INTRODUCTION

Rethinking America’s Vietnam

On the U.S. Department of State’s current webpage, a section titled “Office of the Historian” lists finding aids, historical documents, and summaries of U.S. foreign relations with different countries. It is a gold mine for those interested in thinking critically about these topics. Selecting “Vietnam” from the drop-down menu yields a chronology of Vietnamese-American contact, which the site suggests began in the late nineteenth century: “Relations between citizens of the United States and residents of what is today the Socialist Republic of Vietnam began during the nineteenth century, when that region was a colony of the French Empire.” A little farther down, we find that the United States had commercial agents in Saigon beginning in 1889, and it established its first consul in the country in 1907. In light of America’s longer-standing ties to other Asian countries, such as China, Japan, and the Philippines, and the transformative impact of these connections on American national identity and trade, the official start of American relations with Vietnam seems rather belated—a delayed occurrence in the long history of America’s cultural, political, and economic ties to Asia. Vietnam’s supposedly minor place in U.S. foreign affairs prior to the Vietnam War finds its counterpart in American literary history, for which Vietnam largely does not exist until the ground conflict got under way in the 1960s.

America’s Vietnam challenges the prevailing genealogy of Vietnam’s emergence in the American imagination, one that presupposes the Vietnam War as the starting point of meaningful Vietnamese-U.S. political and cultural involvements. Engaging diverse authors and genres from as early as the 1820s, this interdisciplinary project stages a conversation among American,
Vietnamese, and Vietnamese American texts written in English and Vietnamese. My formalist and historicist analyses demonstrate how Vietnam’s transitions from an emergent nation in the nineteenth century to a French colony to a Vietnamese-American war zone have shaped literatures of Southeast Asian–American relations. Through readings of five genres that I argue have been key to literary constructions of “Vietnam”—melodrama, cookbooks, journalistic memoir, epistolary forms, and literary magazines—I show that genre has significantly shaped American portrayals of transnational encounter as they have evolved through the space and idea of Southeast Asia and across a longer history. If analyzing genre offers insight into how literary form shapes perceptions of war, race, and empire, a longer, transnational history shows how those forces shape-shift over time.

*America’s Vietnam* explores canonical, noncanonical, and new archival materials that, read together, tell a mostly unexamined story of Southeast Asia’s long and varied influence on U.S. political projects and aesthetic concerns. If Vietnam has become known as the war that never ends—a post-1960s benchmark for how we talk about, enact, and remember war—I take Vietnam out of its conventional late twentieth-century, Cold War brackets. I analyze more familiar authors, such as Alice B. Toklas, Michael Herr, and Monique Truong, alongside less studied works, including a nineteenth-century U.S. sea story, Harry Hervey’s melodramas of French Indochina of the 1920s–1930s, Võ Phiến’s refugee nonfiction of the late 1970s, and South Vietnamese literary criticism of the 1960s and 1970s. This cross-cultural lens spans Paris, Saigon, New York, and multiple oceans, and it reveals rich cross-period connections. For instance, U.S. modernism as depicted by American and Vietnamese American authors acquires a Southeast Asian frame; portrayals of war objects and bodies in different texts foreground overlapping imperialisms and anti-imperialisms in Southeast Asia; varied depictions of Southeast Asian landscapes point to changing ideas about race and revolution. Together, the chapters map the development of American empire and American imperial culture, and they demonstrate how authors represent Vietnam as deeply entwined with the shifting role of the United States in the world while illuminating broader relationships between form and history. My comparative, reconfigurable, and long historical method offers new configurations to consider as we chart the scope and significance of transnational Asian American and American literature.

**America’s Vietnam across the Longue Durée**

As a shared term in the American and global imagination, “Vietnam” has structured enduring forms of collective identity and memory after a devas-
tating conflict. Its circulation tends to mark a range of watershed moments in multiple disciplines—for instance, an era of unprecedented activism and academic emergence for Asian American studies and of decolonizing politics and postmodern innovation for American cultural studies. I identify two problems with these prevailing critical approaches. First, because Vietnam’s prewar presence has been largely muted, even erased, in much of the historical trajectory that “Vietnam” has come to define, one of my goals is to undo this truncated temporality. In public discourse, “Vietnam” and the “Vietnam War” are stereotypically conflated, resulting in a willful neglect of pre-conflict contexts that must inform our comprehension of the war’s enduring effects in the present. Such severe historical unevenness disconnects the actual overlap of European, American, and Asian imperialisms in Southeast Asia, subordinates the region’s own shaping of those contexts, and occludes how the United States and Vietnam have inflected each other’s geopolitical imaginaries outside the 1960s–1970s milieu of war. In turn, these critical exclusions sustain literary-historical practices that are premised on Euro-American chronologies and events, smoothing over the heterogeneity of geographies and histories that constitute American literature and literary history.

Advancing more carefully historicized approaches, scholars have begun to take Southeast Asia out of this cultural, ideological, and historical confinement. They account for the region’s specificity as the site of multiple, overlapping empires to decenter dominant narratives that stage “Vietnam” as “a US tragedy featuring US heroes and antiheroes, a blockbuster in which Southeast Asians play the supporting cast.” Field-defining work by Lan Duong, Yen Le Espiritu, Jodi Kim, Mimi Thi Nguyen, Viet Thanh Nguyen, Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, and Cathy Schlund-Vials rereads Asian American literature as a corpus born of war and not solely of immigration. These scholars remind us that the very category “Southeast Asia” is a geopolitical designation that stems from post–World War II political agendas and rubrics of knowledge. Moreover, several of these critics incorporate Vietnamese-language materials to reconstitute what Aamir R. Mufti describes as a terrain of world literature still dominated by works in English. Calls to interrogate Southeast Asia as a Cold War “epistemic formation” build on other critics’ efforts to remap or re-periodize Asian American literature—as in the work of Denise Cruz, Hua Hsu, Yunte Huang, Lisa Lowe, Colleen Lye, Martin Joseph Ponce, and Min Hyoung Song—and offer new geographies and temporalities of Asian American literature that closely link geopolitical context with literary craft.

*America’s Vietnam* affiliates with these scholars’ reassessment of the unfolding of the twentieth to twenty-first centuries through Asian American
cultures and politics. I also commit to re-constellating canons, histories, and periodizations, and I find specific resonance with the above scholars’ interest in the relationships among American empire, literary form, and literary history. However, existing scholarship on Vietnamese-American entanglements remain rooted in Vietnam War and Cold War frames, and I argue that it is requisite to move beyond them to break their historical and ideological constraints. Those emphases can take post–World War II U.S. global power as a given, limiting the extent to which we can depart from the vocabulary and epistemes of U.S. hegemony to further a genealogy of America’s Vietnam that is less exceptionalizing and more relational. I fuse the strengths of the critical paradigms outlined above by combining a Southeast Asian Americanist approach specifically focused on Vietnam with a long historical lens. In turn, I direct attention to how U.S. power evolves and revises itself over stretches of time, developing new logics and rhetoric in relation to shifting inter-imperial and anti-imperial dynamics.

In this way, I find a longue durée approach a valuable and practical tool for advancing Southeast Asian Americanist approaches to literary history. There is nothing self-evident about periodizing Vietnamese-American encounters in Vietnam War or Cold War terms; memory and history are geopolitical fabrications. In 1958, Fernand Braudel identified and criticized the prominent turn to short-term conceptions of history—a tendency on the part of social scientists to privilege the event and “the instantaneous,” imbuing such episodes with an aura of “newness” that explodes in public consciousness and then quickly fades away.9 One of the “events” that Braudel had in mind was France’s defeat by North Vietnam at Điện Biên Phủ in 1954, a loss that precipitated the end of French rule in Indochina. For Braudel, this flashpoint became an easy substitute for historical understanding, and what lay in its shadows became relegated to “unconscious history”: “History was under the illusion that it could derive everything from events. More than one of our contemporaries would be happy to believe that everything is the result of the agreements at Yalta or Potsdam, the incidents at Dien Bien Phu.”10 Braudel advocated a longue durée model of critical inquiry that integrates the long term, the short term, and the conjunctural: “The time of today is composed simultaneously of the time of yesterday, of the day before yesterday, and of bygone days.”11 This dialecticizing of different temporalities encourages relating, rather than isolating and extracting, historical moments to avoid facile and perhaps false historical substitutions and causalities.

If Braudel’s longue durée paradigm invests in long temporal arcs to determine historical causality and totality, I am equally interested in how a text envisions and maps what constitutes history and how these strategies overlap with or diverge from a work’s historical reference points. This proj-
ect draws from recent scholarship in Vietnam studies, whose examinations of under-examined or newly released archives reveal complex landscapes of geopolitical struggle that transform our understanding of Southeast Asia. But I differ in my focus on the formal strategies by which we configure and reconfigure the past, present, and future. The radical potential of a *longue durée* outlook lies in its recognition of both historical continuity and rupture and its openness to cross-spatial and cross-temporal dialogues. Literary critiques that take extended temporal forms can productively loosen sedimented critical habits.¹²

In sum, the *longue durée* impetus that undergirds *America’s Vietnam* goes farther back in time and history at the same time that it looks ahead. In this book, “Vietnam” is very much linked to the Vietnam War but also extends beyond it, setting into relief works and lineages that have not been considered by literary history. By situating American imperial desire relative to Southeast Asia in an expanded temporal line, we can begin to account for the close entwinement of the two regions that began even before America’s earliest days as a republic. For instance, in the late eighteenth century, Vietnam was a topic of interest in American newspapers, as the emerging nation kept an eye on imperial rivalries in Southeast Asia. Cochinchina, or present-day southern Vietnam, appeared in the letters of Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, who both considered the potential benefits of importing and planting Vietnamese rice in the U.S. South. These examples suggest that there is much to learn by de-exceptionalizing “Vietnam” and detaching it from its automatic associations with the Vietnam War and American trauma, instead highlighting a multi-perspectival, centuries-long view that helps us grasp American, Vietnamese, and Vietnamese American literary production and political thought as overlapping and mutually transforming.¹³

**Genre and Literary Constructions of “Vietnam”**

My second motivation for writing *America’s Vietnam* is the under-explored issue of how genres structure the narratives of Vietnam we inherit and continue to produce. In analyses of American literature about Vietnam, questions of form are typically subordinated to those of content. As Fredric Jameson puts it, the historical circumstances of “this terrible first postmodern war cannot be told in any of the traditional paradigms.”¹⁴ This formulation that the Vietnam War caused profound aesthetic crises suggests that formal choices follow from unprecedented conditions of history. Taking an approach more akin to Jameson’s earlier modeling of form as content outlined in works such as *The Political Unconscious* (1981),¹⁵ this study pursues a dialectical understanding of the mutual interaction of literary form and
history. I demonstrate how genre significantly shapes the narratives of Vietnam I study and their aesthetic and political effects, as well as how history produces the existence of and need for particular genres.

An anecdote a friend once told me concerning the way that genre permeates our everyday lives helps clarify what I view as genre’s force in shaping the literary Vietnams I investigate. As a young boy in Louisville, Kentucky, he, along with young friends, regularly—and raucously—ran around the neighborhood playing seemingly harmless childhood games. One in particular was a recurring favorite; in the shadow of the Veterans Administration hospital, the boys would play a war game, shooting at one another with toy guns, just like in the Hollywood westerns they watched. All the while they revised the lyrics to the song they always sang during these escapades—“Marching to Pretoria”—by substituting “Vietnam” or “Cambodia” for the Dutch colonial city, depending on their moods on the given day. “I didn’t know it then, but I had been genred,” he said, forty years after the fact, as he recalled the peculiarity of reenacting gendered and racialized imperial adventure and violence next to the towering building that housed returning casualties of war.

As this example shows, genres can operate in rigid as well as flexible ways. Here, the American western “adventure,” evocative of Richard Slotkin’s thesis that America and its ideologies of freedom “regenerate” and rationalize themselves through violence, exposes its power by transposing onto a new war—the Vietnam War—an old story: the global story of colonial conquest. The portability of “cowboys and Indians” demonstrates how genres are keyed to certain tropes and narrative arcs while also remaining open to revision, or what Wai Chee Dimock calls “regenreing.” Genres are both irreducible and portable, sometimes strictly applied and conceived but also elastic categories through which authors create literary worlds. By enabling scalar crossover between geopolitical contexts and everyday life, they act as a window into the dynamic relationship between form and history.

While genre is not always an apparent orienting term in Asian American literary studies, the field’s evident focus on immigrant autobiography, the realist novel, avant-garde poetics, and, more recently, science fiction and graphic narrative exhibits the organizing logic of genre in the field. Genre might be situated as one thread within a broader discussion of Asian American aesthetics, which has recently emerged most prominently as a question of the relationship between Asian American literary form and history. As Betsy Huang puts it, genre serves as a useful frame through which to comprehend how Asian American authors’ generic experiments relate to societal expectations of assimilation and conciliation that correspond with American national imperatives of immigration and identity. In a related but slightly different argument, Truong prescribes literary analyses based
on “genres and narrative themes unbounded” by time periods and ethnicities for fuller, more comprehensive Asian Americanist critique. If existing debates revolve around the question of how to give the social content and literary forms of Asian American culture adequate and equal critical attention, my view is that genre is an optimal analytic for parsing this relationship because it arises out of particular material circumstances yet, as the above anecdote shows, undergoes constant renewal. Genres formalize the ways in which literature and history interact, yet their dehiscent contours and recyclability also redraw the boundaries of literary-historical representation. Their contingency means that there is no “pure” genre—it is not an ideal form that travels transhistorically and unchanged. We might think of genre as a gathering of, in Raymond Williams’s words, “different levels of the social material process,” of which the structural logic of a genre is just one part and functions in conjunction with myriad sociohistorical currents, whether cultural, economic, or political.

For instance, melodrama, which I discuss in the first chapter, emerges in eighteenth-century France to express collective unrest about class injustice and calls for structural change. In the American context, however, the collectivity of class grievance gives way to an American individualism whereby the person rises above an unjust situation in ways that tend to align with, rather than oppose, U.S. hegemony. This divergent approach to melodramatic conflict manifests in the noticeable hyper-individualism of American melodramas’ characters, who are typically tasked with combating injustice on their own. Melodrama’s differing practices in the French and American traditions illustrate genre’s formal and historical contingency. In their transmission and transformation over time and space, genres reflect and shape our cultural inheritance at the same time that they shift according to changing sociohistorical circumstances.

Genre also allows for capacious, relational analysis of how texts work. It is an expansive yet circumscribed category that allows us to observe the interlocked workings of a text’s multiple moving parts. My genre-based analyses attend to literary objects and landscapes in addition to characters. In this light, literary interpretation is based on not only a text’s “character-system,” as Alex Woloch phrases it, but also its object and landscape systems, among many other possibilities. The linkages within and across these milieus index genre’s management, partial management, or failed management of different historical reference points. It is through this very “genreness”—those moments when a work draws attention to its generic boundaries by rupturing them—that literature’s enmeshment with the social and political emerges. The collisions therein often erupt as formal tensions that generate multiple and potentially contradictory readings of a work.
Analyzing the multilayered thickness of literary worlds results in a rhizomatic contour for *America’s Vietnam*. In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari posit that a rhizomatic network—formed by diverse “plateaus” of condensed activity that relate to one another in inexhaustible ways—deregulates knowledge by remaining open to different associations rather than imposing restrictive organizations that constrain variation.\(^{27}\) As provisional condensations to consider, plateaus persistently branch off into new connections and lines of flight. This book likewise suggests that Southeast Asian–American literary encounters continually evolve and are not somehow fatefully fixed, as various narratives of the “Vietnam syndrome” would suggest. Through its attention to the longer history and to multiple genres, the archive-in-progress I collate asserts the fundamental co-constitution of form, literary history, and geopolitics and offers a range of entry points into representations that unhinge “Vietnam” from its Americanist, Cold War patrimony to show that no two literary Vietnams are wholly alike.

Let us now explore what a genre-based reading can illuminate about the long history of America’s Vietnam. Below, I provide a reading of John White’s *History of a Voyage to the China Sea* (1823), a sea story in which White chronicles a commercial venture to southern Vietnam that took place between 1819 and 1820. While this book concentrates on the period from the early twentieth century onward, I include White’s early nineteenth-century text here because the era marks the first time in Vietnam’s history that the country is ruled as a united “Viet Nam,” and to indicate the provocative depth of the archive we need to recover. We might say that it is during this time period that America first sets its economic-imperialist gaze on “Vietnam” as such. I demonstrate how a genre-based reading of White’s narrative unveils how the formal qualities of the American sea story both enable and restrict White’s striking depictions of a southern Vietnam negotiating its strategic position as a hot spot of bustling maritime trade at the same time that the country is recovering in the aftermath of civil war. Race, conflict, and competing empires converge on and across Southeast Asian waters in this little studied maritime travel narrative of early Vietnamese-American encounter.

**Vietnamese-American Encounter in 1819: Maritime Modernities and the Sea Story**

The year 1819 was eventful for maritime America and American literature. The *SS Savannah* became the first steamship to cross the Atlantic Ocean; Congress passed an anti-piracy law “to protect the commerce of the United
States” on the high seas; and the famous *Essex* left Nantucket, undertaking a tormented whaling expedition that would later inspire Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851). The year 1819 was also when John White, a U.S. Navy lieutenant on furlough, set sail from Salem in a 251-ton brig called the *Franklin*, owned by his brother Stephen. The White brothers were nephews of Captain Joseph White, a wealthy former slave trader and shipmaster who was notoriously murdered in Salem by another established New Englander, Richard Crowninshield. This network of money, maritime trade, and American literature did not stop at the borders of the Northeast. The *Franklin’s* mission, as White framed it in *History of a Voyage to the China Sea* (1823), was to secure a commercial treaty with Cochin China, or present-day southern Vietnam, and become one of “the first American ships that . . . displayed the stars and stripes before the city of Saigon.”

White’s eighteen-month voyage took place between January 2, 1819, and August 31, 1820, and included stops at Bahia, various ports in Indonesia, and a detour through Manila. Twenty-one chapters encompass the narrative, followed by an Appendix displaying the Romanized Vietnamese alphabet, the *Franklin’s* meteorological diary, and comments on innovations in maritime travel. True to the adventure tales of the era, White documents the ethnocentric suspense of encountering the unknown—replete with pirate attacks, dangerous gales, impassable swamps, and perceived uncouth natives. *History of a Voyage* is one of the earliest attempts to provide an authoritative American account of the region, but the twists and turns of White’s Vietnam indicate the difficulty of navigating its waters and the tenuous task of establishing American commercial presence in an area where Dutch, British, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Vietnamese maritime prowess intersect. At the same time, some of the nautical themes characteristic of a sea story oblige White to recognize Vietnamese sophistication on water, resulting in surprising moments of expressed wonderment at the possibility of multiple, coexisting forms of seafaring modernity.

The 17-inch by 23-inch fold-out map included as the frontispiece to *History of a Voyage* affirms the popular notion, at the time, of Cochin China as an ultimately inhospitable place—a confounding “maze of perplexity.” The map evidences Vietnam’s desirability as a commercial partner, outlining the country’s long, continuous coastline that directly accesses the expansive South China Sea. It also follows cartographic protocols of knowledge transfer, duly recording latitude and longitude, depth of water, and safe and hazardous areas. Yet the aerial view suggests geographic impenetrability. Rivers and channels wind about the page, and while they eventually lead to the city center of Saigon—at the time, part of the Saigon–Gia Dinh administrative area—their serpentine patterns frustrate clear points of departure and des-
tination. Saigon itself occupies a tiny, dense corner on the upper left-hand side, its citadel, concentration of pagodas, and king’s residence portrayed in miniature.

However, lest we attribute the portrayal of Southeast Asian disproportion and impenetrability to American hands alone, it bears noting that the map, and the book as a whole, is a fundamentally transnational, long historical product. Even though White situates History of a Voyage as a corrective to the world’s general ignorance about the region—“few correct accounts of it have been published” (vi)—he depends heavily on prior accounts that the book also dismisses. The map borrows from an earlier French map that is itself derived from yet another map, while throughout History of a Voyage White excerpts significantly from French and British writings to buttress his claims about Vietnamese barbarity and backwardness. White’s mariner text operates as pastiche, as Margaret Cohen might argue, demonstrating how American nationalist themes echo a mixture of rival powers’ imperial literary voices.34

The visual dominance of winding waterways is appropriate for a sea story’s map. But as the narrative’s frontispiece, the map’s snaking routes an-
ticipate the problems that White and his crew will encounter as they begin to set their sights on land. Exhibiting maritime authors’ impulse of “performing description”—or what Cohen describes as providing material information that enlivens and moves the sea story-world forward—White meticulously replays the trials he and his crew face in their initial encounters with Vietnam. As the Franklin reaches Vietnam’s southern tip, it drifts off path into shoal water and is unable to “stay the course,” forced to take a series of detours (15). Upon seeing the first identifiable landmarks in Vietnam, they encounter a strong change in current, which again diverts the ship and slows them down, “[rendering] the time tedious and irksome” (29). When the Franklin finally reaches the Vietnamese island of Poulo Condore, White is disappointed, asserting that, despite its good harbor, “the island is very unhealthy and unproductive, abounding in noxious reptiles, and affording no good fresh water. . . . There are a few miserable inhabitants on the island” (30). Southeast Asian waters hit White and his crew with all kinds of obstacles, resulting in delay after delay for the Franklin.

In addition to navigational hurdles that obstruct the narrative’s progressive thrust, other diplomatic vexations frustrate the tale of White’s journey to Saigon. During the first meeting between the Americans and Vietnamese, Vietnamese officials regale White’s dispatched representative with tea, Vietnamese delicacies, and honorific trumpeteers. But the challenges of communication in an international maritime era soon become apparent. Lacking local knowledge, the Franklin’s crew requests a Vietnamese pilot to guide them upriver, but lack of a shared language makes it difficult even to make the request, highlighting America’s benighted foreignness; White’s officer cannot relay “of what nation we were, or what language we spoke” (34). Furthermore, the Vietnamese claim that they use Spanish dollars as their currency, which the Americans do not have, and request copies of certain documents, which White’s crew also lacks. In turn, Vietnamese officials repeatedly stall trade talks, expressing their displeasure that the Americans have come in ignorance of Vietnamese diplomatic customs. When White wants to bypass Vietnamese procedures in order to proceed, he rapidly learns that the risk of continuing his journey without proper documentation is decapitation (40). Perhaps the biggest disappointment of all is that the Franklin cannot even go to Saigon without the local governor’s permission, and the governor is unavailable. In the early nineteenth century, Vietnam rebuffs a young and impudent America’s diplomatic and economic agenda. White’s key goal—securing trade rights with Vietnam—is never achieved.

White insists that Vietnamese political and economic practices are inefficient, taxed by empty formalities, needless hierarchies, and bureaucratic excesses. The “view from the masthead” in History of a Voyage—to borrow
Hester Blum’s phrase that describes the analytical and imaginative work of antebellum sea narratives—is that the Vietnamese are “but little removed from a state of deplorable barbarism,” and Vietnam is a country that is isolationist and undemocratic at its core (36). The Franklin’s interruptions and ultimate commercial failure not only put White behind schedule and trouble hopes for literal “smooth sailing”; they also thwart desires for diplomatic and economic alliance and divert the flow of American capital. “In the present state of the kingdom,” White concludes, “no commercial operations can be expected to result in a manner to warrant further trials” (31). He blames “the tyrannical nature of the government” for having “interdicted all direct commerce between foreigners and that country” (261). Vietnam is a “court of Pandemonium,” an impediment to America’s vision of free and open trade in Southeast Asia (47).

White’s nationalist, capitalist account of Vietnam’s uncompromising routes, peoples, and government minimizes how Vietnam and other Asias determine the Franklin’s fate, and it justifies his conclusion that Vietnam is geographically secluded and enforces its own political and economic isolation. However, if a nation-based approach to History of a Voyage might rest with this reading, a transnational and interdisciplinary take attends to the rich but muted subtexts of White’s account. Historically, southern Vietnam was part of what the Asia historian Tana Li calls a dynamic “water frontier,” or what the China and Vietnam historian Alexander Woodside terms “a crossroad of the Southeast Asia crossroad.” This region, which stretched from the Mekong Delta of present-day southern Vietnam to the Gulf of Thailand and Malay Peninsula, was tied together for centuries as an interconnected “ensemble.” For example, the commercial network along the water frontier was multinational and multiethnic. “Vietnamese” identity might actually have referenced one of many Vietnamese or Khmer ethnicities, while “Chinese” also referred to many ethnicities and dialects. In the late eighteenth century, Saigon and Bangkok were central sites of political and economic activity in Southeast Asia, and by the nineteenth century the water frontier had become a vital region of extensive trade and state formation. The establishment of Singapore in 1819—the same year that White departed Salem—was a game changer, competing directly with the Dutch East India Company to mark the apex of free trade and fortune. Traders from independent Southeast Asia dominated commercial exchanges at British colonial territories during the time of White’s voyage, not traders from other European territories. Parts of Vietnam had long been an integral part of these vast networks of trade, its ports dotting the world’s busiest shipping routes.

White’s History of a Voyage gives short shrift to Southeast Asia’s internationalism to mobilize an American national identity that is at stake in the
nineteenth-century sea narrative. Relatedly, it diminishes Vietnam’s domestic historical complexities. White’s arrival coincided with Gia Long’s rule (1802–1820) over a Vietnam deep in post—civil war recovery.\textsuperscript{48} For thirty years before his ascendance, the rebel Tây Sơn brothers had waged and won a bloody war against Vietnam’s existing regimes, which since 1627 had ruled a country that was effectively divided. The Trịnh dynasty had reigned in the north while the Nguyễn dynasty governed the south—a division situated at almost exactly the same line that would divide North Vietnam and South Vietnam in 1954. As Christopher Goscha notes, there is “nothing necessarily aberrant about the existence of ‘two Vietnams’ during the second half of the twentieth century.”\textsuperscript{49} As they took the country from north to south, the Tây Sơn brothers mobilized widespread popular unrest over taxation, corruption, and Nguyễn imperial expansion into Cambodia and Champa.\textsuperscript{50} Their victory would forever transform Vietnamese geography and politics, tenuously unifying the country of Đại Việt (Great Viet) from 1788 to 1802 and helping to carve the S-shaped Vietnam of today.\textsuperscript{51} When Gia Long defeated the Tây Sơn leaders and ascended the throne, he declared “Việt Nam” the official name of the country in 1804 and began the difficult process of connecting a space that had not been united as such before his reign. He oversaw the development of infrastructure, including establishing a postal system, modifying laws, and strengthening local and international networks. His court was populated by officials from China, Spain, France, Portugal, Italy, Cambodia, Thailand, Ireland, Siam, and Java.

Yet the emperor is an elusive figure in History of a Voyage, relatively disconnected from the Vietnamese military, political, and economic developments he spearheaded. America would soon face the challenges of its own civil war, but here White suggests that Vietnam’s clannish internal feuds have undercut Vietnam’s modern potential, racializing Vietnamese space, time, and money to foreclose possibilities of Asiatic modernity and expunging foundational material contexts.\textsuperscript{52} By contrast, Lê Quang Định, a trusted member of Gia Long’s court, described Vietnam’s geographically and politically expansive outlook in 1806: “Now, after more than two hundred years, those [Vietnam’s] borders and edges have all been brought together, . . . unified as one, all becoming units of imperial cultural enlightenment.”\textsuperscript{53} His remarks reveal the critical role of the emergent genre of the imperial gazette in Vietnam, which supplied information about the country’s disparate locales by recording stories specific to each region while also generating a cohesive narrative of Vietnam.\textsuperscript{54} In the nineteenth century, the Nguyễn dynasty prioritized cultural and historical record keeping, as evident in the rise of gazettes, to produce an impressive output of literary documentation about the region. Although Vietnam would be embroiled in struggles against the
French just a few decades later, at this point in time, writings expressed sanguinity about Vietnam’s future and resonated with the energy found at the water frontier—a space where “different flows of energy came in, mixed, and blended with various indigenous elements . . . and reemerged in different local forms.”

Intersecting with Vietnam’s terrestrial and aqueous energies at the time, a striking example emerges in History of a Voyage that momentarily creates an 1819–1820 story world in which Vietnam and America are coeval and overlapping rather than inherently divided by reifications of geography, race, and politico-economic difference. It is oriented around White’s observation of Vietnamese sailing culture and shipbuilding. As the Franklin navigates various hurdles, signs of promise emerge out of these entangled scenes in animated snapshots of Southeast Asian nautical achievement. Observing small trading boats “as far as the eye could extend,” bustling in “piscatory excursions” (54), White discerns not only commercial possibility but also sailing ingenuity, expressing simultaneous befuddlement by and admiration for the proportions and methods of Vietnamese marine engineering. He is worth quoting at length to give a sense of the entwined quantitative and qualitative richness of sea stories—how their depiction of material details relates mariners’ experience or how the text’s object-system interacts with its character-system:

They are of great length, sharp at both ends, projecting far out above, giving their decks about one-third part greater length than their keels, which are not deep; and it may be a subject of curiosity with nautical readers for me to state further, that the rebate which receives the garboard strake, being near the bottom of it, gives it but a very slight degree of elevation from the plank; this latter circumstance would not perform well in working to windward; but this is not the case, for it is presumed that these vessels are equal, if not superior, to any in the world in this respect. Should it be asked, wherein this superiority consists, a satisfactory answer may be difficult to be found; our conclusions, however, were, that it might be discovered in their great depth, which, according to our ideas of naval architecture, is somewhat disproportionate to the breadth below. . . . Their frames are much farther apart than those of our vessels, and they have no ceilings; they are secured together with iron nails, the heads of which are made in a peculiar form. (55–56, emphasis added)

This is a rare occasion when White’s ethnocentric, universalist assumptions about naval construction cede to the promise of maritime difference. Per-
ceived incongruity and disproportion are shown to be nautically effective, even “superior to any in the world,” upending White’s expectations about naval measurement and architecture and destabilizing his literary constructions of American modernity and Vietnamese unmodernity. Images of Vietnamese vessels included in History of a Voyage visualize the Vietnamese maritime sophistication that White confronts and describes at length.

The image of the junk has clean, smooth lines, drawn to convey its functionality of purpose and scale, while the state vessel emanates grandeur through its ornate engravings that befit the occasion portrayed—the arrival of Saigon’s viceroy (see the “Trader” and “State Galley” images). Its defined geometry communicates discipline and tasteful majesty, quite unlike the depictions of barbarous natives and immoderate cultural and political customs White perceives on land. That the vessels—which we must recognize as potentially crafted by multiethnic Asians living in the region—are depicted as “superior” to any other on the globe runs counter to the idea of a cartographically and politically opaque Vietnam. In these nautical scenes of Vietnamese-American encounter, White offers a more open account of what Kale Fajardo calls “crosscurrents”—the long historical abundance of “maritime routes and maritime trade” in the Pacific and Oceania.56 White is utterly struck by nautical craftsmanship on the water frontier, admitting multiple maritime modernities across early nineteenth-century New England and Southeast Asia.

A second example that appears toward the end of History of a Voyage punctuates the ways in which Vietnam’s historical and political depth undercuts White’s consolidation of U.S. nationalist chronology. When White is finally able to meet with the governor of Saigon, likely the figure Nguyễn Văn Nhơn, he presents an array of gifts, having accepted the protocols of Vietnamese diplomacy.57 Among the gifts is a kaleidoscope, which White describes as a brand-new innovation: “The kaleidoscope, being of superior workmanship, and handsomely ornamented, was particularly admired. I directed the linguists to inform the viceroy, that this was a new invention, and had excited much admiration in Europe, and then proceeded to explain its uses and mode of application” (307). This translated conversation suggests the possibility of productive interlingual and intercultural transference between Americans and Vietnamese and relates White’s desire to demonstrate to Saigon’s governor the benefits of Western modernity and innovation.

An object that brought random pieces of materials together to create a spectacle of color and unpredictable patterns, the kaleidoscope was a modern European sensation. In A Treatise on the Kaleidoscope (1819), David Brewster, who invented the instrument, recounts, “The idea occurred to me of giving motion to objects, such as pieces of coloured glass, &c., which were either fixed or placed loosely in a cell at the end of the instrument. When
“Trader of the Northern Provinces” illustration from John White's *History of a Voyage to the China Sea* (Boston: Wells and Lilly, 1823).

“State Galley of the Viceroy of Don-nai” illustration from John White's *History of a Voyage to the China Sea* (Boston: Wells and Lilly, 1823).
this idea was carried into execution, and the reflectors placed in a tube, and fitted up on the preceding principles, the Kaleidoscope, in its simple form, was completed.” A product of serious scientific and mathematical deliberation, the kaleidoscope took what might otherwise be discarded materials—shards of colored glass—and brought them together to produce a seemingly endless array of symmetrical, colorful, and optically interesting combinations. Brewster predicted that the results would be universally appealing: “The succession of splendid colours formed a phenomenon which I had no doubt would be considered, by every person who saw it to advantage, as one of the most beautiful in optics.” The kaleidoscope encapsulated modern and innovative ways of seeing in the early nineteenth century and, in an age of global sail and exploration, marked a time when the world opened up to “different cultural sensations” that could be personally experienced with the simple turning of one’s hand.

True enough, the governor takes note of the kaleidoscope and even “particularly admires” it (307). But to White’s utter astonishment, the governor remarks that the kaleidoscope is old news in Vietnam:

No sooner, however, had he looked through it, than he took it from his eye, and addressed a few words to the linguist, who repeated to me from his excellency, that the instrument might be new in Europe, but was by no means rare with them. He then directed a few words to an officer in attendance, who returned in a few minutes with several kaleidoscopes, covered with red embossed paper: they were, it is true, of inferior workmanship, but in principle did not differ in the least from that of Dr. Brewster. We were, however, greatly surprised, that an invention of such recent origin in Europe should be found in this secluded part of the world, especially as those we saw were evidently of Chinese manufacture. And if it was not a Chinese invention also, but had been brought from Europe by the way of China, it was not a little remarkable, because the trade between China and Saigon was . . . remote from scenes of European intercourse. (307–308)

Corresponding with its effect of multiplying colorful patterns, the kaleidoscope refracts White’s ethnocentrism into new ways of seeing, confronting him with unexpected circuits and velocities of trade, production, and consumption. A device that achieves its spectrum of effects through tactile viewing, it forces White to admit Vietnamese commercial modernity up close and face-to-face in this momentary re-vision of early nineteenth-century Vietnamese-American relations. A striking device with which White begins to draw History of a Voyage to a close, the decorative object is an apt metaphor
for the instability of the text’s misreading of Vietnam as “anti-commercial,” “secluded,” and “remote”—a logic that allows White to assert that the rejection of U.S. economic “friendship” is no real loss. The kaleidoscope-as-trope disrupts the knowledge and confidence of the mariner-author himself, upending White’s “epistemology of the sea.”

A historicized, genre-based reading of White’s practice of the sea story adventure draws critical attention to this overlooked archive and history of Vietnamese-American encounter and illustrates a dynamic central to this book: how authors transform unfamiliar historical materials into familiar forms and unfamiliar forms into recognizable historical narratives. It is the seaman-author’s respect for maritime craft and life on water that compels White’s recognition of Vietnamese maritime modernity in his sea story. Yet it is also the genre’s historical potential to subordinate non-American nautical advancements to a U.S. nationalism that ultimately places Vietnam’s political system and economy on the edge of White’s perception. White is, in sum, genred. The fleeting moments of maritime kinship in History of a Voyage that exceed national difference cede to an imperialist racialization that casts Vietnam as backward and unmodern in the face of American trade and capital, despite the commercial and cross-cultural dynamism of the water frontier. Toni Morrison states in Playing in the Dark (1992) that early American literature insistently “[presses] toward a future of freedom, a kind of human dignity believed unprecedented in the world.”62 This liberation has everything to do with capital, and what impedes that flow becomes an obstruction to American freedom and modernity. History of a Voyage thereby works through a doubled logic in which Vietnamese waters are both a site of “pandemonium” and an aquatic frontier of mercantile possibility. But the latter is dominated by White’s repeated Hegelian configurations of Vietnamese non-history at a time when “the whole navigation of the world was in motion” (1). The overarching theme of Vietnamese ahistoricity results in a stunted quality to White’s own narrative, which is threaded with extended periods of “doing nothing” and “nothing remarkable” (352) in an adventure sea genre that, in Cohen’s terms, depends on the “remarkable.”63

Thus, despite being utterly struck by Vietnamese nautical craftsmanship, as the mariner-author White generically manages the tensions of Euro-American imperial competition on the water frontier, an international cast of Southeast Asian characters, and diverted American imperialist aims. He reasserts “the superiority of our [American] sailing” and trade (1). Recalling Williams’s observation that genre serves as a site in which “different levels of the social material process” interact,64 we can read White’s History of a Voyage as an example of how the genre of the American sea story episodically fuses but more consistently hierarchizes interlinked cultural and social forces. In
White’s hands, the maritime tale reaffirms American ability on the high seas and negates Vietnam’s domestic and international complexity, even as the *Franklin* returns to its home port empty-handed, revealing how the sea story can enact literary hegemony and operate as a genre of evolving American empire. However, I would not position the Vietnamese perspectives and histories I have highlighted as mere counter-archives to White’s text. Rather, I suggest that they both are at odds and intersect. Vietnamese writings of the period have their own, imperialist inflections. The wealth of literary production under the Nguyễn dynasty in the nineteenth century bespeaks the emergent country’s efforts at self-legitimation—not unlike a young America’s attempts to do the same through its own literary efforts.

The transnational network of trade in southern Vietnam is lost not only to White, but also to us, the contemporary audience, and to American literary history.\textsuperscript{65} Time and time again, American literature has depicted Vietnam as a novelty, despite Americans’ recurrent interfaces with it. As I have shown, Vietnamese-American encounters have been long in the making and oblige an analytical approach that does not render “Vietnam” passive but, rather, attends to the contingencies and varied, often conflicting desires that constitute a work’s story world. In addition to Franklin’s and Jefferson’s interest in the potential benefits of Vietnamese rice for American agriculture and economy as early as the 1770s, White’s own journey crossed paths with at least three other American ships traveling to or through Vietnam (157, 172). American commercial missions were reportedly dispatched to Vietnam in 1803, 1832, 1836, 1845, and 1850, but they also all failed in their efforts.\textsuperscript{66} Attention to these narratives and their generic contours is valuable in researching and developing a more comprehensive literary history of Vietnamese-American encounters.