

**“Journey to Freedom Day Act”: The making of the Vietnamese subject in
Canada and the erasure of the Vietnam War**

Anh Ngo

School of Social Work, York University

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Anh Ngo, The School of Social Work, S880 Ross Building, York University, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, Ontario, M3J 1P3A, Canada.

Contact: anhngo@yorku.ca

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Abstract

The Journey to Freedom Day Act (S-219), which passed on April 23rd 2015, marks the national day of commemoration of the exodus of Vietnamese refugees and their acceptance into Canada. The seemingly innocuous act of a national commemorative day masks the politicizing of the Vietnamese subject and aids in the erasure of the Vietnam War. A critical review of the parliamentary debates during the passage of this Bill over twelve months will reveal the systemic reliance on a Cold War discourse to act as a veil, concealing the making of the Vietnamese subject as grateful refugees, who actively reject communism and laud (western) democracies. The focus on this singular discourse facilitates the erasure of the Vietnam War and Canada’s complicity in the war. Critical discourse analysis is used to examine the parliamentary text and findings are discussed using the theoretical lens of Cold War epistemology. This allows us to analyze the construction of the Vietnamese subject in relation to Canada, along frameworks of meaning making deeply rooted in the events and effects of the Cold War. I will comment on how social policy as a knowledge producing technology upholds and reproduces subject positions, thereby contributing to conditions of conflict within groups.

Keywords: Vietnamese; refugees; Cold War epistemology

“Loi sur la Journée du Parcours vers la liberté”: la construction du sujet vietnamien au Canada et l’effacement de la guerre du Vietnam

Résumé

La loi sur la Journée du Parcours vers la liberté (Bill S-219) a été adoptée le 23 avril 2015, marque la journée nationale de commémoration de l’exode des réfugiés vietnamiens et de leur arrivée au Canada. Cet acte, qui peut paraître anodin, d’une journée de commémoration nationale masque la politisation du sujet vietnamien et aide à achever l’effacement de la guerre

du Vietnam. Une revue critique des débats parlementaires pendant le passage de cette loi, sur une période de 12 mois, permettra de montrer que la création du sujet vietnamien comme étant un réfugié reconnaissant qui rejette activement le communisme et embrasse la démocratie (de l'Ouest), dépend de manière systémique sur un discours issue de la guerre froide. La dépendance sur ce discours unique, facilite l'effacement de la guerre du Vietnam et le rôle qu'a jouer le Canada dans celle-ci. Mon examen de textes parlementaires utilise une analyse du discours critique, et les données sont interrogées en utilisant la perspective théorique de l'épistémologie de la guerre froide. Ceci permet d'analyser la construction du sujet vietnamien comme existant en relation avec le Canada, et appliquant des cadres de connaissances profondément enracinés dans l'historique et les conséquences de la guerre froide. Je propose que la politique sociale, en tant que technologie productrice du savoir, réifie et reproduit des sujets particuliers, et donc contribue aux conditions qui créent des conflits à l'intérieur des groupes.

Mots clefs: vietnamien; réfugiés; épistémologie de la guerre froide

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Introduction

On April 30th, 2015, Canada marked its first Journey to Freedom Day (Bill S-219), an Act “respecting a national day of commemoration of the exodus of Vietnamese refugees and their acceptance in Canada” (Bill S-219, 2015, p.1). I am interested in how Vietnamese subjects are now constructed under the weight of an official commemorative day and what the purpose of this Bill is for the Canadian state. I will explore this central concern by using Cold War epistemology to conduct a critical discourse analysis of the texts related to Bill S-219. I argue that this bill constructs the Vietnamese subject as a political subject in tension with those who identify otherwise and serves to erase the Vietnam War with a refocus on celebrating freedom, thereby obscuring Canada’s participation and complicity in the war. This paper contributes to scholarship that views social policy as a tool for nation building and will propose Cold War epistemology as a necessary lens to fill the gaps in the Canadian critical multiculturalism literature. First, I will provide a brief demographic outline of the Vietnamese in Canada. I will follow this with a review of the main highlights of the passing of the Journey to Freedom Day Act. Next, I will review my use of critical discourse analysis of elite talk and text. A discussion of the data elaborating on the discursive themes emerging from parliamentary text reveal the ways in which the Journey to Freedom Day Act works as a producer of knowledge. Finally, I will discuss how this official misrecognition fuels community conflicts based on historical war-related identities by a state sanctioned narrative.

Vietnamese in Canada

In 2011, there were 70,725 persons of Vietnamese ethnic origin in the Greater Toronto area (Statistics Canada^a, 2011). The City of Toronto alone counted 45,270 people of Vietnamese ethnic origin with 23,575 having reported Vietnamese as their mother tongue (City of Toronto,

2012). Across Canada, Vietnamese residents ranked in the top 12 most common languages spoken at home in 5 of the 6 largest census metropolitan areas of Montreal, Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, and Ottawa-Gatineau, and in the top 25 languages spoken at home nationally in 2011 (Statistics Canada^b, 2011). In total it is currently estimated there are approximately 300,000 Vietnamese Canadians. During the period of 1970s and 1980s, large waves of Vietnamese people migrated to Canada in cohorts, first as conventional refugees who came immediately after the end of the war in 1975/1976, and then many more arrived in the period of 1979 and 1980. This later cohort, commonly referred to as the Indochinese refugees or boat people, came as part of the 60,000 people admitted in the special immigration partnerships between the government and the public (Employment and Immigration Canada, n.d.) The identities these people occupy continue to be derived from being participants, victims, and witnesses to the civil war in Vietnam as part of the larger international Cold War conflicts. While they have physically left the site of military conflict and the Cold War, what they take up in Canada and how they fit into a western society is shaped by the Canadian state project to “settle, adapt, and integrate”. The following section reviews Bill S-219 with a highlight on some of the critiques and conflicts.

Overview of Journey to Freedom Day Act (Bill S-219)

The Journey to Freedom Day Act marks every April 30th as:

A day to remember and commemorate the lives lost and the suffering experienced during the exodus of Vietnamese people, the acceptance of Vietnamese refugees in Canada, the gratitude of Vietnamese people to the Canadian people and the Government of Canada for accepting them, and the contributions of Vietnamese-Canadian people. (Bill S-219, 2015, p.4).

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This Bill was introduced in the Senate by Senator Thanh Hải Ngô of the Conservative Party on April 10th, 2014, was sponsored into the House of Commons by Member of Parliament (MP) Mark Adler of the Conservative Party on December 10th, 2014, and was adopted into law on April 23rd, 2015. This Bill was contentious both within the government and in the public realm, with concerns raised about its proposed name, its date of commemoration, and the contents of the Bill (Meyer, 2014). Within a twelve-month period, the Bill was passed in the Senate and the House of Commons, both levels of the government dominated by a Conservative majority.

Originally, Bill S-219 was titled the “Black April Day Act”, an expression that reflects the grief and mourning felt by the South Vietnamese refugees who lost their country on April 30th, 1975 when Saigon was formally overtaken by the North Vietnamese Hồ Chí Minh regime, following the United States’ official termination of their intervention in the Vietnam War. The original group to flee Vietnam was the military and state officials who actively supported the South Vietnamese government. Many of them in the international Vietnamese diaspora mark this day as “*Tháng Tư đen* (Black April)” or “*Ngày Quốc Hận* (National Hatred Day)” or “*Ngày Bỏ Nước* (Country Abandonment Day)”. Senator Ngô later changed the title to “Journey to Freedom Day Act”, diluting its political reference.

The date of April 30th is of great political significance, as it is mourned in the international diaspora yet celebrated in Vietnam. Vietnamese Ambassador Anh Dũng Tô publicly stated that this Bill will hurt relations between Canada and Vietnam as the celebration and official recognition of the South Vietnamese refugees’ “Journey to Freedom” on April 30th directly contradicts Vietnam’s National Day of Reunification (Bryden, 2014). At the same time,

Vietnamese-Canadians took to websites, media¹, and a community listserv to also express their reluctance in supporting this bill in its entirety, proposing instead the date Canada officially committed to admitting 50,000 Indochinese refugees: July 27, 1979 (Senate Committee, April 1, 2015, p. 6). The date of this proposed commemoration, while widely critiqued remained unchanged.

Finally, the short preamble of this Bill was also deeply political for a National Day². The preamble centered on a re-writing of history and the cause of the boat peoples' flight by sea, to the invasion of North Vietnam into South Vietnam.

Whereas on April 30, 1975, despite the Paris Peace Accords, the military forces of the People's Army of Vietnam and the National Liberation Front invaded South Vietnam, which led to the fall of Saigon, the end of the Vietnam War and the establishment of a single-party socialist government. (Bill S-219, 2014, p.4).

The Journey to Freedom Day Act kept this historically questionable account of North Vietnam's invasion into South Vietnam, but changed the "single-party socialist government", a direct reference to communism, to the "Socialist Republic of Vietnam government". Current texts now commonly dispute the concept of a North Vietnamese invasion into South Vietnam, supporting instead the narrative of a civil war plagued with foreign intervention in the climate of the Cold War (Preston, 2003). Hoang Nguyen, a member of the Canada-Vietnam Friendship Association

¹ See Thoi Báo: The Vietnamese Newspaper "community contribution section" (<http://thoibao.com/cong-dong-toronto/>) where the South Vietnamese Veterans of Ontario Association posted a message warning individuals not Thời Mới: The Vietnamese Canadian Newspaper (Bùi, 2014) for a favourable coverage of the the Bill.

² "There is no central authority in Canada responsible for the proclamation of national days. Days declared special by any public body, including municipal, provincial or federal governments or even international bodies such as the United Nations, as well as any private association, cultural group or religious institution, can be recognized in Canada." The Library of Parliament, Ottawa, lists 70 National Days but notes that it is a not a comprehensive list (Hyslop & Virgint, 2015, p.1)

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and one of the witnesses to parliamentary hearings in the passing of the Bill contested the use of the word invasion: “There was no invasion. The country was one before. It was just temporarily separated.” (House of Commons Canadian Heritage Committee, April 1, 2015, p. 10) These significant conflicts in the process of passing Bill S-219 highlight how government processes effectively shut down the dissenting voices from a diverse group of people.

Method

While the above overview of Bill S-219 highlights how dominant players shaped their version of history, an analysis of the discourses reproduced and upheld in the debate and passage of the Bill is required to expose the various performances of power. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is committed to disrupting acts of dominance, defined as “the exercise of social power by elites, institutions or groups, that results in social inequality, including political, cultural, class, ethnic, racial and gender inequality” (van Dijk, 1993, p. 249). CDA highlights the concealment of power in discourse, that which uphold and reproduce social structures of dominance and inequality, in the slippery means of talk and text (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000, van Dijk, 1993). Hook (2001) reminds the analyst of the political project of CDA in the unpacking and linking of discourses to material power. Here the Gramscian conceptualization of hegemony is useful to track how the relationship between parliamentary talk and text to material dominance operates such that “the minds of the dominated can be influenced in such a way that they accept dominance, and act in the interest of the powerful out of their own free will” (van Dijk, 1993, p. 254). CDA is used here to reveal the stealth operation of power in parliamentary speech in the “style, rhetoric or meaning of texts for strategies that aim at the concealment of social power relations, for instance by playing down, leaving implicit or understanding responsible agency of powerful social actors in the events represented in the text” (ibid., p. 250). Informed by Sharma

(2001) and Bauder (2008) in their respective works of deconstructing elite discourse in the making of immigrant subjects in Canada, I will use this politically grounded method to interrogate the making of the Vietnamese subject and the Canadian nation in the parliamentary debates on Bill S-219. The debates are from the Senate (First, Second, and Third Readings of the Bill, Proceedings of the Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights) and from the House of Commons (First, Second, and Third Readings of the Bill, Proceedings from the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage).

Cold War Epistemology

Critical multiculturalism has vigorously critiqued Canada's nation building as a white settler colonial project that governs and oppresses racialized, gendered Others, and Indigenous peoples (Bannerji, 1993, 2000; Haque, 2012; Mackey, 2002; Thobani, 2007). Multiculturalism is a policy and cultural tool of the state in the construction of the nation and Others. The discourse of culture and heritage operates as a governing technology to manage and regulate the interactions and relationships of ethno-cultural groups while upholding white settler colonial values as normative to the nation. Additionally, model minority theorists have demonstrated how the construction of Asian Canadians as the desirable neoliberal immigrant subject, serves to discipline and delegitimize the political claims of Indigenous peoples and nonconforming racialized others (Ku, 2012; Park, 2011). Yet neither critical multiculturalism nor model minority theory can fully account for what is being observed in the Vietnamese diaspora. Critical multiculturalism is inadequate in understanding how the intergroup relations and community conflicts within the Vietnamese community are produced by the state-sanctioned discourse of the Vietnamese subject as informed by Cold War ideology. Model minority theory does not explain the active participation of Vietnamese Canadians in constructing themselves politically in line

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with the nation-building project at the expense of their fellow community members. What is needed is a critical lens that can interrogate the historically mediated relations between Canada and Vietnamese Canadians due to an economic and ideological Cold War that brought the Vietnamese to Canada in the first place, a political history that continues to structure how the Canadian state and the Vietnamese know themselves and one another.

Cold War epistemology is a body of scholarship primarily by Asian scholars who query the lingering knowledge production of Self and Other in Asians and Americans (Chen, 2010; Kim, 2010). It theorizes the ongoing impact of colonialism, imperialism, and the Cold War on the psyches and subject formation of Asians and nations globally. Western imperialism in East and Southeast Asia has largely been exercised in the name of “containing communism” as the physical and ideological threat to neoliberal democracy. Cold War epistemology demonstrates that this Cold War discourse goes beyond a historical event or series of events, and has seeped into the psyche of the U.S./Western colonizer and Asian subjects. Kim analyzes Asian American cultural productions to trace how their subjectivity has been formulated and constituted by the Cold War. She argues that the Cold War needs to be approached “not solely as a historical epoch or event, but as itself a knowledge project or epistemology, which is always also a pedagogy, and asking how it continues to generate and teach ‘new’ knowledge by making sense of the world through Manichaeian logics and grammars of good and evil” (2010, p.8). Likewise, in describing the lingering impacts of Asian subjectivity, Chen reiterated, “The complex effects of the war, mediated through our bodies, have been inscribed into our national, family, and personal histories. In short, the Cold War is still alive within us” (2010, p.118). This critical lens allows for an analysis of the relations of the Vietnamese Canadians to the State that emphasizes the Cold War. To borrow from Kim, “Cold War compositions are at once a geopolitical *structuring*,

an ideological *writing*, and a cultural *imagining*” (2010, p.11). Due to this ideological conditioning, the Vietnamese (as anticommunist) are “compositional subjects” which can only be “visible” and “intelligible” in Canada through an understanding of the Cold War. Additionally, Cold War epistemology is utilized to illuminate Canada’s hidden involvement and complicity in the Vietnam War. This theoretical lens offers a framework to understand the conflict within the Vietnamese community as one specific Vietnamese subject is legitimized, while other competing identities are discursively expelled.

Discussion

Making the Vietnamese subject

In the parliamentary debates the Vietnamese subject is presented as grateful and opposed to communism. This shaping of the Vietnamese subject is accomplished by various strategies of talk, including argumentation, rhetoric figures, storytelling of before and after coming to Canada, euphemisms, and quoting credible witnesses (van Dijk, 1993).

“Without Canada’s generosity and humanity, I never could achieve what I have today” (Thanh Hải Ngô, Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights, November 6, 2014, p.12.10). The grateful refugee is hardworking, resourceful, and successful with little assistance from the state, and most importantly appreciative of and committed to the state that provided refuge (Nguyen, 2013). Whereas the model minority excels despite migration and acculturation stress and the good refugee thrives despite the loss and terrors of displacement, the grateful refugee accomplishes both but is also endlessly, consistently, and deeply beholden to the rescuing state. Traced on the bodies of grateful refugees are the actions and consequences of the Cold War which continue to linger and to have very real material effects on the lives of those who have internalized the racist and imperialist inscriptions of their very selves as subjugated

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persons who had to be given their humanity (Kim, 2010). Canadian scholar Vinh Nguyen critiques the local context in his reading of Vietnamese Canadian literary works, by illustrating how “the grateful Vietnamese refugee, who is born from this gift of freedom, first through war then by refuge, is ensnared in an endless debt-payment relationship to the state and its imperial logics” (Nguyen, 2013, p.18). Grateful refugees, rescued from war and granted refuge, are given the gift of freedom which is “the right to have rights, the choice of life direction, the improvement of body and mind, the opportunity to prosper – against a spectral future of their nonexistence, under communism, under terror” (Nguyen, 2012, p. 2). The Vietnamese Canadians’ stories of rags to riches, or the before and after framing, follow a postcolonial script of having lost democracy in their own homeland only to be gifted with a second life.

In the debates on the Journey to Freedom Day Act, this grateful Vietnamese refugee was centered as the natural identity of the Vietnamese Canadians. Of the nine witnesses who presented in the process of passing the Bill, seven located themselves as former refugees from Vietnam³. Regardless of each witness’s level of critique of the Bill, all the former refugees followed a familiar path of describing the war-torn country they left behind, the perilous journey by boat to the nearest shore, and then finally their bright and peaceful life in Canada. The most prominent of these witnesses is Senator Ngô, who repeatedly stated he owed his life, his children’s and his grandchildren’s lives and all he has been able to accomplish to the gift of

³ The witnesses are (in order of appearance, all presented in person with one exception):

Vietnamese Ambassador Tô Anh Dũng (in writing)

Mike Molloy, President of the Canadian Immigration Historical Society

Can Le, Former General Secretary of the Vietnamese Canadian Federation

James Lam Nguyen, President, Vietnamese Association Toronto

Julie Nguyen, Co-Founder and Director, Canada-Vietnam Trade Council

Elizabeth McIninch, Director, Canada-Vietnam Trade Council

Trac Bang Do, President, Canada-Vietnam Friendship Association

Van Hoang Nguyen, Member, Canada-Vietnam Friendship Association

Ba Ngoc Dao, President, *Communauté Vietnamiennne au Canada*

democracy from Canada. In addition, “I am able to proudly rise as a Senator and defend freedom, human rights and democracy without fearing for my life. “Today, I can look at my family and know that I have been able to provide for them and ensure their wellbeing” (Senate Debate, April 30, 2014, p.1413). The stubborn reliance on these narratives alone without the larger discussion of the war in Vietnam, the global contributors of the war, and what had driven hundreds of thousands of people to leave their homes is problematic. This focus on rescue and refugee success in the debates results in a carefully constructed state narrative of an ideal Journey to Freedom that overshadows the ugliness of war. It is little wonder this divisive Bill, despite its critics, is still roundly celebrated by Vietnamese Canadians for the little bit of official recognition they receive from the state.

“For the last 40 years, there has been only one accepted political voice in the Vietnamese Canadian community, and all other voices are suppressed.” (Julie Nguyen, House of Commons Canadian Heritage Committee, April 1, 2015, p.3). Julie Nguyen from the non-profit Canada-Vietnam Trade Council, was the only Vietnamese Canadian woman, and one of the few critical voices who presented as a public witness in the Bill S-219 debates. According to Nguyen, the “only one accepted political voice” is the voice that publicly claims to be anti-communist. In the parliamentary debates those who opposed the Bill in any form were positioned as communists, and thus, not members of the Vietnamese Canadian community. In his study of Taiwan, Chen (2010) identifies how “the entanglement of colonialism and the Cold War in Taiwan has produced and shaped local structures of sentiment, which, in turn, have become the emotional (more than the material) basis for political mobilization, the dominant forms of which are ethnic politics and ethnic nationalism” (p. xiv). Chen’s theorizing of the subjectivity-producing effects of the Cold War can inform the messy aftermath of the Vietnam

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War on the lives of Vietnamese Canadians who today who are wrestling with identity, belonging, and community building as they attempt to reconcile their past. In the localized setting of contemporary Taiwan, Chen (2010) deconstructs how a rigid choice had to be made by post-Cold War subjects “between unification with Mainland China and independence from it” (2010, p.117). This rigid choice between one and the other is a structure that is replicated today in the politics of the Journey to Freedom Day Act where any critique is positioned as a nonconforming identity.

In response to public critiques that the Journey to Freedom Day Act is divisive of the Vietnamese community, MP Wladyslaw Lizon, after having talked about his family’s own experiences of living under communism in Poland stated “This is not a bill to divide communities; we have to fully understand who is a part of the community and who is not” (House of Commons Debate, March 23, 2015, p. 12141). By first prefacing his statements with his own personal suffering under communism, MP Lizon encourages the listener to understand that the Vietnamese community suffered under communism thus those who oppose the Bill must not have suffered and are then, not part of the Vietnamese community. When pressed at the House of Commons as to why the Senate did not allow witnesses who were not in support of the Bill to present, MP Adler, the sponsor of the Bill at the House of Commons neglected to mention those who were denied access to the Senate proceedings and mentioned the Ambassador of Vietnam as the only opposing voice. He stated: “I am a little perplexed that the Liberals would be interested in hearing the communist views of the Vietnamese government” (House of Commons Debate, February 5, 2015, p.11140). Here Adler used the common sense Cold War logic of positioning communism as antidemocratic to then broad brush all voices of dissent at the Senate proceedings as holding “communist views”. Similarly, Senator Ngô evicts

nonconforming Vietnamese Canadians from the debate by stating “For those who oppose the bill – maybe those who came to Canada before 1975, are students in the Colombo⁴ plan, or for their personal interest of doing business with Vietnam – their personal interest compared to millions of Vietnamese who fled Vietnam on April 30, 1975 is unacceptable” (House of Commons Canadian Heritage Committee, April 1, 2015, p. 4). According to the Senator, those who oppose Bill S-219 are not refugees, or they have ulterior motives, or simply do not know any better. Dissident voices are those who do not reject communism and thus are not taken as true voices of the Vietnamese refugees.

“But to the 90 million Vietnamese living in a Communist country, full of oppression and prohibition, freedom does not exist” (Thanh Hải Ngô, Senate Debate, April 30, 2014, p.1414) While the above comments construct the Vietnamese Canadian subject as a grateful anti-communist refugee, further analysis of parliamentary text reveals that every Vietnamese subject, not just Vietnamese Canadians, are democratic. The above quote is from Senator Ngô who portrays current day Vietnam as absolutely devoid of freedom. He describes Vietnamese refugees as people who fled their country when “invaded” by communist forces who now dream of returning to Vietnam to restore the rightful democratic order to the Vietnamese people still enslaved there by communism:

April 30 provides Vietnamese-Canadians with an opportunity to remember the suffering of their past, allowing them to officially express gratitude to Canada, and enabling them to advocate on behalf of those in Vietnam who don’t enjoy the basic human rights and religious freedom we enjoy here. (Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights, November 6, 2014, p.12.11).

⁴ The Colombo Plan was an international agreement to deliver aid to Asian and Southeast Asian countries in the form of social and human development in the 1950s (Dorais, Beuys, Tàpies, & Twombly, 2000, p.9).

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These declarations were met with approval and support among parliamentarians as they collectively channel Canada’s aspirations through the Vietnamese subject in Canada *and* in Vietnam. In support of bringing freedom to Vietnam, Minister of Foreign Affairs Stéphane Dion states in the House of Commons debate, “the goal is to bring people together, to leave nobody out. The goal is also to strengthen the bond between Canada and Vietnam, to strengthen the trade, cultural and scientific ties between our countries. Canada must stand up for human rights and justice in Vietnam as it does all over the world” (March 23, 2015, p. 12138). Dion’s appeal for inclusivity and unity is belied by his reference to trade, as it is clear that human rights and justice in Vietnam is not the only thing Canada is standing up for.

Kim (2010) argued that the narrative of progress for Asian Americans is different from other timelines of those colonized achieving decolonization, and thus, must be analyzed under Cold War epistemology. Unlike other so-called developing nations relating to the West, the source of the Vietnamese subjects’ oppression is not poverty but rather communism. To further this theorizing, parliamentary debates construct the Vietnamese refugees as not only being saved *by* democracy in gaining refuge into Canada but Vietnamese refugees were in fact trying to save their own country *with* democracy. In the debates, Senator Ngô locates the Vietnamese refugee as democratic, as the subject who tried to fight off their Others (communist North Vietnam) alongside the U.S. and its allies. The Senator states: “The Republic of South Vietnam courageously fought to defend freedom and democracy for over two decades in order to prevent the spread of communism” (Senate Debate, April 30, 2014, p.1412). The Vietnam War, then, an international spectacle of human suffering, was in fact not the tragedy. The tragedy would be if these Vietnamese refugees did not escape Vietnam in their journey to freedom to realize their dreams and potential in capitalism. As MP Peter Kent argues: “In fact, greater freedoms came to

Vietnam not through war but through the pressures of capitalism, free enterprise, and the will of the people for better lives in Vietnam” (House of Commons Debate, February 5, 2015, p.11146). The Journey to Freedom Day Act brings the democratic Vietnamese into the fold of Canada, as a colluding partner to deliver democracy and trade back to Vietnam. Complementing the construction of the Vietnamese subject in relation to Canada is the discursive move to erase the history of a devastating war and a messy complicity.

Erasing the Vietnam War and Canada’s complicity

In tandem with the construction of the authentic Vietnamese subject, parliamentary debates on Bill S-219 utilized the apparent need for a day of commemoration to erase the Vietnam War and Canada’s complicity in it, a project reminiscent of the United States’ official acts to forget the “war with the difficult memory” (Espiritu, 2014, p.1). Espiritu (2006) queried the use of the Cold War and specifically the war in Vietnam as a meaning-making tool for the U.S., specifically the ‘we-win-even-when-we-lose’ syndrome. She argued how the American military intervention was justified for the liberation of weaker Others in Vietnam, is the same justification used in present conflicts such as the war in Iraq. Thus the Vietnam War in the U.S. is simultaneously eclipsed and vindicated by the narrative of liberating racially inferior others with the bestowing of democracy and the “gift of freedom” (Nguyen, 2012). Here I am relying on literature from critical scholars in the U.S., as there is a marked dearth of literature on the Vietnamese Canadians as one distinct group apart from other Asian immigrants (pan-Asian, Chinese, Indochinese).

Parliamentary talk re-writes and eludes the events of the Vietnam War, choosing instead to shine the spotlight on the journey to freedom. This move hides the American atrocities of this war, from the carpet bombing of entire regions of Vietnam, the My Lai massacre, the napalm

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attacks, the wide unrestrained use of Agent Orange poison, and to the still active land mines of which many are yet to be uncovered (Espiritu, 2014). Instead, we in Canada shine the spotlight on the Journey to Freedom. Repeatedly across the debates of the Senate and the House of Commons, utterances of the “Fall of South Vietnam” and when “South Vietnam fell” were repeated, but it was not often that the events leading to the Fall were discussed. What precipitated the need for the Vietnamese refugees’ journey is largely veiled behind discourses of democracy, freedom, and success. In the face of opposition, Senator Ngô was very careful to make it clear that the Bill is not about the war instead the purpose of the Bill is to celebrate one’s heritage:

I’m talking about the refugees. I’m not talking about Vietnam. I’m not talking about the Vietnamese Communist regime. This Bill is concentrating on and focusing on the exodus of the Vietnamese people. More than two million people left Vietnam on that day. This Bill is recognized by 300,000 Vietnamese who came to Canada. ...The focus of the Bill has nothing to do with trade. It has nothing to do with the Vietnamese government. It has nothing to do with the Vietnamese soldiers (Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights, April 1, 2015, p.4).

Here, the use of “Communist” to describe the government of Vietnam, now officially recognized as a Socialist state, reignites Cold War politics while denying any potential political and economic impact of the commemorative bill on Canada’s relations with Vietnam. In his plea to recognize the refugees, he ends up pointing to the variety of players and states that are implicated in the making of the refugee, the apparent focus of the commemorative day.

Finally, Canada’s complicity in the war in Vietnam is erased in parliamentary talk.

The debates of Bill S-219 show the parliamentarians' choice to conceal history using discursive strategies of euphemisms and broad generalizations to narrate the story of a young nation that struggled to do more than its share in alleviating the global boat people crisis. Repeated references to the youthfulness of the nation and the youthfulness of the Canadian public servants who labored at the international refugee processing sites were described during the debates (Mike Molloy, Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights, November 20, 2014, p.13.11) In the House of Commons debate, MP Bob Dechert borrowed the suffering of the refugees and claimed it for his own, stating "It is a Canadian story. It is a story that represents all of us. So many Canadians have come to Canada from places torn by war, from great adversity and oppression, and have struggled very hard through very difficult conditions to come to this country" (February 5, 2015, p. 11143). By the end of the proceedings in the passage of the Bill, parliamentarians were metaphorically patting themselves on the back. As Dion stated: "Since we did not participate, our country could have chosen to ignore these victims. If we are being honest, there were some people in Canada who did not want to get involved in the aftermath and consequences of a conflict we have no part in" (Stéphane Dion, House of Commons Debate, March 23, 2015, p. 12137). These statements conspire to uphold what Dua, Razack, and Warner call Canada's "national mythologies" of innocence, which are propelled to "erase the history of colonization, slavery, and discriminatory immigration legislation" (2005, p. 1). Except for one rare reference to Canada's official role in the Vietnam War, as a war that occurred right under Canada's nose, Canada's role in the war was not mentioned again.

During the war in Vietnam, Canada did not assume a neutral position. As the United States' closest ally, Canada was chosen to sit on the International Control Commission from 1954 - 1973 to balance out Poland as the USSR's ally, as a monitoring and surveillance body

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located at the demilitarized zone of Vietnam along the 17th parallel (Bothwell, 2000). Using war-time documents, Neufeld (1995) challenged the “‘selfless’ character of Canadian foreign policy” by arguing that Canada had many interests towards peace, but humanitarian concerns were not considered one of them as Canada was tasked to simultaneously overlook peace term violations by the U.S., and to restrain and counsel this superpower towards peace and neutrality (p.8). Even more condemning, Canada’s role in the Vietnam War extended beyond surveillance, as Nguyen points out, “it must be remembered that while Canada did not join the fighting effort, it acted as the chief arms supplier to the U.S., providing resources and materials that fueled combat and drove the war economy” (2013, p. 25). The façade of an innocent and neutral Canada has been chipped away at by the robust scholarship in critical multiculturalism. The insertion of Cold War epistemology here allows for a deepened analysis of Vietnamese Canadians in relation to the state and nation building exercises.

Implications

I examined the parliamentary debates in the passing of Bill S-219, “The Journey to Freedom Day Act” and traced the discursive work of commemoration in constructing an authentic Vietnamese subject in relation to an innocent Canada. Parliamentary debates reveal how the National Day constructs the nation as innocent and humanitarian alongside a state sanctioned Vietnamese identity. A commemorative day here erases the Vietnam War and Canada’s complicity in it by shining the spotlight on the success of the Vietnamese refugees and Canada’s compassion. This discursive frame continues to have destructive effects on survivors, who struggle with multigenerational trauma, chemical poisoning, the destruction of kinship ties, and the loss of spiritual and material resources.

The implication of this Bill is disturbing, it fuels inter-group political conflicts by legitimating one particular identity while at the same time disavowing the state's role in group division by maintaining its staunch hold on celebratory heritage. The power of parliamentary talk manifests in "the direct enactment or production of dominance, on the one hand, and the consequences of this speech in the process of the management of the public consensus on ethnic affairs, on the other hand" (van Dijk, 1993, p.270). This Bill itself is an act of "discursive violence" (Jiwani, 2009) as it fuels the discrimination and negative attitudes within the Vietnamese community in Canada as divisions that originated from the devastating war in Vietnam. Anecdotal evidence from years of community work with local Vietnamese Canadians suggests that this population continues to carry the baggage of trauma, distrust, and war-created divisions. A divided community is one that cannot effectively respond to social issues in the climate of a shrinking social safety net where racialized populations are encouraged to seek informal supports within their ethnic communities. Ethnic community conflicts continue to be blamed on the communities themselves as the contributing hand of the state is veiled. When a group experiences conflicts that threaten its well being, it is the community that is held responsible. Minister of Foreign Affairs Stéphane Dion emphasized this in discussing the dissenting voices against the Bill "To that I say that it is important for the people of the Vietnamese community to talk to each other. ...In the meantime, Vietnamese Canadians must continue talking to each other to reconcile their points of view" (House of Commons Debate, March 23, 2015, p.12138). With the recent passing of Bill S-219, simply talking to one another has become increasingly difficult given that some of us are now proclaimed as the true Vietnamese and others are not.

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The contribution of this study is to provide a localized specific analysis of social policy’s operation as a knowledge producing technology. While this is a study of the Vietnamese community in Canada, it can lead to the examination of other immigrant communities in Canada. Today, Canada is glorified in the popular media for its role in leading the humanitarian response in the Syrian refugee crisis with little attention paid to its military involvement. The spotlight is on Prime Minister Justin Trudeau placing a winter coat on the body of a newly arrived young Syrian female (Panetta, 2015). In 40 years’ time, what will be the possibilities and limits to the construction of Syrian Canadians’ identities and narratives? Additionally, the use of Cold War epistemology as a critical theoretical lens fills in the gaps left by existing critical literature to unpack the complex relations of state and subject making, and state contributions to shaping intergroup relations. Most of scholarship in Cold War epistemology is grounded on the context of and in relationship to the United States. This paper shifts the analytic lens to Canada’s relations to the Vietnamese community, and consequently to Canada’s implication in maintaining Cold War epistemology.

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