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Research Statement

Much of my research is an interdisciplinary exploration of the ways in which social narratives can both shape and shatter collective identity (with a special emphasis on racial/ethnic identity). In my forthcoming “Farewell to Genre,” I argue that every narrative traces the trajectory of a protagonist's complete movement between states of fortune (e.g., from happiness to misery), and when the protagonist of a narrative is a collectivity, one of the narrative's most consequential meanings is the answer to the question, “Are things getting—or have they gotten—better or worse for us?” When a social group tells stories about itself, this self-assessment of well-being-over-time is significant, for it can influence the goals and actions of its members, empower some members and disempower others, and affect the collectivity's relationships with other groups.

Based on this conceptualization of narrative, I have written on what it might mean for a social group to be traumatized. When a collectivity experiences a fracturing of its identity and responds by reconstructing its self-understanding, it has suffered a *cultural trauma*. In my “Theories of Cultural Trauma” (2020), I argue that this phenomenon entails a two-stage narrative process. First, the social group must narrate an experience as unassimilable. That is, the group must tell itself stories in which some event is so catastrophic that the collectivity no longer understands itself in the same way as before; it is no longer *itself*. When collective identity is fragmented in this way, the second stage of the cultural trauma process involves an attempt to reconstruct that identity. This is a contentious undertaking that pits different groups within the collectivity against one another as they strive to have their preferred narrative of collective identity adopted by the whole.

In “Cultural Trauma, Collective Memory and the Vietnam War” (2017), I demonstrate how Vietnamese-Americans have engaged in this process of identity reconstruction, and I elaborate on the process in my forthcoming book, *Vietnam: A War, Not a Country*. The project is a comparative analysis of the Vietnam War narratives that circulate within the societies of each of the war's three principal antagonists (i.e., Vietnamese communists, Vietnamese Americans, and the broader American society). Within each of these three social groups, my co-authors and I conceptualize arenas of collective memory where various groups struggle to promote their particular narrative of the war. As we trace these struggles, we explore whether each erstwhile antagonist sees itself as having experienced a radical disruption to its sense of collective identity. For this project I combine (a) interview data collected from a diverse and

geographically dispersed number of Vietnamese-Americans (about 50 in all), including artists, academics, museum curators, journalists, community leaders, and veterans of the South Vietnamese military with (b) analysis of the literary, graphic, and plastic representations of the war created by the diaspora's numerous carrier groups. In analyzing this material, I illustrate the disparate ways in which groups within the Vietnamese diaspora in the United States have come to narrate their collective identity in light of the war, and I show that these narratives indicate a rupturing of the collective's identity and subsequent effort to reconstitute it.

In my current book project, the edited volume *Interpreting Trauma*, my co-editor and I have assembled an array of scholars in order to explore how trauma is theorized. The book is interdisciplinary and distinguishes three approaches to the analysis of trauma: a) the psychological, b) the aesthetic, c) and the social. The contributors represent a range of disciplinary traditions, and the volume has generated innovative approaches to the interpretation of our theme. In my own contribution, "The Cultural Trauma of Injured Ideals: Mourning Truth in the Post-Truth Era," I argue that cultural trauma theory has concentrated primarily on traumatic events that involve direct, physical injuries to people within a collectivity. However, this focus has left unexamined the trauma resulting from the dissolution of a society's cherished *value* or *ideal*. My empirical case centers on the concept of a "post-truth era" with its associated despondency over the loss of *truth*. In this novel approach the traumatized subject is still a social group that must re-narrate its collective identity in light of a perceived injury, but instead of understanding the traumatic event as deriving from harm to human bodies, it is understood to have arisen from a damaged or destroyed ideal, one that had been considered integral to the group's collective identity.

My upcoming project begins with an investigation into the ways in which race is narrativized through the notion of *wokeness*. I explore this concept from liberal, illiberal, and leftist ideological perspectives and analyze how this narration both reveals and reinforces different conceptualizations of race and collective identity. Based on this investigation I will detail the impact these different conceptualizations have on contemporary political and rhetorical strategies, which often belie the common depiction of race in the United States as a bipolar issue.