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Paisley Rekdal, The Broken Country

**Paisley:** [00:00:03] And when we invoke Rambo, I talk about him in the book because I talk about the Rambo sense of justice that we have around violent crimes like the ones that he committed. We have this idea that someone should just take that person-person out. And what's also interesting is that every time there is a violent crime in the media people often say what we need are more people with guns. We need more people who are armed to have a sort of Rambo kind of ability to take that person out. And Rambo took to hearken back to-that is to hearken back to a legacy of Vietnam about how some people cannot be rehabilitated in any kind of way.

**John:** [00:00:46] Paisley Rekdal of the University of Utah is my guest. She's the author of *The Broken Country: Trauma Crime and the Continuing Legacy of Vietnam*. Progressive spirit is next. Stay with us. For the Pacifica Radio network and PRX the Public Radio Exchange and from the studios of KBOO in Portland Oregon. This is Progressive Spirit, progressive spirit dot net. I'm John Shuck.

**Paisley:** [00:01:53] I have a lot of friends here. He is American and what's interesting is when the Ken Burns documentary came out and we've been all watching it talking about it, online a lot of them voiced some similar complaints which is once again you know this is a massive war that relocates nearly a million people. And it's, you know, that relocation is treated in four minutes a film. And so that sense of constantly not quite being in the public eye and yet having paid a tremendous price for actions that America took abroad I think is something that creates this long simmering anger and frustration.

**John:** [00:02:32] Paisley Rekdal is the author of a book of essays: *The Night my Mother Met Bruce Lee* and four books of poetry: *A Crash of Rhinos*, *Six Girls without Pants*, *The Invention of the Kaleidoscope*, and *Animal Eye*. She's won numerous prizes for her poetry. Her poems and essays have appeared in The New York Times magazine, American Poetry Review, The Kenyon Review, The New Republic, 10 House, Best American Poetry Series on NPR. She teaches at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City where she's also the creator and editor of the community web project mapping Salt Lake City. In May of 2017 she was named Utah's Poet Laureate and her latest book released in September 2017 is a book length essay, *The Broken Country: on Trauma, a Crime and the Continuing Legacy of Vietnam* and that's the book we're going to discuss today. She's with me via Skype from Salt Lake. Welcome Paisley to Progressive Spirit.

**Paisley:** [00:03:26] Thank you so much for having me.

**John:** [00:03:28] Your story begins with a violent act a stabbing at a market place in Salt Lake City in a parking lot. Can you set this up for us how this event-and tell us how this event impacted you?

**Paisley:** [00:03:42] Yes. Well it was in some ways by American standards it's a very small crime but it really struck me because I was living in Vietnam in Hanoi at the time. But essentially, a young, at that time, 32 year old Vietnamese American man who had been a post 1975 refugee to the United States purchased a knife at a Smith's marketplace grocery store near my house where I often shop, walked outside, and began stabbing specifically white young white men around his age while yelling about the Vietnam War. That's what all of the bystanders who were interviewed later said that they felt that he was specifically doing this as some sort of retribution for the Vietnam War. And as I said I'd been living in Hanoi at the time and I read about the account on Facebook via illegally VPN because Facebook is illegal in Vietnam. And one of the people he had stabbed was an English major at the University of Utah where I teach. And so some colleagues who'd had him in

class were posting about this and I thought it was such a strange and unusual crime and that I became a little obsessed. Well. Actually quite obsessed with the crime. I've been living also by the Vietnam Military History Museum and was going and visiting there very frequently to look at a particular memorial, or art piece of art. Essentially that was composed of French and American planes shot down during the conflicts with France and the United States. And I've never seen anything like that and I never thought that much about the legacy of the Vietnam War. But this crime started to make me consider what it means when we say a war is over. And what it means to memorialize a war and how it is that maybe we memorialize wars in ways that go beyond the conventional and expected ways that we remember war.

**John:** [00:05:39] And you mentioned post 1975 refugee. I think that was important too because there are really a number of waves of refugees that came from Vietnam. Can you tell us about that and what was it-being a post 75 refugee-he really wasn't in the war at all. I'm thinking of Thanh Ly.

**John:** [00:05:58] Yes. Ly would not have been born or experienced the war. He was born in 1978 and post 1975 when Saigon fell in April of 1975 and our involvement in the Vietnam War supposedly ended. There were about three different waves of refugees that fled from Southeast Asia. The first wave was right at the fall of Saigon. They tended to be in general wealthier, better connected, had ties to the U.S. military and government. They were often the fighters from the South Vietnamese army and they came over and their relocation experience was perhaps a little bit "easier". It was certainly not easy, but they had more resources available to them. The second and third waves were the waves that we would commonly call "boat people". So the later 70s and early 80s basically had two waves of people that included much poorer Southeast Asian refugees, people from farmlands, farming communities, people who had fewer literacy skills. It also included many Cambodians, Laotians, people fleeing fighting the Khmer Rouge. The third wave came over in the mid 80s early to mid 80s and even sometimes the late 80s and they comprise again more farmers, people who are living in rural areas. Children who were of mixed descent. What they call the Amerasians and then people who were fleeing essentially-just leaving the reeducation camps that they had been forced into by the North Vietnamese after North Vietnam won the war. So these are people who had experienced torture, extreme poverty, difficult social experiences in Vietnam and they had a harder time readjusting and relocating to the United States. They often spent longer times in refugee camps as people struggled to find homes and they also entered-this is important I think-they entered into an American society that had largely changed too in its attitudes around Southeast Asian refugees. You know, right after Saigon fell Americans largely felt rightly so responsible for the fate of the South Vietnamese. These were our allies. They fought in the war obviously alongside of us and women and children were often being shown on television as the most vulnerable to, of course, what was going to happen. And so the sympathies that Americans felt with were for the South Vietnamese were very strong. That changed by the time the second and third wave came to the United States. Public sympathy had largely dropped off. In part for a variety of reasons, but a lot of people saw the South Vietnamese as taking up a lot of welfare resources, taking up housing that other veterans were not also privy to. They were seen as being in direct competition with lower income American soldiers returning from war and lower income Americans in general.

**Paisley:** [00:09:27] And you know the public sentiment had turned to the point where I think the relocation experience of someone like Kiet Thanh and his family when they would have experienced far more racism they would have experienced far more distrust and a sort of public moral exhaustion upon their arrival I think.

**John:** [00:09:49] And so when Kiet Thanh Ly in the stabbing event is speaking about really the people he's attacking and they're just random people. They're symbolic, really, for him of how they hurt his country. But in the also- right in there- you're trying to figure this out in your book and what is really causing the trauma that he has and it's more than simply a psychological problem

within him himself or a violent personality or something that he is trying to put together. A narrative of his experience of a person who's really lost the country or doesn't know where his country is.

**Paisley:** [00:10:33] Yeah I think that's a very good way to put it. I mean essentially we could on one level look at Lee's crime in a very simplistic way. We say we can understand it because he had problems of drug and alcohol addiction and we can understand it because he had mental health issues. And yet I think to do that and to dismiss him as a diagnosis misses the larger historical resonance of how he became both of these things: a drug addict with mental health problems on the one hand, but also the fact that he is clearly using symbolic metaphoric language to describe essentially how he has experienced history. And in that he's no different than us. We have turned Vietnam into a metaphor. We use it all the time. But Vietnam of course really just refers to a country. And yet we have referred to Vietnam I think the average American will immediately think of war. And what that war means, of course, changes according to the way in which the context of that metaphor appears. So when we say we don't want to make Iraq or Afghanistan another Vietnam, what we could be meaning is anything from a disastrous proxy war fought on someone else's shores.

**Paisley:** [00:11:46] You know a terrible way of treating our veterans upon their return, or even the idea of how that civil unrest or the war affected basically civil rights movements in the United States leading to a sense of civil unrest at home. So it's a very rich kind of metaphor and I would argue that Ly is actually similarly using a fairly rich symbolic language in turn, and one that has been very much shaped by American media. I mean, one is a historical way of him using this metaphor of Vietnam is that of course he was South Vietnamese. He was not in the Navy. So when he says, "you killed my people why did you kill my people" and is, you know, acting in these ways, he's sort of symbolically taking on the North Vietnamese historical position that he would imagine himself and his family as being the opposition and not the allies of the United States. And part of that I think is due to the fact that the experiences he might have had being forced to quote unquote "assimilate" once he came here is that he was sort of placed in a position as seen as an perpetual outsider, a perpetual foreigner, and potentially a kind of threat. He represented the other side even though his family never was part of that other side. And I'm really fascinated by that and I think that the ways in which we speak to each other often rely on such rich and complex metaphors. So while he may have no easy... Maybe I should say. Maybe he can be diagnosed easily. I think he's not diagnosed or understood historically in very easy terms.

**John:** [00:13:32] Well I'd like you to read a passage from your book it includes the title of your book, *Broken Country*. I'm speaking with Paisley Rekdal author of *The Broken Country: On Trauma, a Crime, and the Continuing Legacy of Vietnam*. And we're talking about, in a sense, being displaced. And I'd like you to read a passage this is on page 49 that talks a little bit about what it means to be a refugee

**Paisley:** [00:13:59] In the refugee community, war marks time. It cleaves it as it divides a family's life into events that happened before the war or after the war. In some families it splits personalities. The father, the child, had before war and the relocation, and the father she had after. Trauma is a broken country, one in which the past fractures into the present. Stuff like glass shards in the skin are sutured together like a tape reel from a thousand fragmented recordings. To live in this country is to traverse borders between self and other that are inherently subjective and constantly shifting where violence erupts without warning and where grief, silence, guilt, and shame come to feel as natural and as necessary as breathing. It is a place with no beginning or ending where memories become intertwined. And if you are a child, there's a region where any boundary between yourself and your parent is not only unstable but may ultimately be indefensible.

**John:** [00:15:02] Can you talk about that for a second I also want to maybe relate to this other thing that you wrote to the trauma. Is it really a continuous retelling of grief? You can never finish the story. And in this sense can you talk about this experience of trauma and the experience that perhaps the refugees, as well as veterans, also all feel in a sense.

**Paisley:** [00:15:26] Yeah well, I mean, on trauma-I mean the theory of trauma and the reality of trauma is that it's the inability to process a terrifying memory and an inability to basically integrate that memory into your sense of time, your narrative in a way that makes sense and does quote unquote "finish" the narrative that allows you to sort of finish grieving. And what this means is that the person is traumatized is often told to kind of go back and talk about that moment to try to give it a narrative shape, a kind of beginning and end that will somehow put that memory to rest. And in refugee communities, and I think also in veteran communities, that has some interesting side effects. One is to tell stories of trauma might not give you the relief you think, you know, or you hope that it will. At the same time it might also create kind of cultures of trauma or shared familial stories of trauma.

[00:16:33] One of the things that I was struck by when I did so many of the interviews with people mostly post 1975 refugees is that they talked about how their parents would whisper these stories about what had happened to them or give them fragmentary tales of some of these really terrifying things that they experienced during the war and then, of course, you know when they were being relocated to swell, things that children may or may not have known about or may not have remembered themselves. And living with their parents' memories-living with these kinds of stories constantly swirling around made them feel as if they too had sort of suffered something, as if they too had an access to some frightening kind of grief and violence that might erupt at any time. They were constantly aware of and waiting for. And that kind of created a sort of traumatic inheritance for a lot of children. I was struck also by some of the research I did when they were talking about traumatized veterans of war is that one therapist said one traumatized veteran will touch basically 10 people in his or her life. And, you know, the effects of living with trauma, but the retelling of trauma can affect people in so many different ways. And so the traumatic-the PTSD symptoms that the soldier-returning soldier-might experience starts to radiate out into his children and their children's children. Trauma is something that scientists have discovered epigenetic-genetic research can be inherited. And in fact when you look at refugee communities and also in veteran communities you will see elevated rates of PTSD in the children and the grandchildren of those who have come back with a diagnosis of PTSD.

**John:** [00:18:21] Now that's amazing to me that the trauma really has biological effects that can physically change the genes. And this trauma can be passed down genetically.

**Paisley:** [00:18:31] Yeah. Trauma. When we talk about trauma it's messy because it is simultaneously a bodily wound that's carried on our genes but it's also a cultural wound that's carried through our narratives and so there's two ways we can transmit it. One is if you want to think of PTSD as a sort of disease which a lot of people do think of it as a kind of communicable disease. It's something that your children can inherit or your grandchildren as I said. And they've studied this in multiple groups: American Indians, Holocaust refugees, those who experienced refugee genocides, you know, throughout European history and there's many. And then of course with the Vietnam War we have enough longitudinal data to look at both the refugees that were relocated as well as the Vietnam veterans. And they're discovering that 40 years on out those who have been given a diagnosis of PTSD their symptoms didn't necessarily always get better. And there's an elevated rate of PTSD in their communities in general. But it's also communicable through the ways we tell stories. There was a-there was an interesting article I came across recently that said that people who had watched the video of the towers falling from 9/11-they were not in New York, they didn't observe it personally, they had no firsthand experience of it, but just

watching the videos they found that some people were displaying symptoms of PTSD. Ten years on from that. And I, you know, it asks very difficult questions about how it is that the ways in which we talk about traumatic events, how we show them, how we reproduce them through entertainment through our narratives, also can affect people over time.

**John:** [00:20:21] Yet you write about the Rambo movies. Talk about that a little bit too. I want to get back to these other two - to trauma and how it spreads and I'm going to ask the ultimate question: will the Vietnam War ever end? Because it just spreads on in so many different ways. But, talk about the Rambo film. What were the Rambo films telling us about Vietnam and what are they not telling us?

**Paisley:** [00:20:46] Well what's fascinating about the Rambo films is that Rambo comes back as, for me the way I read the film, he comes back simultaneously as a symbol of that war and torture and PTSD. But at the same time he is-when he comes back-this is the first one, first blood. He is mistaken as one of those long haired hippies. So he's also mistaken as sort of a domestic insurgent. What's interesting is historically the Vietnam War did play a significant role in the civil rights movement and some of the social movements: the veterans movement obviously, the women's rights movement that was taking place in America in the 60s and 70s. So the idea that he would represent both unrest abroad and then unrest at home is fascinating. And he's also this sort of bizarre kind of hybrid of American and then also Vietcong because suddenly he is out there fighting the jungle in the ways that are meant to kind of invoke what he learned in Vietnam, but from his captors from the people he fought. And when we invoke Rambo. I talk about him in the book because I talk about the Rambo sense of justice that we have around violent crimes like the ones that Ly committed. We have this idea that someone should just take that person out. And what's also interesting is that every time there is a violent crime in the media people often say what we need are more people with guns. We need more people who are armed to have a sort of Rambo kind of ability to take that person out. And Rambo it took- To hearken back to that is to hearken back to a legacy of Vietnam about how some people cannot be rehabilitated in any kind of way. Rambo ends up in prison in the movie where he seems to do better than he does in civil society. And that's a darker inheritance too of the war when we think about returning veterans of Vietnam. There were a number that did end up in the prison system and repeatedly so. And so it did seem that prison was a way in which if you couldn't rehabilitate soldiers with PTSD, prison became a place of de facto housing for them. A place where if you can't treat them then just put them where you can't see them. And interestingly that parallels obviously what's happening to keep Thanh Ly who's now in prison because he was also mentally ill and are our prison system in general is just flooded with the mentally ill. So, you know, to invoke Rambo is to sort of bring up this cascade of issues that the Vietnam War raises for us. And it is a metaphor and a symbol of still.

**John:** [00:23:38] And as I've been reading your book and thinking we treat it so individually is the one person who has mental illness. And so this person needs to be put away or this person needs to be stopped or whatever. But we're, as you writing in the story... We're missing that huge picture that we're so interconnected whether biologically or cultural trauma that the effects just continue to ripple throughout American society. But also of course Vietnamese society which hardly we ever talk about.

**Paisley:** [00:24:09] Yes this is true. I mean getting back to your earlier question about will the Vietnam war ever end. In some ways no and I think what's interesting is that there are people who would argue that the civil war in the United States has never ended too. I mean, there are a lot of economic cultural dynamics that are still in play. Powerful forces that we always forget about until they rear their head up, as you know as we talked about in Charlottesville and continue to remind us about the powerful ways in which that war has never been settled neither in our history books nor in our imagination. And I think, you know, one of the things that I kept thinking about when writing

this book is why is it that we want to believe that wars are over? You know, who does that benefit? And of course it benefits all of us and politicians because eventually we do have to accept the fact that we may have to end up in armed conflicts and if we have evidence and we have theories around trauma that show that in fact wars have extraordinarily long term cultural consequences that we cannot control. Of course it's going to make us far less likely to want to engage in wars to want to engage in these kinds of conflicts even when they may be necessary. And also it's danger--I mean--I also thought that personally one of the difficulties of talking about this research was that it also runs the risk of pathologizing individuals.

**Paisley:** [00:25:43] You know, I think the other-the flip story of trauma that I've been telling is that the bulk of returning veterans in fact were not traumatized and the bulk of the refugees that fled Vietnam also did not display long term PTSD symptoms. So the story on both sides could also be written as one of resilience. But you can't ignore the fact that there is still a significant population that suffers from these things and they have an impact historically as well. When we create narratives of war we usually try to create reasons why we went. And we try to make it look like we were justified in doing everything that we did. And Vietnam continues to remind us that that might not have been the case. And this is another example I think when we think about the PTSD and the long term effects of war, we have to think about the ways in which we sacrificed a lot of people for something that might not have been worthwhile in the end at all.

**John:** [00:26:46] This is Progressive Spirit, progressive spirit dot net. I'm John Shuck. My guest is Paisley Rekdal of the University of Utah. She's the author of *The Broken Country*. It's a book length essay on cultural trauma and the intergenerational Legacies of War. In 2012 a young Vietnamese man named Thanh Ly walked into a downtown Salt Lake City megastore, purchased a knife, and began stabbing white male passersby in the parking lot. Reportedly in revenge for the war in Vietnam-a war that due to Ly's age he had never experienced. Her book opens up the question of trauma, crime and the continuing legacy of Vietnam. More to come. Stay with us. You're listening to Progressive Spirit, progressive spirit dot net. I'm John Shuck. My guest is Paisley Rekdal author of *The Broken Country: On Trauma, a Crime, and the Continuing Legacy of Vietnam*.

[00:28:22] You know, when you talked about the mythologizing the individual and many- and it could be a story of resilience-but there's also a sense and I think you wrote about this that the that the individual such as Kiet Thanh Ly actually voiced a collective experience and paid-in a sense-paid that price for it. I mean he, in one sense, he told the truth and his actions were awful and they're violent we don't - I'm not- you know excuse or credit that in some way, but there's a sense in which sometimes it's the ones that we cast as mentally ill are sometimes the prophet.

**Paisley:** [00:29:06] Yeah. I mean it's a tricky thing to talk about. I mean I compare him to another kind of random stabbing: the man who stabbed Samuel Beckett, one of the guys who was stabbed in my book I talk to, Kelton Barney, refers repeatedly to the man who stabbed Beckett. And in both cases that man, and then also Ly are themselves individuals but they do sort of-I think in Lee's case I think you're right. There is a way in which he starts to represent or at least speak or tried to symbolize in his language. The recognition of an experience that often gets swept under the rug. And what that experience was is kind of also open to interpretation. I mean, I think that the people I spoke to who were post 1975 refugees-many of them said that it wasn't necessarily relocation itself that caused some of the stresses in their families. It was the experience of being in America and trying to assimilate that seemed to bring out some of the most difficult and dark stories in their families too. And so one question we might want to ask as well, "is this a story about words?" Was a story about American assimilation and the kind of subtle but violent process that takes place there too in cultures, and in that sense Ly does speak for a group of people which is to say when he's saying "why did you kill our people" he might be talking about a kind of cultural or racial there. Why is it that you don't want to see me? Why are you making us invisible?

**Paisley:** [00:30:55] And that is something that I think a lot of the people I spoke to felt that somehow their experience has been erased, and I have a lot of friends who are Vietnamese American and what's interesting is when the Ken Burns documentary came out and we've been all watching it talking about it. Online a lot of them voiced some similar complaints, which is once again, you know, this is a massive war that relocates nearly a million people and it's, you know, that relocation is treated in four minutes of film time. And so that sense of constantly not quite being in the public eye and yet having paid a tremendous price for actions that America took abroad I think is something that creates this long simmering anger and frustration.

**John:** [00:31:43] I'm speaking with Paisley Rekdal she's the author of *The Broken Country: On Trauma a Crime and the Continuing Legacy of Vietnam*. At the very beginning of our conversation you talked about the memorial in Hanoi, an artwork perhaps of airplane parts created perhaps by the Viet Cong to make a statement of some kind. But you found something quite deeper in that symbol in that artwork. It's the cover of your book. And I was wondering you also spoke later on about the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington D.C. Could you contrast those two memorials and what you discovered that they meant for you?

**Paisley:** [00:32:19] The memorial in Hanoi. One of the things that's so striking about it is that it is composed of actual plane parts and in that sense it goes against all the things that I had grown up seeing with war memorials. First of all we never make war memorials out of the actual material of war because to do so I think would be pretty grotesque and there is something grotesque about that. Look at all of these plane parts has to be made intimately aware that somebody died to get that piece and somebody else died on the ground as well. I mean so it represented death in both ways. And that sort of surprised me because you know that it ended up and I think more accidentally than deliberately being almost a dual memorial. You were looking at the deaths of French and American soldiers but you were also thinking constantly the death of the Vietnamese that they were shooting at as well. I am the daughter of a non-combat veteran of Vietnam and the niece of a combat veteran of Vietnam who had been you know basically nightly shelled while being stationed in parts of North Vietnam for different conflicts. And so I was aware maybe because of that you know that mortal meaning.

**Paisley:** [00:33:40] And when I when I look at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial that Maya Lin created at the end of the book I was also struck by the ways in which there was something similar she was trying to achieve I think to that first that first piece in Hanoi which is the question is always how do you represent war? Like what is the representation that's going to make us feel like we actually touched or were touched by war's terrible sublime? And its magnitude and its impact. In Maya Lin's case what she wanted to do was to create a sculpture, not a sculpture, but basically a monument where all the soldiers' names would have been put back in the order of their death. Like when they died. That of course was almost impossible to do. But the idea of trying to put people back into the time frame of war I think is what she called it and I don't think it's dissimilar to what the Vietnamese sculptor was thinking when he assembled these plane parts together. There is a way about of trying to get a reader to enter the timeframe of war and to really see it and to become intimate with it. Maya Lin's memorial I think is so amazing because you can have a tactile relationship with it. People go up they touch the names, they rub the names on pieces of paper, they can they have a connection. They look for the people that they lost. It's a very different kind of memorial than we're used to where normally we're encouraged to stand apart from that to look up at it. They're usually glorious you know and representational figures of soldiers coming back from the war. And hers is abstract in a way that I think that the plane parts became abstract. It was a way of showing us not the propagandistic way of looking at that war or the historical way we should look at that war but just trying to get us aware of what we lost in that war.

**John:** [00:35:44] You write: the stories and memorials we create around war do not honor the women who were raped, the children who were bombed. But the soldier who died in service to their countries we ask the rest to forget. So in almost all of our memorials it really is ultimately still is about blind patriotism in some level, isn't it?

**Paisley:** [00:36:06] I think it is. I mean war memorials are always a fascinating blend of elegy-public elegy but then also political propaganda. I can't even. Most war memorials are there to give us a context. Why was the war fought, who did the fight. What were the values that were at stake. And I think it's very interesting that I don't write about this in the book, but you know I think it's very interesting that Maya Lin's memorial was joined later on. You know, two and a half years later by the three soldiers figure by Frederick Hart where he depicts a black soldier, a Latino soldier, and a white soldier from Vietnam coming-either coming out of battle or going into battle. And the idea there was to suggest that, you know, America is a diverse land. And he fought in some ways for unity and diversity and a kind of liberalism. And our armed forces, you know, represented that. And that's a very ahistorical kind of, I mean, it may be factually true that it was a very diverse group of soldiers who fought. But it is up to debate whether or not they were actually fighting for racial diversity. But I think that there's, you know, that move is very classic when we think about war memorials. We oftentimes try to make it look as if the war was fought for good values in order to assimilate I think the public to those values. They're meant to reflect who we think we are as much as anything else. And so I, you know, when we're-when we don't show rape, when we don't show the Vietnamese refugees, we don't show these children are left behind. That's because it's morally inconvenient to us, right? I mean at some level we don't want to acknowledge that we did as much as we did over there because we were trying to rescue something of ourselves some image of ourselves that we think we hold dear as being American.

**John:** [00:38:05] So how far can truth go? That's what I want to know: how deep can the human go in terms of being honest about the trauma that we experience and that we share with others. I mean is there a way of healing at the end of the day?

**Paisley:** [00:38:24] Well that is the question. And I know this is the thing that I'm frustrated with my book as well is that I point out there's the paradox but I don't know-I don't know if I can answer that because the paradox about representing your trauma, representing our lives to anyone is that on the one hand we're always kind of not getting it right. So for instance with a memory of PTSD, oftentimes what we're doing is constructing a narrative that makes that memory make sense in ways that I think the person experiencing that event it's not necessarily truthful to that experience entirely. Violence erupts sort of out of nowhere. Things happen and seem absurd and don't seem to have a reason. And yet narrative asks us to make a reason. Narrative asks us to think in terms of protagonists and antagonists. Narrative that makes us think about the beginning, in the middle, in the end. It makes us want to tell a story in which something is resolved. But I don't think PTSD is something that is essentially resolvable that traumatic memory resists that at that level. So when we're trying to be truthful we're trying to actually give an accurate depiction of our experience in war and experience in life like this. I think we're asking ourselves to do something that is inherently impossible. And yet if we don't try to do it, if we don't engage in this I think we also miss out on something very primal and necessary which is empathy. We miss out on understanding the consequences of these kinds of actions. We miss out on the ability to see more and more people as Americans, as like us. We miss out on the ability not to repeat the crimes of the past. So while we may fail at representation, I think there's a worse failure in not trying to represent.

**John:** [00:40:22] And you write poetry. Is there a way in which poetry can catch that that a narrative can't?

**Paisley:** [00:40:29] I think sometimes. Yes. I think one of the things about poems is that they tend



to be-especially lyric poems-lyric poems tend to be they jump through time and space and history very quickly. They're good about that. They tend to focus on refrain lines and repetition and in that sense poems might actually be able to capture some medically-some aspect of what it might be like to have a traumatic memory be recursive and fragmentary. But I think in the end I don't think that poetry is also the right vehicle because people come to poems also hoping to be healed. A lot of times hoping to have some experience shown to them in a way that makes it beautiful and OK. And poems might not-might not give you what you want in that sense either. In the end I don't think there's any genre that actually can do what it is we really long to have done for us. And yet all of them offer opportunities and different types of opportunities to come closer to other people and to understand their experience.

**John:** [00:41:41] I have one more question for you. I'm speaking with Paisley Rekdal the author of *The Broken Country: On Trauma a Crime and the Continuing Legacy of Vietnam*. And one of those legacies is in the way in which the phrase is American society. Whoever is pulling some strings wants us to remember things. And we talk about Vietnam, Vietnamese refugees and sense being co-opt at the nail salon business grown into a multibillion dollar industry by young immigrants and refugees that you write. But is told in a particularly American way by the story of the actress Tippi Hedren. You know of *The Birds* Alfred Hitchcock's movie. Talk about the significance of that aspect and who gets a narrative and who gets to tell it for whom.

**Paisley:** [00:42:28] Yeah the Tippi Hedren story I find fascinating and it really made the rounds a couple of years back. It was on everybody-like everyone's news channel to talk about this multibillion dollar industry: the nail industry that is largely made. You know, it's a Vietnamese industry now practically and it means American women have just done a phenomenal job. And yet oftentimes they trace it back to Tippi Hedren going and visiting a refugee camp. And it's her quote unquote "long glossy nails" that sparked the curiosity of a couple of Vietnamese women in the refugee camp. She promises to teach them how to give a manicure and suddenly they're off and going. And while it's not incorrect that of course Tippi Hedren was in that refugee camp and did have these conversations and did do this- the way in which we frame that story as a story about Tippi Hedren is the thing that, you know, allows for this to happen at some point is very consistent with the ways I think we talked about relocating Southeast Asian refugees. The idea was that it was our American humanitarianism and largesse that's made for this and made this all possible and so if Vietnamese Americans are economic successes on our shore, well, it's because we gave them that opportunity. One could ask the question why there why were they on our shores to begin with. Right? But you know it's another way I think to morally rescue a war in which I think many Americans most Americans probably felt that America had been morally compromised by its actions abroad.

[00:44:06] So there's lots of ways in which we, you know, change stories of and I've seen this in, you know, we can see it with African-Americans we can see it with Southeast Asian refugees Asian Americans in general. There's a lot of ways in which American capitalist success stories often basically go back to reifying or supporting the idea that it's America as a space of economic opportunity and advancement and generosity allows people to thrive there and it's rarely the story of or primarily the story of the ingenuity and the need of different other ethnic groups to survive. So that's one of the things that I found really fascinating but, you know, that's sort of when I was writing this book I was thinking that's kind of the beauty of capitalism because no matter whatever happens capitalism always gets to win. It always gets to say See? You know we made it possible for people. At the same time you could easily say well maybe this is not this might of been capitalism doing. No.

**John:** [00:45:14] And that's what I was getting at I guess. Who's pulling the strings there. Who's making the - Who has the power to shape the narrative in the media for all of us?

**Paisley:** [00:45:23] Yeah yeah. I mean we all are subject to that narrative right. Because all of us are held to this standard of what it means to be a successful American. And the assimilation story we often think of that is something that only has best effect the immigrants. The immigrant onto our shores but oftentimes that that assimilation narrative is held up. I think just for native born Americans too. You have to be successful financially. You have to be of a certain ethnicity you have to be ideally male. You have to be you know a certain kind of religious background and stuff like that to be sort of visible and seen. And so when we think about the assimilation narrative having negative effects on Southeast Asian communities we might also want to say how is it this this American dream narrative has wounded Americans in general.

**John:** [00:46:18] You know that just reminded me of another thing I wanted to point out because you did conclude your interviews or continue interviews with the victims of Lee's violent attack. The two people who were stabbed and that aspect of the one of the victims had the brain injury from the knife attack. He was also in a position where he felt pressured to get back to work. That there is something there that you found a real connection between all of these people who were victimized in a sense by a trauma much larger than themselves.

**Paisley:** [00:46:56] Yeah I was really struck by Tim De Julius's interviews because he had been-he had been stabbed in the head. It caused traumatic brain injury. He had to go through such a long period of rehabilitation. The end result was that basically he wasn't suited to do his job. His job was to work with words to write technical manuals as quickly as possible. And what he kept saying and what really frustrated him was that everyone kept saying, "Don't worry we'll get you fixed up you go back to work as soon as possible." They didn't say ever. According to him "we'll get you fixed up and you can sit and you can process what happened to you." It was never about that; it was about getting him into the workforce as fast as possible. And you know what's fascinating is that, you know, I come from an Asian American background myself and the idea of people's usefulness being utterly tied to their labor potential is something that has always haunted and dogged the Asian American community and it was something I think that also very much dogged the Vietnamese American community too or the Vietnamese community once they arrived. This idea of how do we get them to assimilate as fast as possible in particular. How do we put them to work as fast as possible. And one of the reasons that Vietnamese Americans probably were also made largely invisible is that their success story didn't unfold and has not unfolded along the same lines. The Chinese, Japanese, and Korean American success stories in part because you get a lot of people with less education with no economic resources. Where are they going to go? But in low paying factory jobs and probably unsurprisingly a lot of young men were basically put adrift. And so many of them did in fact go into gangs. One of the highest Asian ethnic groups in our prison system are Vietnamese. So this idea of having them be useful by being workers is something that I saw parallel with not just with Tim but with the Vietnam veterans returning and also the Vietnamese.

**John:** [00:49:08] My guest has been Paisley Rekda she's the author of *The Broken Country: on Trauma A crime and the Continuing Legacy of Vietnam*, a beautifully written book length essay that certainly made me think about a lot of things I hadn't thought about before and then that's what I appreciate most. Thank you so much for this work and for spending time with me today.

[00:49:28] Thank you so much. It was such fun.