). In her autobiography, Hayslip succeeds "in countering dominant American representations of the Vietnamese people as mere backdrops to a hellish landscape. Vietnam and the Vietnamese, her story testifies, *exist*" [author's emphasis] (Bow 170). Despite the power of her narrative as testimony and activism, these writers credit Hayslip for an agency that does not exist for her filmic counterpart, Le Ly. Oliver Stone, a white American male and former veteran mediates the "voice" of Hayslip/Le Ly as he adapted and wrote the screenplay for the film. Bow describes the differences between the autobiography and film. She writes:

Stone's interpretation of Hayslip's life jettisons the autobiography's narrative structure, which centers on Le Ly's reconciliation of her supposed national betrayal, in favor of a simple chronology of events and the all-too-familiar American male saviour/Asian female saved narrative of *Madame Butterfly* ... (186).

Although she argues against overdetermining the role of the coauthor (Jay Wurts, a white American male veteran co-wrote When Heaven and Earth Changed Places) or in this case, the adaptor, Bow misses the importance of agency and the subject for an Other like Hayslip/Le Ly. From the transition from Hayslip in the autobiography to Le Ly in the

film, loses the voice from which she speaks as what Trinh T. Minh-Ha deems the (Inappropriate) Other. In Heaven and Earth, a white American male veteran “gives voice” to the un-represented – poor, Oriental/foreign woman. For someone to be in the position of privilege and dominance to “give” voice to those that are disadvantaged is a technique of condescension. It implicitly acknowledges a difference in power and position but provides a band-aid type remedy instead of critically examining the ways in which power (culturally inherited or not) is internalized and subsumed. Trinh depicts this technique of “giving voice,” common in documentary film practices as a way “[t]o authenticate a work” (67). She asserts:

[I]t becomes therefore most important to prove or make evident how this Other has participated in the making of his/her own image; hence, for example, the prominence of the string-of-interviews style and the talking-heads, oral witnessing strategy in documentary film practices. This is often called “giving voice,” even though these “given” voices never truly form the Voice of the film ... (67)

To be “given” a voice reveals itself to be a false sense of subjectivity. Le Ly lacks true agency. Do I identify with Le Ly because she is a Vietnamese woman? This becomes a site of rupture for the (Vietnamese) viewers, as her unique positioning is undermined and displaced in the film. Bow notes:

However much the film intervenes by recasting *Madame Butterfly*’s ending – the disintegration of the American vet contrasted to the triumphant Vietnamese woman’s homecoming – it nonetheless reaffirms the dominant representation of Asian women in American film as noble whores finding salvation in white men who turn out to be more angst-ridden, psychologically complex subjects. (186)

In my view, it is not enough that her story is recounted for a Western audience or that she exists on screen. To merely exist should not be equated with acting and/or disrupting.

In Heaven and Earth, the conflation of Hayslip and Le Ly serves to authenticate the war narrative whose validity hinges on “experiential accounts” and “being there” (Bow 169). Christopher elaborates, “only those who were ‘there’ can really understand experience. This qualification gives the participant writer greater ‘authority’ ... ‘authenticity’ is construed as authenticity of *experience*” [author’s emphasis] (9 – 10). By employing the “voice” of a Vietnamese woman through Le Ly and Hiep Thi Le, the actress that portrays her, Stone appropriates the voice of the insider. This lends the film greater sense of “authenticity” that ultimately effaces the construction of the character and the filmic medium.

The film misrepresents itself as enlightened as it (falsely) speaks from the perspective of a Vietnamese woman, simply reinforces the dominant American understanding of Asians and specifically, the Vietnamese. The film draws a distinct parallel between Le Ly and Viet Nam. It conflates woman with nation. In the film, Steve Butler (Tommy Lee Jones), an American marine initiates a relationship with Le Ly (Hiep Thi Le). He comes to her home, carrying a box of cheap toys and trinkets, evoking the image of a generous white Santa Claus. This image draws upon the narrative that the United States as “well-meaning good guys,” trying to help poor, inferior nations around the world “who do not recognize good intentions in Americans” (Christopher 7). In this scene, Steve asks Le Ly to marry him. He says, “I just want a little peace and happiness. I just want to be with you ... to help you and your mom. Anything wrong with that?”

When Le Ly protests that she has bad karma since past relationships with men have left her sexually violated and/or unwed and pregnant, Steve dismisses her objection. He says, “Bad karma? How much bad could have happened to a *little* girl like you?” [my emphasis] He goes on to say, “I have a house in San Diego. I want you to be there with me. You’ll be safe. You’ll be free. Your boy will have his freedom and an education. I need a good Oriental woman like you.” The men in Le Ly’s life reduce and abstract her from her actual body and self. Steve and others speak of her in terms of her size and her lack of ability/agency. She is “little” or “small” in their eyes. Also, she is not an actual woman but rather a girl or child.

The malleability of language and accent highlights alternation between affirmation and difference. Ultimately, it reveals Le Ly’s lack of agency. In the scenes that take place in Ky La, a remote farming village in central Viet Nam, villagers speak English with the slightest hint of an accent. This is not to suggest that greater authenticity is required but for a film that rests on authenticity, it is puzzling that the villagers begin their dialogue (particularly the Viet Cong’s rousing propaganda rally) with a few words in Vietnamese and then switch over to flawless English. However, when Le Ly moves to Saigon and must earn her living on the street, selling “smokes and Johnny Walker,” her mastery of English evaporates, leaving her barely able to communicate with the soldiers around her. She reverts to the stereotypical “sucky sucky five-dollah” accent in the metropolis of Saigon. Any agency she had in the inaccessible town Ky La has been confiscated when she is around white American men; thus, leaving her vulnerable and dependent. This bizarre shift accentuates Le Ly’s Otherness. It leaves her unintelligible.

The representations of Vietnamese women in the film play upon the stereotypes of Asian women in general. They oscillate between lotus blossoms and dutiful daughters and/or dragon ladies. Despite her status as unwed and pregnant with her former master's child, Le Ly sells not her body but cigarettes and whiskey on the streets of Saigon. In contrast, her sister and other Vietnamese women pander their bodies to American soldiers for money. Hai, Le Ly's sister, works as a prostitute in a Saigon brothel. In the brothel, a sense of chaos overwhelms as bodies flow in and out of tight spaces and women dance naked. Hai, in her red chinoise dress, red heart-shaped sunglasses, big coiffure and gaudy make-up contrasts against the plain clothes and face of Le Ly. Le Ly's hair is long and straight and pulled back behind her head, a style common to "good" Vietnamese girls. Although prostitution became a facet of life for many in the war, the film does not contextualize the economics of such a vocation. Instead, the film in the way it represents the two sisters, plays the stereotypes of Asian women against one another.

In Heaven and Earth, Le Ly declines requests for sex by American soldiers because she is a "good girl" but she succumbs in one brief scene, as the soldiers offer her \$400. After much time hesitating and rebuffing the offer, she obliges because the money could feed her mother, son and herself for a year. The film portrays this instance as one of shame and humiliation and ultimately, an aberration. She washes herself, cloaked in darkness, crying, and her back to the camera/viewer. However, in her autobiography, Hayslip writes of more than one instance of prostitution. Bow notes the agency in this action that is often judged:

Le Ly's resistance does not depend upon the denial of these systems [patriarchal systems of marriage and heterosexuality, etc] but on her ability to recognise and

exploit them materially. As sex literally becomes a commodity bartered for survival, in controlling her sexual commodification Le Ly asserts the primacy of her own agency in her distribution. (185)

Any agency that Hayslip has in her autobiography is lost in the translation to the screen. By portraying her prostitution, a sex-positive and economically conscious act of resistance as humiliating and shameful, the film reaffirms the stereotypes that divide Asian women that When Heaven and Earth Changed Places fought to change.

Perhaps Heaven and Earth could have been a more successful film in terms of race and representation if Hayslip could have written the screenplay herself or even articulated her experience in film, not to authenticate the text as an insider but to take the position as the Inappropriate Other. Trinh defines this as one “who moves about with always at least two/four gestures: that of affirming ‘I am like you’ while persisting in her difference; and that of reminding ‘I am different’ while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at” (74). After viewing the Hollywood epic Heaven and Earth, despite the (good) intentions of the filmmaker, the representation of Viet Nam and the Vietnamese has much to accomplish and complete before its spectators can comfortably sit and watch with more pleasure than displeasure. In either case, the critical eye is still necessary to ensure that questions are constantly being asked and explored.

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