Abstract:

*Small Wars* is the creative product of Vietnamese American artist An-My Lê’s documentation of Vietnam War re-enactments that occurred in North Carolina and Virginia from 1999 to 2002. Lê’s use of the large format, five-by-seven inch camera has inspired scholarly treatments of the series’ aesthetic resemblance to photographs of the Civil War by Alexander Gardner and Timothy O’Sullivan. Nevertheless, such accounts have overlooked the meaningful implications drawn between this nineteenth-century American war and the civil war in Vietnam that precipitated U.S. military involvement. Also missing in the literature is the discussion of Lê’s artistic identity in relation to her participation in the re-enactment. My paper addresses what her performances as POW, sniper, and Kit Carson scout suggest about the interchangeable roles between ally and enemy, and what this reveals about the perception and treatment of Vietnamese Americans displaced by the communist takeover.

I combine a narratological approach with Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory to frame my study of *Small Wars* as a simulated, non-linear narrative that unites multiple temporalities and a plurality of perspectives. That the content unfolds in a fragmented sequence not only evokes acts of remembering trauma, but also suggests the nature of reconstructing a memory that was not experienced firsthand. As I argue, the gaps that emerge in the narrative speak to the unknown traumas inherited by the postwar generation. Indeed, Lê’s complex representations of time and space attest to the war’s proximity in daily experience across temporal and geographic boundaries.