

# HOMESCAPES/WARSCAPES <sup>25</sup>/<sub>30</sub>

Joseph Darda, "Like a Refugee: Veterans, Vietnam, and the Making of a False Equivalence"

June 1, 2017

12:30PM - 2:00PM | SST 777

Please join us for a Critical Voices Workshop

-- Commentary by Professor Linda Vo --

Please RSVP (required) to Jasmine Robledo (robledj1@uci.edu) by May 29 for lunch and to receive a copy of the paper

**Abstract:** In 2015, American news media marked the fortieth anniversary of the "fall" of Saigon with stories of loss and reconciliation. These stories tended to focus on Southeast Asian refugees who had settled (and succeeded) in the United States and white male American veterans who still carried their war wounds with them and, through return visits to Vietnam, sought to at last heal themselves. This narrative structure suggests a sense of balance, that the liberal news reader was getting more than a one-sided, soldier-centered remembrance of the war. But it also reflects the emergence of a wider cultural narrative in which the "dislocation" of the American veteran—from his "innocence," his youth, the nationalist fantasies on which he was raised—is treated as the mirror image of that of the Southeast Asian refugee.



Building on the work of such scholars as Yen Espiritu, Mimi Nguyen, and Viet Nguyen, this paper will investigate the making and meaning of this false equivalence. Whereas Espiritu, in her much-cited account of American media's coverage of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the war's end, scrutinizes the circulation of the interrelated "good warrior" and "good refugee" narratives, the fortieth anniversary saw the white veteran become "like a refugee" himself. Through a consideration of news media and "return to Vietnam" tour services for American veterans, this paper will show how this flattening of difference has allowed the white male veteran—in an era of an all-volunteer military and anxious discussions of a growing soldier-civilian divide—to imagine himself as "refugeed" from American culture. With then-presidential candidate Donald Trump claiming, in September 2016, that veterans are "treated worse than illegal immigrants," the memory of the Vietnam War has once again, I argue, been deployed as a vehicle for white male grievance and, ironically, a case for new draconian refugee policies.

**Bio:** Joseph Darda is an assistant professor of English at Texas Christian University, where he specializes in twentieth- and twenty-first-century American literature and media, critical race and ethnic studies, and American cultural studies. His articles have appeared or are forthcoming in such journals as *American Quarterly*, *American Literature*, *Contemporary Literature*, *African American Review*, and *Criticism*. While serving as the managing editor of *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory*, he edited and introduced the special issue "Literary Counterhistories of US Exceptionalism" (2014). He is currently working on a book project, *Empire of Defense: Race and the Cultural Politics of Permanent War*, that traces a cultural history of national defense and racialization—through state documents, novels, films, memorials, and news media—from the formation of the national security state in the late 1940s to the counterterror wars of the twenty-first century. At TCU, Darda is a core member of the Comparative Race and Ethnic Studies Program and an affiliate member of the Women and Gender Studies Program. He is on leave in 2016–17 as a Mellon Sawyer Seminar fellow at the University of California, Irvine.

Co-sponsored by the Center for the Global Peace and Conflict Studies, the Mellon Sawyer Seminar on Documenting War; and Viet Stories: the Vietnamese American Oral History Project

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