

MIX

ALMOST FUTURES

Sovereignty and Refuge
at World's End

NGUYỄN-VÕ THU-HƯƠNG

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Almost Futures

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Almost Futures

Sovereignty and Refuge at World's End

Nguyễn-võ Thu-hương



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to Huy and Th  -an

CONTENTS

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Note on Language</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>xiii</i>
Introduction: Almost	1
1. The Sovereignty of Grief: Land Protest and Speculative Time	31
2. Assemblages of Laughter and Sorrow: Women Workers and Allegorical Fragments	58
3. Iterant Remains: Witnessing Sovereign Violence	86
4. History Interrupted: The Death of South Vietnam and Refugee Hauntings	117
5. Untimely Habitation: Irreconcilability and Refugee Memory	150
Notes	191
Bibliography	227
Index	253

ILLUSTRATIONS

1. “Push Hard for Industrialization and Modernization of the Countryside,” government billboard facing Thủ Thiêm, Vietnam 32
2. Some former inhabitants return after eviction to eke out a temporary existence in Thủ Thiêm, Vietnam 33
3. Political billboard among developers’ visions of a future Nhơn Trạch, Vietnam 48
4. Nguyễn Thái Tuấn, *Tranh Đen số 40 (Black Painting No. 40)*, 2008 104
5. A “bourgeois” landowner is denounced before a tribunal in North Vietnam, 1955 105
6. Headstone in former Republic of Vietnam Military Cemetery, Biên Hoà, Vietnam 161
7. Moving Wall Exhibit in Garden Grove, California 167
8. Government banner commemorating 35th anniversary of Liberation Day on Vincom Mall, Saigon 186

NOTE ON LANGUAGE

Vietnamese is not decipherable without diacritics. I generally keep them. Vietnamese conventions for names place surname, middle name, and given name in that order. With a few exceptions, we use the entire name rather than just the surname to avoid confusion, given the small number of Vietnamese surnames. I follow those conventions where appropriate. When people or authors prefer no diacritics in their names or the order more familiar to English readers, I follow them. Vietnamese entries are integrated in the bibliography and index under English alphabetizing rules (e.g. D and Đ are treated as D). Depending on contextual significance, I use internationally familiar place-names like Vietnam, Saigon, Ho Chi Minh City, and Hanoi, but other places are referred to in the manner they are written in Vietnamese.

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

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Introduction

Almost

*Free of memory and hope,
unlimited, abstract, almost future*

—JORGE LUIS BORGES, “REMORSE FOR ANY DEATH”

The monsoon season in southern Vietnam lasted unseasonably long in 2016, and it began to dry only in the second week of November, past the election of Donald J. Trump as the next president of the United States. Symptomatic of deeper structural malaise globally, the Trump presidency and the Make America Great Again movement would later extend a new vector of political polarization into Vietnam and refugee communities. In the downpour, it was difficult to get from town to town on a motorcycle. When we did manage, the smells of fermented fish and ripening rice, the sounds of motorcycles and market bustle, the sights of green fields and hills behind dusty roadside stalls on the ride from my hometown of Vũng Tàu to Saigon often brought back snatches of my childhood in the early '70s. Then as now, the first thing we would cross on this highway was the Cỏ May bridge, frequently laid with mines during the war by fighters in the Mặt Trận Dân Tộc Giải Phóng Miền Nam Việt Nam, more commonly known as the National Liberation Front (NLF), or Viet Cong in American warspeak. Back then, liberation was still something that lay in the future. A promise. The bridge was our only connection to the old capital. Three days before the fall of Saigon, this bridge was blown up, not by liberation forces this time, but by South Vietnamese marines in a desperate attempt to keep at bay communist advances towards Saigon from the nearby Minh Đạm mountain bases.¹

With no way to reach Saigon in its last days of April 1975, my family left Vietnam on a small fishing boat, courtesy of a friend who operated as a communist agent and who thought my father would likely be killed by the incoming revolutionary regime for being one of the leaders of a political party opposing the South Vietnamese government. Perhaps the friend acted out of sympathy because he

knew that my father, when he was a young French colonial army conscript from a poor family, had participated in anticolonial acts of sabotage and was sentenced by the French authorities to twenty years of hard labor on the island penal colony of Poulo Condor for *trahison et association des malfaiteurs ayant pour but la démoralisation de l'armée* and, upon release by Japanese occupation forces near the end of World War II, fought for independence during the slaughter committed by colonial and anticolonial forces before being hunted down by the president of the First Republic in South Vietnam. But this communist friend held no illusion about the Communist Party's need for political monopoly against all political forces, not just the government of the Republic of Vietnam, which it called "puppet" to American imperialism. And like every Vietnamese of his time, this friend knew well the brutality of a politics of death that had become the order of the day in modern Vietnam coming out of colonialism. I wonder if he felt forebodings about his own impending death in a communist prison a couple years after he saved my father's life. Past the bridge on this highway to the old capital, I kept seeing again the silhouetted bodies of Republican soldiers strung up on power poles by liberation fighters near Long Thành decades ago.

As a child, I could not imagine peace in the same way that I could not imagine that other country in the North or the distant and foreign country known as *Mỹ*—America the Beautiful. Death, sent by both, was the more familiar territory—the man fleeing into our house pursued by soldiers who kicked and crushed him just feet from me, the frequent night shelling that sent us behind sandbags, the return in body bags of all three sons of an auntie living in the alley behind us, my eldest sister weeping over the coffin she was told held pieces of her soldier fiancé. Modern Vietnamese knew the colonial civilizing mission, anticolonial liberation, socialist revolution, pax Americana, American refuge, and now global capital by way of violence. All these things had carried the promise of progress, translated into the hope of redemption in a future where humans could master their fate. Only they found themselves engulfed in the brutality that lies at the foundation of modern conceptions of human freedom.

Our family friend might have saved my father from murderous politics, but he could no more protect his own life than he could guarantee us safe passage to America. The fishing boat on which he provided us free passage was stopped at gunpoint to ferry a group of soldiers, remnants of the defeated Army of the Republic of Vietnam two days before war's end. Young men, their boots and hair caked in mud, with a shattered look in their eyes. They wanted to be taken to the mangrove forest, as if it could shelter them from the disintegrating country they served. Like them, we were fleeing, but where to? Later that afternoon, my father spotted the helicopters ferrying American personnel in what I later learned was Operation Frequent Wind, set off by the unseasonable signal of Bing Crosby's "White Christmas" on the radio. We followed them onto American ships. From our boat, my family and I jumped barefoot across six other boats before reaching

the rope ladder hanging by the side of the towering ship while it continued moving. Not all of us made it on board to American soldiers pointing M-16s at us on either side. My water-soaked skin acquired an American color of race that afternoon, walking at the ends of those rifles. From the ship, I saw a baby left crawling on an unmanned fishing boat drifting out to sea as our American ship refused to stop for security reasons. The American military did not at first intend to evacuate Vietnamese.

That night, I stuffed my fingers in my ears to muffle the screams of the baby's mother echoing in the airless cargo hold of the ship. Three men were thrown overboard by other men. We were herded by American soldiers, sometimes hit, and daily hosed down if we stood up when told to squat while waiting in line for drinking water. There was no food for days. Pointing to her sick child, my mother begged an American soldier for his half-eaten apple for me. We were ferried across the Pacific, stopping along the way or put up in tents and tin barracks at American Naval, Air Force, and Marine bases—Subic, Guam, Wake, Camp Pendleton—bases that came after America was propelled into global empire status after the last world war, bases that continue to exist because of wars that followed.

The journey to resettlement took six months for my family. We were saved, but we were far from protected. Our family of five settled in a one-bedroom apartment in Garden Grove, California. To afford it, my parents took up a series of minimum wage jobs. My father came home from work with fingers swollen black and blue almost every day because he kept hammering his hand trying to keep up with the pace of production at a small skateboard manufacturing shop. A few years later, he would have his first major stroke while wiring the bilge of a ship at the San Pedro shipyard. My mother knitted little green wool caps for her fingers to keep them from getting too torn assembling glass garden lanterns before taking up soldering microchips onto circuit boards. These were among the last jobs of their kind to remain in America before the global restructuring of American capitalism offshored them and brought us intensified finance capital in the 1970s. To get two rooms on my parents' wages, we moved to a neighborhood people warned us about on the border with Santa Ana. One night, I watched from our window a man chased down Clinton Street by men who looked like him, men of color. Shots rang out. Another time, a Brown man was hemmed in by police cars, beaten to the ground, and handcuffed. On yet another night, two men pounded on the living room window of our second-story apartment and kicked our door. My sister and I were trying to climb out our bedroom window down the vertical bough of a cobwebbed cypress when they left.

This book is not about all the ways I suffered as a child. After all, some of us led full lives with joyful moments. We were not simply victims. Some of us participated with varying shades of blame in bloody affairs of liberation, revolution, repression, and war. We were also more than our brushes with brutality, deprivation, or even death. Vietnamese and Vietnamese refugees were not exceptional.

They shared these circumstances with many others in our time. This book is my attempt to learn from some of the ways people familiar to me paid the highest price for living in the catastrophes of our modern world. They encountered, and some survived, the end of their world. They were residents evicted from their homes by land speculation at the moment of accelerated capital investment; workers treated as disposable in the decade of intensified export processing; witnesses to political killings in the revolutionary moment; and refugees written over for nation and empire when these underwent renegotiations of history. Even while held down to a less-than-human status, the people I follow in this book impossibly marched, grieved, struck, organized, spoke, painted, wrote, remembered or forgot, and sometimes stayed silent.

If these people have been brutalized in the very pursuit of progress towards the sovereignty that constitutes our understanding of the human, we may not get very far in efforts to restore their humanity to that same understanding with its internal methods of objective inquiry. Critical refugee studies scholars have invited us to listen, feel, and see with refugees how nation and empire are put together through race, militarism, colonialism, and settler colonialism. I bring these intimate and relational methods to inquiries into the human, drawing the threads that connect refugees to others who share the incommensurate yet equally perilous conditions of not being counted as fully human. Similar to the Latin stem of *fugere* or to flee in the word refuge, the relevant Sino-Vietnamese verb is *ty nan*, 避難, to elude calamity and capture, I suggest, from the Enlightenment model of humanist sovereignty and its historiography of progress that place so many in peril. As modes of ethical and political elusion and engagement, refuge lies in ways of being and living on across our modern catastrophes. The book brings critical refugee studies and Vietnamese studies into conversation with feminist, Black, Queer, disability, and Indigenous studies in contemplating modes of being in a world already at its end with deliverance of some but not those, in Alex Wehiliye's words, "excluded from this domain" of the "liberal humanist figure of 'man' as the master-subject."²

Such a journey necessarily becomes errant in the ways that Édouard Glissant may have meant.³ A humanist framework as we understand it in the modern world will miss the significance of what these folks had to teach us. To learn, I follow especially Black feminists and feminists of color who have for so long now searched for ways of being and knowing beside humanist subjection. The people you find here were subjected to conditions that were sometimes not as stark but yet often akin to what Hortense Spiller sees with chattel slavery in its grammar of capture and mutilation in which the "human subject is murdered over and over again."⁴ Although the most prominent politics and economics of death in our time are not the same as those in slavery, Jodi Kim builds on such insights into violence and the human subject to draw our attention to a "precarious grammar of life," in which the range of these political and economic processes render certain people into "essentially disposable lives,"⁵ or unworthy whose memory and knowledge

should be discounted. It is in such memory and knowledge read through a women of color feminist lens that Grace Hong finds the rejoinder to the neoliberal violence that subjects the “existentially surplus” to incarceration, police brutality, and premature death.⁶ Writing about approaching the archive of slavery, Saidiya Hartman asks “how does one listen,” and is it “possible to construct a story from ‘the locus of impossible speech’ or resurrect lives from the ruins? Can beauty provide an antidote to dishonor, and love a way to ‘exhume buried cries’ and reanimate the dead?”⁷ Perhaps not. Yet I feel compelled to listen to those from these places, some of whose experiences feel familiar to me not because our conditions of subjection or the ways to our salvation are the same, but because there is a kinship among those barred from the status of being full humans.

To look to the stories of the people who appear in these pages, I am led to examine the idea of the human and its attendant imagined history as the progressive march towards sovereignty understood as mastery. I trace their implications in the politics and economics of death. These political and economic processes are historical, evolving along the way. In the context relevant to Vietnamese, colonial racist violence gave way to nationalist and socialist revolutionary violence, which was soon directed against new forms of American imperial violence. American brutality abroad was entangled with racist violence at home all the way to this moment of white supremacist recuperation. Older modes of capital accumulation that accompanied colonialism gave way to socialist, then to late-socialist and flexible ones in current global capitalism, facilitated by neoliberalism with its emphasis on entrepreneurial and consumer freedoms. These processes that deploy humanist mastery in progress may overlap and connect, but they cannot be reduced to one another. They work by differentiating in multiple ways those whose lives will be disposable from those whose lives must be protected. In other words, the violence depends on, and therefore must produce in each unfolding moment, the determination about who belongs to the past and who will be here in a promised future. Though the people I follow here could not entirely escape that structure of time imposed on them economically and politically, they made places on the margins of that future, the *almost futures* that held possibilities still, even in the catastrophes that constitute our modern history.

MASTERY: HUMANIST SOVEREIGNTY AND THE RACIAL DEATH MATCH

The thread I trace in these pages pulls me back to a particular modern idea of the human that requires we move forward in an unrelenting march towards freedom defined as mastery in opposition to slavery. At the opening of the nineteenth century, in a passage labeled “Lordship and Bondage,” G. W. F. Hegel chillingly speaks for this modern preoccupation with mastery within his framework of dialectical progress: “The master relates himself to the bondsman mediately

through independent existence, for that is precisely what keeps the bondsman enthralled; it is his chain, from which he could not in the struggle get away, and for that reason, he proves himself dependent, to have his independence in the shape of thinghood.”⁸ Reading like myth, Hegel’s account cites a “life-and-death struggle” the combatants must enter in order to bring “their certainty of being for themselves, to the level of objective truth.”⁹ What has been popularized as Hegel’s “master-slave dialectic” reveals the logic of freedom in Enlightenment humanism. In it, death defines the master who wears the crown of the sovereign. Not only must the combatants seek the death of the other, it is death that is the source of sovereign life in its ability to confer objective truth. For Walter Benjamin, the sovereign was the site of sorrow worthy of mockery in the Baroque period preceding the Enlightenment.¹⁰ Yet, from such early modern roots, sovereignty from the late eighteenth century on gained a new lease as it was transferred to each and all, who as qualified citizens would vest theirs in new republics. The transfer of sovereign power from monarchs or colonial masters to popular sovereignty in both liberal and liberatory, including socialist, formulations came with violence twisted into a tautology: all are imagined to be entitled to sovereignty, and yet you can only assert sovereignty over others who would be kept from this essence of being human as the result of the death match that had become our inheritance on a global scale when European colonial conquest spread over continents old and new.

Economic practices in the preceding two centuries grounded the Enlightenment’s philosophical formulation of human life. Kali Tambree argues that the connection between death and life, unfreedom and freedom, in Enlightenment humanism can be found in the archive of the Atlantic slave trade. British ship ledgers, surgeons’ journals, and parliamentary documents from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries show the capture of human life in the numeracy of venture capitalism, including actuarial calculations. Risk management and profit assessment in future returns manipulated the horizon of death for purposes of speculation, while the proximity of death stayed the same for the captured and enslaved. Abstract determinations of death and life were governed by their capture in the speculative numeracy of the slave trade and extended to the entire realm of the human.¹¹ Hence, death remains foundational to humanism even as biological life moves to the center of political conceptions and practices in modern time. Michel Foucault argues that modern governance revolves around the calculation, administration, distribution, and protection of life force in what he calls biopolitics.¹² By implication, this involves the deprivation of biological time for some or many whose life force must figure into these biopolitical calculations, all the way to the ultimate paradox where “the life of our species is wagered on its own political strategies.”¹³

Explaining this very paradox—the reign of necropolitics under the sign of biopolitics in and outside of the Nazi death camps—Giorgio Agamben calls our attention to “bare life” in the *homo sacer* that he says is both constituent of and

excluded from the political community, a notion he argues goes back to Aristotle's conception where mere biological existence is opposed to the good life as the ends of politics.¹⁴ Sovereignty is thus defined as the power to invoke a state of exception allowing for the killing of those rendered into bare life to implement the political ends of the good life, justifying the modern death camp. The political order in the West is premised upon the inclusion of the always already excluded *homo sacer* as the inversion of the sovereign figure.

Foucault similarly identifies this sovereign with the power to kill or let die. And though his historical approach notes race as a way to encode a historiography of strife, which in the nineteenth century assumes the familiar biological racist formulation cementing the connection between the right to kill and biopolitics, Foucault does not address the site of its formation and enactment in the colony and the plantation.¹⁵ Preoccupied with placing the European formulation of sovereignty in a Western tradition continuous with the Greek polis in his discussion of the *homo sacer*, Agamben further deemphasizes the colony and plantation as constituent to this formula. The colony and plantation remained occluded for these European theorists even into the second half of the twentieth century. It seems that most of these thinkers could not elaborate on the mechanism by which large groups of people would be rendered subject to sovereign power and therefore killable. Not surprisingly, they had difficulty seeing through such occlusion, given a couple of centuries of the subsumption of the colony and plantation in Western projects of universal philosophy.

Apparently, it takes a different kind of theorist to address the colony and plantation to make some sense of questions about who could be killed or let die. Decades earlier than either Foucault or Agamben, Aimé Césaire in his 1955 *Discourse on Colonialism* pointed to racial differentiation underpinning European sovereignty to problematize the assumption that European violence could be understood apart from its colonial relations.¹⁶ His formulation of *un choc en retour* calls our attention to the colony as the original site of modern European violence, which would boomerang back to Europe in the form of genocidal murder, as the colonizer "accustoms himself to treating" the colonized "like an animal, and tends objectively to transform himself into an animal."¹⁷ Some fifteen years later, Hannah Arendt cited the "much feared boomerang effect" whereby English violent rule of faraway subject races would render the English themselves the "last subject race."¹⁸ European sovereign violence in the colony, it seems, haunts the heart of a Europe deemed the center of civilization built on the protection of life. In his reformulation of biopolitics to reveal its dependence on necropolitics as the exercise of sovereignty, Achille Mbembe argues that the colony and the plantation constitute the site where sovereignty consists of power outside the law: "the colony as a terror formation."¹⁹

Mbembe's designation of the colony as a space of exception where terror reigns allows us to reformulate Foucault and Agamben's theses on death at the disposal of

sovereign power. It appears that Western biopolitics, which protects life in opposition to death in the West, requires sites where such binaries are intimately entangled, where death is the order of life. Those who form the pool from which the killable could be drawn would wear the quality of the colony and the plantation on the surface of their bodies—their race interchangeable with their less-than-human status—even *after* the colony has gained its independence and the plantation has reacquired the newly emancipated. While Agamben thinks the threshold of the inhuman due to extreme deprivation in the death camps, represented by the figure of the Muselmann, transcends race, Weheliye argues: “Far from exceeding race, though, this threshold represents an intense and excessive instantiation thereof, penetrating every crevice of political racialization.”²⁰ In order for life to be held in opposition to death in Western biopolitics, those racialized to wear the mark of the colony, the plantation, and the death camp, whether in the colony or in Europe itself, will have to live in conditions of the disavowed entanglement between life and death. Their death becomes the condition of protected life for others. The Americas as the meeting place of European settler colonialism and slavery revealed this entanglement early on, even while Europe could hide it for a certain time before its death camps. As such, Lisa Lowe shows that “social relations in the colonized Americas, Asia, and Africa were the condition of possibility for Western liberalism to think the universality of human freedom, however much freedoms for slaves, colonized, and Indigenous peoples were precisely exempted by that philosophy.”²¹

The context of the colony is one in which will and mastery operate on the distinction between the sovereign human and those who could be subjected to physical and social death,²² those whose existence marks the limits of the human because they do not possess the possibility of mastery. In her ground-breaking essay, Sylvia Wynter traces historical ways in which the social code differentiating Man from those who are sub- or nonhuman evolved from a religious to a secular framework.²³ With the rise of the state in Europe heading towards absolutism and the Enlightenment, Man held reason while his others were pushed into unreason, justifying European subjection of Indigenous people and Africans in the Americas to serfdom or slavery. As European empires spread, the use of unreason as a marker of those who could be subjected to violence served purposes of security and economy.

Because of this production of will and mastery of rational Man over his others, the colonial project became a civilizing one—*la mission civilisatrice* in the case of French rule in Indochina. Extending reason was always part of this project in the form of “native” education and the institutionalization of bureaucracy as goal-oriented and rationally organized government, be its goal the suppression of native resistance through war and executions or economic development through semienslaved labor for extraction of natural resources. Historiographic visualization allowed the white man to imagine his progress in time relative to those he conquered or captured. In a Hegelian manner, he made objective truth of such

progressive historiographic imagining through violence. When he killed, it was for the redemptive possibilities of a future for humanity. To oppose such historiographic truth was to err.

In Hegel's master-bondsman dialectic, the latter cannot gain mastery over existence by negating it, because it has already been negated by the master in that death match. In that first stage of this dialectic, the master negates his own existence and that of the other to assert the truth of his freedom in his mastery. In the second stage, the bondsman resists in vain. The bondsman's consciousness can only "cancel itself as self-existent," "for what is done by the bondsman is properly an action on the part of the master."²⁴ What damnation is this? Hegel completes his dialectic of freedom by proposing that "through work and labor, however, this consciousness of the bondsman comes to itself."²⁵ The last leg of this peculiar dialectic depends on labor because, through "desire restrained and checked, evanescence delayed and postponed," labor "shapes and fashions" the objectivity of the bondsman as his consciousness becomes "externalized and passes into the condition of permanence."²⁶ In other words, the bondsman can make himself truth through making things, free from the fear of death that imprisons both master and bondsman in the previous two stages of the dialectic. Though this seems to be the starting point for the Marxist labor theory of value, it invalidates revolution in favor of basically a prescription for the bondsman to stick to making objects and thus himself in his objectivity and objecthood. The bondsman, Hegel seems to say, can just lord over the things he makes.

Frantz Fanon would resist such wretched destiny. He distills the colonial condition in which once someone from the ranks of the colonized "realizes his humanity," he "begins to sharpen the weapons with which he will secure its victory,"²⁷ and such act would give birth to new nations.²⁸ Fanon's humanist meditation attempts to theorize what was already in play for anticolonial fighters. In the 1940s mobilization for anticolonial war in the three colonies that the French established in Vietnam, young men were called upon to fulfill their masculinity in expressing the sovereign will of the nascent nation through exactly that act of sharpening their weapons. And indeed, they sharpened those bamboo sticks called *tầm vong dạt nhọn*, followed by the quick acquisition of ever more sophisticated weaponry that would enable continuous but ultimately victorious war against first the French, then the Americans, from 1946 to 1975. While Fanon-like anticolonial response on the ground effectively dismisses Hegelian limits to the sovereignty of the enslaved, sharpening weapons against the colonizer does replicate death as the source of sovereignty and therefore of truth. The death match continues, and not necessarily just against the colonizer. Long before Benedict Anderson drew our attention to the modern nationalism that animated wars between the newly independent socialist states of Cambodia and Vietnam on the heels of their victories against the Americans,²⁹ it was already hard to miss the potency of nationalism as a mode of mobilization for the expression of collective sovereignty, most starkly since World

War II weakened European domination. Partha Chatterjee points out that such nationalism “produced a discourse in which, even as it challenged the colonial claim to political domination, it also accepted the very intellectual premises of ‘modernity’ on which colonial domination was based.”³⁰ Anticolonial nationalism did not necessarily advance decolonization. Ever mindful of extending relations, Glissant observes that “most of the nations that gained freedom from colonization have tended to form around an idea of power—the totalitarian drive of a single, unique root rather than around a fundamental relationship with the Other.”³¹ I have made the case elsewhere that the more racially inclusive intercolonial imagining that Brent Hayes Edwards has identified in 1920s Paris among the colonized from Africa, the Caribbean, and Indochina later turned into a racially exclusive imagining of the nation, “a national singular,” in the Indochinese anticolonial war.³²

Prefacing Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, Jean-Paul Sartre pushes Fanon’s exploration of violence in decolonization into a formula: “the colony must fight against itself,” because “to triumph, the national revolution must be socialist” to prevent a return to dependence on imperialists.³³ Using Fanon, Sartre turns into a blueprint the evident ways in which postcolonial nationalist *and* socialist governments had come into being through anticolonial violence and kept on exercising the sovereign power to kill those who now threatened the integrity of the racial nation or the party-issued socialist future. We see this time and time again since the French Revolution, where Mbembe identifies terror as “a way of marking aberration in the body politic.”³⁴ Fanonian violence, as formulated by Sartre, may unseat ruling classes, but it also replicates the remains of the Hegelian legacy in the Marxist insistence on labor as the source of truth-making and mastery in a deterministic movement of history. Terror in liberatory movements, the Enlightenment source of which is exemplified in Marxist truth-making, abolishes the “divisions among the man-made realm of freedom, the nature-determined realm of necessity, and the contingent in history.”³⁵

How do we count the dead in these events of domination and resistance, colonialism/neocolonialism, and the nationalist and/or Marxist-Leninist liberatory movements that fought against empire? If the metrics of death provide the epistemological basis of the Enlightenment humanist project, how do we distribute the body count? One estimate puts modern Vietnamese deaths due to political violence at nearly four million.³⁶ Of the more than five million Cambodian, Laotian, Vietnamese, and Indigenous dead in the so-called Vietnam War, how many should we attribute to the imperialist United States and its South Vietnamese allies, and how many to the forces of liberation—the National Liberation Front in South Vietnam, the Vietnamese Communist Party in North Vietnam, the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, and the Pathet Lao in Laos? We may need to pay attention to a language that skirts the grammar of capture and its measure of death in its life-affirming and truth-making function.

The violence in this mode of historiographic thinking became all too real for those who managed to survive wars of decolonization. State violence remained necessary indefinitely after the seizure of power and the declaration of independence from European or American masters. Communist parties in postcolonial states in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam sought to monopolize power within their territories and manage their command economies according to the truth of their devised historiography of class struggle for full human sovereignty according to that Enlightenment redemptive formulation. Not different from liberal modern government in the West with its Janus-faced bio/necropolitical governmentality, these ruling parties deprived, incarcerated, and killed people in the postcolonial socialist state in the name of the protection of life defined as the People's sovereignty, sought and won in anticolonial wars. In socialist Vietnam, the People's Public Security would eliminate those who resisted state power internally, and together with the People's Army, it would fight new forms of colonialism.

It might make us feel as if we are on the right side of history to trace such accounting of slaughter solely to the Western colonial/imperial violence that necessitated liberatory violence in the first place. No surprise such exercise would uncomfortably take us to earlier forms of racism, settler colonialism, or genocidal killings exercised by states that preceded European colonial conquest, case in point the precolonial Vietnamese state.³⁷ But then again, there is plenty of right to place much of modern carnage at the door of American wars of domination with lasting impact on the groups of people I study here, linking racialized spaces and visions of history within the United States and abroad.

At the moment of decolonization after World War II, and at the start of the Cold War, the world greeted new masters. The United States quickly established new forms of hegemony through global free trade and hot wars fought in the name of global peace and freedom. It rode its World War II victory to establish international free trade regimes like the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, which later transformed into the World Trade Organization. American goods and popular culture brought visions of capitalist plenitude to former colonies. Freedom was redefined as individualistic and capitalistic to oppose the communist liberation now championed by the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. Unsurprisingly, the American killing of Korean and Vietnamese persons became the means to deliver the Korean and Vietnamese people into the "free world." In contrast to European colonialism, with its violent eradication of budding nationalism in the colonies, the United States promoted the idea of national self-determination in each of its client states, gesturing to the 1941 Atlantic Charter. This new story of national freedom replaced that of the White Man's Burden, but it never hampered American pursuit of strategic interests in the looming Cold War by supplying weapons and money for the French to reclaim Indochina and Algeria, for example.

Yet, despite the modernity of nationalism with its claims to multiethnic states, the language of nations, including that of the American exceptionalist kind,

depended on the affect of ethnonationalism and its entailed exclusionist violence. New empire inherited old colonial modes of racism that divided the world along the Du Boisian color line,³⁸ as well as the myriad ethnoracial differentiations within the colony for the purpose of colonial governance.³⁹ The rise of the American empire, built on victory against fascism in both Europe and Asia-Pacific, restructured these old modes of racial differentiation into the rhetoric of modernization and freedom from various forms of oppression like tradition, European colonial domination, and communist tyranny. Lisa Yoneyama traces an “uneven geopolitical imaginary which maps out the modern world into those cultural spaces that are assumed to have progressed into embracing modern humanism and those that have not.”⁴⁰ Those that have not, meaning those lagging behind in the imagined historiography of progress, would be made to pay the price. Race enabled the identification of these spaces and people who not only had to pay for modern humanism but would be prevented from entering into such status of the human in a deadly circular logic. To make race work for strategic interests, new empire rode on the rise of ethnonationalism within each nation-state. Ethnoracial difference remained important to decisions about who lived and who died, on a scale of human worth based on civilizational progress.

Davorn Sisavath draws our attention to American remote killing through bombing campaigns in a secret war that turned Laos into a racialized “wasteland.”⁴¹ Just as drones have in recent years stepped up how American pilots can kill remotely from places of safety, Cambodia during the war became a “sideshow,” with secret bombing campaigns in which 539,129 million tons were dropped between March 1969 and July 1973 in operations “Menu,” “Freedom Deal,” and “Arclight.”⁴² Remote was a safer method of killing for those at the apex of human sovereignty, those most advanced in a progressive historiography. Alas, not all killing could be done remotely. At the height of the Vietnam War, there would be half a million American troops stationed in South Vietnam and bases of deployment in the region. Yet, the lives of American soldiers were already graded in racial biopolitical calculations. Black men disproportionately served and died in the military. This was a point of mobilization for Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Of the 246,000 men recruited under Lyndon Johnson’s “Project 100,000” between October 1966 and June 1969, 41 percent were African Americans, with a disproportionate combat presence at the height of the war.⁴³ Not only were African Americans overrepresented among those killed in action, Chicano fatal casualty rates in the war were also disproportionate to their percentage in the population at the time.⁴⁴

Outside of the human scale held to the lives of American GIs, Sisavath points out that the use of Hmong forces and others recruited by the United States to fight against the Pathet Lao insurgents demonstrated these racial taxonomies.⁴⁵ The American campaign of Vietnamization at the start of the 1970s continued on this scale of human worth when the United States withdrew troops and had South Vietnamese soldiers fight not only in South Vietnam but also in Cambodia

and Laos to reduce loss of American lives. And while the number of American soldiers who were killed in combat in Vietnam stood at 58,318, the number of South Vietnamese soldiers killed in action between 1960 and 1974 was roughly five times that.⁴⁶ In April of 2020, COVID deaths in the United States were said to have reached the number of American dead in the Vietnam War.⁴⁷ That war came to serve merely as a numerical measure of American casualties, while that cruel month of April went entirely unmarked in American media as the forty-fifth anniversary of its end. Sorrow, it seems, was rationed to the worthy. There was no mention of others on that sliding scale of human worth who fought and died because they were caught up in the pursuit of American imperial interests.

Long Bui argues that such logic of who should die at higher rates underlying the Vietnamization campaign depended on the absence of South Vietnamese as sovereign subjects during the war and later when they became refugees on American soil, exemplified by the otherwise incomprehensible lack of references to the Vietnamese except under the racist epithet of “gooks” in the American archive of the war.⁴⁸ Vietnamization in South Vietnam after American military intervention yielded not self-determination for South Vietnamese, but racialized refugees in the United States, typecast into expectations of their roles as the good refugees in model-minority expectations, or otherwise subjected to state incarceration, deportation, and general racist violence in America. Racialized allies in the extension of empire become racialized refugees.

In May 2021, as the Biden administration set an end date for the complete American withdrawal from Afghanistan and a bombing at an all-girl school claimed the lives of more than 80 children and injured another 150 Afghans, human rights worker Shaharзад Akbar registered how violence had already been normalized as a “forever pain of us Afghans.”⁴⁹ The same logic of Vietnamization echoed in Afghanization, and in all American wars waged in racialized spaces, within and without, populated by those placed on that scale of human worth underwritten by humanist historiographical progress. U.S. president Joe Biden contradicted his sanguine 2002 call for Americans to not be “fearful of the phrase ‘nation-building’”⁵⁰ with pronouncements in 2021 that “our mission in Afghanistan was never supposed to be nation-building.”⁵¹ But it was exactly the post-World War II standard model of nation-state sovereignty that the United States was imposing, along with judgment about the Afghan people’s capacity to maintain such sovereignty. At the end of failed imperial engagements, the lives of allies invariably lose their tenuous worth in considerations of imperial obligation. When asked in July of 2021 at the acceleration of the American drawdown if the United States was responsible for the loss of Afghan civilian life, Biden emphatically said “No. No. No. No. No. No. It’s up to the people of Afghanistan to decide what kind of government they want,” pointing out that “never had Afghanistan been a united country,” “not in all of its history.”⁵² Afghan time apparently stood still against the progress of humanist history.

As Afghan horrors unfolded in mid-August of 2021, Biden doubled down on the familiar racist gaslighting of allies who failed to deliver American interests by emphatically blaming the Afghans for having no “will to fight” for their own future despite being given “every tool they could need” by the United States.⁵³ In other words, again and again, America’s failed allies, cast as savages and puppets, were not capable of becoming human with any will to master their own fate, cutting themselves off from their future and thus from time itself. Zalmay Yawar, who worked as a translator for National Public Radio, expressed anger that Biden blamed Afghans for not fighting for their country when more than 66,000 Afghan soldiers and 47,000 civilians lost their lives, his cousins among them. “We are just numb from all the losses,” he said.⁵⁴ Criticized for his lack of empathy for Afghans who were caught in some kind of hell, Biden finally said that those who worked with Americans were “equally important,” then added “almost” under his breath.⁵⁵ This *almost* had a precedent in a younger Senator Joe Biden’s position on Vietnamese refugees at the end of that American engagement: “I will vote for any amount for getting the Americans out. I don’t want it mixed with getting the Vietnamese out.”⁵⁶ Even as the racist logic of empire reasserted itself, American officials furiously denied any historical returns. On August 15, the day American embassy personnel were being evacuated by Chinook helicopters against the backdrop of Taliban forces entering Kabul, U.S. secretary of state Antony Blinken insisted on network television that “this is manifestly not Saigon.”⁵⁷ What manifested were the haunted grounds of empire.

This logic of the gradation of human worth in war zones like the former Indochina also continued to manifest itself in the militarization of state violence and racist movements within the United States. As the Vietnam War became unpopular and antiwar movements overlapped or joined the civil rights movement on the streets of 1960s America, policing became increasingly brutal through the use of military hardware and tactics deployed in war. In *Tyranny Comes Home*, Christopher Coyne and Abigail Hall revisit the “boomerang effect,” in which the experimentation of coercion “over distant populations” in foreign military adventures was imported to expand the scope of state violence against segments of the American domestic populations.⁵⁸ Brutal policing has become part of the criminal justice system of a carceral state directed at those relegated to the status of the existentially surplus, particularly through the War on Drugs declared by Richard Nixon in 1971. On its fiftieth anniversary, National Public Radio quoted Nixon adviser John Ehrlichman in a 1994 interview: “We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the [Vietnam] War or Black,” “but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and Blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities.”⁵⁹ Black and Brown men and youths continued to be shot by the police by the time of the trial of police officer Derek Chauvin for murdering George Floyd in front of a crowd pleading for his life.

There is no question of how the racialized gradation of human worth operates not only in our daily life in this republic, but also in continuity with the racist histories of the colony and the plantation playing out in wars abroad. Relatedly, in *Bring the War Home*, Kathleen Belew begins with a photographic image of Vietnam War veteran Louis Beam in white garb burning a boat marked “U.S.S. Vietcong” at a 1981 Klan rally in Santa Fe. Belew follows Beam’s use of his Vietnam War story of killing “between twelve and fifty-one ‘communists’” to “militarize a resurgent Ku Klux Klan and to wage a white power revolution.”⁶⁰ Belew shows how upon their return, a small percentage of white Vietnam veterans, who felt betrayed by an American public that had turned against the war, became instrumental in the militarization of the white supremacist movement, while some veterans of color turned to activism for racial equality.⁶¹ Through shedding blood and killing racialized populations far from home, these soldiers learned the color line’s historiography and brought it home with them.

TIME VISUALIZED: RACIAL HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE ECONOMIC USES OF PROGRESS

Arendt points out that “such a thing as progress of mankind as a whole” was unknown prior to the seventeenth century but “became an almost universally accepted dogma” by the nineteenth, with its faith in “the realm of freedom that could be the end of history.”⁶² Rather than salvation into the kingdom of God, man would redeem himself into his own telos of human mastery. Nicholas Mirzoeff argues that such narrativization of history requires the act of visualization associated with the sovereign as the seer and hence the subject of history, modeled on plantation surveillance.⁶³ For the forces of progress in their day after the French Revolution, representations now “had to be located in History.”⁶⁴ This temporal visualization has come to animate our sense of past, present, and future, as well as our determination of who would constitute the human. Racialized differences place groups of people at different points on a trajectory of historical time that progresses ever closer to human mastery.

Economically, the logic of historiographic racialization continues to enable global capitalist undertakings at home in America and at offshored sites. As a continuation of the ways in which racialized people in the colonies were worked in the mines and the plantations, Henry Giroux welcomes us “to the new era of disposability in which market-driven values peddle policies that promote massive amounts of human suffering and death for millions of human beings.”⁶⁵ Kevin Bales estimates the enslaved number “twenty-seven million” in the world today.⁶⁶ This too is a practice that has its roots in the enslavement of peoples of color, even if the legal institutions and the actual groups being enslaved have changed. Cedric Robinson has long drawn our attention to how capitalism, from its beginnings, has made use of preexisting modes of differentiation, what he calls “racial

capitalism.”⁶⁷ The use and production of racialized, gendered, and sexualized difference continues and intensifies with our era of flexible accumulation and finance capitalism. Producers look for populations that embody docile and dexterous labor, and find them in women from places like Vietnam, where women make up about 80 percent of workers in textile and garment manufacturing.⁶⁸ The creation of a surplus labor force depends on racial and gendered difference. Neferti Tadiar points out the connection between the creation of a surplus labor force through land dispossession and contemporary finance capitalism as taking place, not just in one economy, but across the global North-South divide in, “the conversion of rural land into capital through privatization and marketization/ industrialization” that “creates a newly ‘freed’ proletariat for export-oriented manufacturing and agricultural industries, which in turn fuel debt-financed consumption in the postindustrial North.”⁶⁹ Because these differentiated people enter into capitalist calculations as a surplus labor force, value is extracted in a manner that treats their bodies as disposable, quickly wearing out parts thereof in the production process.

With the intensification of global finance capitalism since the 1970s, land has become a premier commodity for speculation. In Vietnam since its opening to global capital in the 1990s, millions of hectares of farmland and dwellings have been appropriated by either the government or private developers with government help. The speculative value of land based on future projection of its monetary value if converted into industrial parks or tourist resorts feeds the feverish pace of land appropriation. The people who reside on such land are evicted because they are an encumbrance to the land, whose speculative value requires that residents be cast off as though they were human refuse. Their lives do not qualify for redemption in a conversion into humanist or capitalist value.

RUINED TIME AND TIME’S RUINS

As dogma, such humanist historiography animated oppression and responses globally through the better part of two centuries. Though fragmented by the very tumult it created, this structuring of human worth continues to offer ways to determine who lives, who dies, who is left behind, and who enters into a future. The conclusion of the Vietnam War did not just bring to an end to the era and aura of American invincibility, it also put liberatory socialist revolutions to the task of delivering the future it had promised. After victories against American imperialism in the mid-1970s, the wars between socialist Vietnam, Cambodia, and China, mass killings in Cambodia, ethnic expulsion and mass political incarceration in Vietnam, and refugees dying on boats and along jungle routes, filling and turned away from refugee camps in neighboring countries, had all darkened that promissory future. Exploring the Grenada Revolution that followed, David Scott refers to our time in the wake of shipwrecked revolutions as “an *absolute* ruin, the very ruin of time as a source of possibility, the absolute end of a temporal journey.”⁷⁰ It seems

we, Enlightenment's children by inheritance or by force, have been jettisoned from that hopeful history. Yet, even at time's end, the future is not foreclosed for all. Humanist time may be ruined, but time's ruins continue to operate differentially, unequally, most notably for the conscientious consumers and their billionaire saviors versus the teeming billions who live on at the edge of the human in zones marked out for the laboring or existentially surplus.

Global capital can still marshal this progressive historiography that for so long organized our experience of time in order to create zones of lag between the global metropolises and their peripheries, between the urban and the rural in each nation-state, inhabitants of which could be subjected to regimes and accompanying social worlds that produce gradations of the human. The idea of progress operates in modes of differentiation between the already-human, the expectantly human, and the unhuman in gradations of value. It organizes the flexible mode of accumulation that relies on the extraction of biological time from certain kinds of disposable people, while neoliberal governmental policies assist to the extent that outcomes would serve the interests of the state and its officials. Forward-looking national policies of industrialization and modernization in the "emerging economies" of the former Third World dovetail with the future time that bestows speculative value to dispossessed regions and people being reincorporated into the global capitalist system. For gain, even time's ruins can be used to organize human suffering.

ALMOST FUTURES: LIVING BESIDE PROGRESSIVE HISTORY

This book frets at the idea of humanist sovereignty through progress as it operates to structure the lives and deaths of many. The modern march of humanist mastery has manifested in conquest, domination, liberation, and revolution. The collapse of this humanist time in mass death without delivery of the promised future has given rise to its fragmented deployment in neoliberal governance, finance capitalism, and post-Fordist production and consumption. These processes cannot be reduced to one unified set of historical conditions, but nevertheless are connected by the deployment of humanist progress in overlapping contexts. What of the human as an ontological category as its ruins are used in the contemporary politics and economics of life and death? And what kind of epistemological considerations could help us access different modes of being in a time that feels like a slow end to the world?

I begin my reflections here as a refugee. This starting point does not seek to privilege the refugee condition as either exceptional or universal, only in kinship with others who also must live through loss and endings because they are dehumanized in humanist regimes of economy and politics. I hope to learn from the people around me a kind of refuge that does not always exact from us the sacrifice of all there is in time in exchange for a future threadbare of promise and rife with

violence. And maybe in return, I could in some small way attend to the discarded, broken, discounted, killed, as the human is deployed and redeployed to bar many of us from sovereign futures. Among humanist conditions that dehumanize people, refugees likely have gone through many at once or in succession. Vietnamese refugees had been colonized, participating in and/or becoming victims of liberation, and racialized in colonial, imperial, and country-of-settlement national structures. Attending to ways of being among refugees generates methods that make visible humanist violence and forge connections between groups beyond refugees otherwise incommensurate in their histories or degrees of dehumanization.

Recuperation of the human has always been upheld as a strategy to save refugees. Liisa Malkki argues it was sovereign nation-states, in what she calls the “national order of things,” that eroded universalist human rights in the institutionalization of the international refugee regime in the post–World War II era.⁷¹ Yet the relationship between national interests and universalism might be a lot more entwined. Mai-Linh Hong shows how refugees are disempowered by the very international refugee regime that purportedly safeguards their human rights, when it “conserves resources for Global North nations by inhibiting refugee migration,” and “masks and sustains itself through humanitarian narratives that valorize the regime as care.”⁷² Nation-states as well as other domestic and international entities deploy the universalism associated with refugee rights as human rights for political gains from gatekeeping to other ideological, strategic, and economic concessions in intergroup or international relations. As such, the refugee figure does not operate in opposition to humanist sovereignty. The refugee figure as less-than-human is produced by a humanist regime.

Alongside this institutionalized figure, refugees themselves differ in how they experience violence within related but incommensurate historical contexts. Kabul indeed was not Saigon, even when the American empire and refugee-producing conditions connected them. Dwelling in this connection requires we push against an ethical obliviousness that cannibalizes others in the creation of another universal figure based on ourselves. Mindful also of incommensurability in responses to dehumanizing conditions, I recognize a kinship in insights that scholars offer from across groups of refugees and other marginalized communities because they feel familiar to me. Many Vietnamese, including my family or myself, are far from blameless, because we inherit tangled legacies as participants and victims in humanist violence. I would hope that methods attentive to other ways of knowing and being beside humanist sovereignty would allow us to feel such relations beyond equivalencies without suppressing the ethical accountability attached to each of those locations.

To enter into such relations is to be wary of easy recognition of oppositional categories like domination and liberation. As Wynter’s master code substitutes chains of binaries for Man and not-Man, it bestows intelligibility on opposition against itself. In other words, resistance is only recognizable as such because it has been

incorporated into the framing of the master narrative. This explains the insistence on mastery in modes of liberation against domination. One master is substituted for another in the same code of sovereignty while oppression is born anew.

Such oppositional logic within incorporation and substitution depends on the politics of representation—as in presence and voice. Kevin Quashie warns against the reductionist move to “understand black culture through a lens of resistance” that is itself racist because it “thwarts other ways of reading” that would be attentive to the inner life of a person in a “sovereignty of quiet.”⁷³ Reading Lucille Clifton’s poem consisting of quotidian verbs like *live, love, flee, fight, mourn, weep, and die*, in response to an inquiry of whether “the Negro sheds tears” addressed to W. E. B. Du Bois by one Alvin Borgquest in 1905, Quashie argues that the poem “recognizes the capaciousness of being” and, hence, “worldmaking” in an infinity of time with the repetition of “they do” at the end of the poem.⁷⁴ The poem refutes death’s truth as all encompassing, a critique that has been leveled at Afropessimism for centering death in Black being.⁷⁵ Likewise, death is not the encompassing truth of being for the people I bring to these pages. But neither would it be exactly in opposition to the truth of the master authorized by violence, because that would require countervailing violence as a singularly meaningful response. At the end of her pathbreaking inquiry into this master code of the human, Wynter calls for a Césairian poetic knowledge in which “A can be not-A,”⁷⁶ permitting “dual descriptive statements and thereby of our modes/genres of being human.”⁷⁷ Even in that thorniest of pairings, human can be not-human. Expansive genres of being would need to suspend binaries of reason and unreason, thought and action, presence and absence, past and future. Being beside modern humanism necessarily suspends ascriptive meaning as the objective truth of the master or of the opposition to his sovereign power. Eve Sedgwick contemplates the preposition *beside* as possibly embodying “a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping, and other relations.”⁷⁸ These possible acts echo the quotidian verbs in Clifton’s poem that make worlds and thereby simultaneous truths out of sovereignty. To elude the deadly and singular sovereign logic operating through racial historiographic difference across the globe within necro/biopolitics and capitalism, we may have to engage ways of being beside mastery, in a sense of time that does not beeline for a humanist future.

Working from a refugee location, Ma Vang speaks of a Hmong epistemology of fugitivity in the “permanence of running for the refugee, even in refuge, such that the figure unsettles the nation-state, democracy, and liberal empire as well as knowledge formation.”⁷⁹ I see refugees and those who are differentially subjected in humanist sovereignty elude and engage with it at this paradoxical site. They are like Fred Moten’s fugitive, marked by the double inability to “either intend the law or intend its transgression.”⁸⁰ Disarming the great humanist story requires looking, listening, and feeling for those acts that seem inadequate to the task of

opposition. I want to be able to sense these ways of being without extending our individualist humanist moral imperatives to the people involved. I am not advocating we accept the dehumanizing economic and political practices that produce devastating truths about these people and subject them to harm. But perhaps we can be taken into their capacities for ways of knowing that do not stake a claim on the exclusive truth of being human imagined in terms of mastery and progress. I am not saying the broken must never fight. But humanist recuperation should not be the only intelligible strategy in the murderous field of economy and politics. Straining to find the integrity of the human subject in the politics of representing the truths of who we are sometimes blinds us to acts of ghosting, manifesting, dissembling, reassembling, remembering, and even forgetting so that lives can be lived, and sometimes so that worlds and times can go on past their end.

The future sold to the people you find here was one they were told they did not yet deserve. What they made for themselves were *almost futures*, “free of memory and hope,” as Borges writes of the dead person whom we already rob of everything.⁸¹ I want to be able to sense the things that can rise from that *almost*, the not-yet of future, that perpetual lag in imagined time beyond its deadly deployments, when folks can still be and do and live. This book, then, attends to those who are from but not of the human, who require alternative ontologies of the human in the ruins of humanist time, and whose acts beside sovereignty require an epistemological openness that allows for slippage in reading that can elude the duality of an identity-based approach to humanity and history, however dialectical. As such, you find here a slippery usage of primarily some nouns and pronouns. The most noticeable of them is *we*. I do not know if by *we* I mean those like me who have been refugees and racialized in a certain way, or a contingent collective that tries to appeal to allied folks. I think I sometimes use *we* in an inclusive and oppositional sense at once, as in “we are you” and “we versus you.” That failure to stay with the truth of who we are seems a little more generative. The word *human* will appear as itself, but not always. Being but not. Life and death but not. Future but not. In his *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant seeks ways to relate to others by going astray, “because the thought of errantry is also the thought of what is relative, the thing relayed as well as the thing related.”⁸² My errant list includes *Vietnamese* and *refugee*, among other nouns that identify. Refugee but less and more, in conditions that overlap, diverge, intersect, relate, succeed, precede other names, locations, and times. These designations can all be qualified in that they are not just themselves but include others besides themselves in relation to themselves before or after the war, past or future. My work here is “not to capture something or someone,” as Katherine McKittrick writes of Black stories, “but to question the analytical work of capturing, and the desire to capture, something or someone.”⁸³ I am trying to imagine a politics that skirts ontological or historiographic truths, and a kind of knowing beyond the universal as exemplary and generalizable in a logic based in sameness and difference. As such, I do not aim to generalize the

experience of Southeast Asians, Vietnamese, Vietnamese Americans, Vietnamese diasporics, or Vietnamese refugees. The portability of their insights instead might lie in that slippage that gives way to moments of recognition in the web of relations between disparate stories, people, and times.

Affect seems a promising detour from identity and duality in being-nonbeing, subject-object, self-other, presence-absence, material-spirit, means-ends, that allows the sovereign subject to be thought and institutionalized. Feelings and states of being demand ways of recognition that go beyond our habitual ontological stance. Sedgwick muses about recognition, not as a tool of authority, but as a mode of tautological learning that eludes the identity, hence duality fixing in place categories of being. This is how Sedgwick comes to include Buddhist hermeneutics, which despite its repeated visitations in the West still causes discomfort here regarding its ontological fuzziness, not to mention its relegation to the theologically and politically suspect nether region of nihilism in its supposed negation of being.⁸⁴ Sedgwick makes me think about how recognition demands postures of intimacy and relationality, in other words, a tender attentiveness that is uncertain and hesitant because it remains open to iterations and resonances across time. The grief in an act of gathering in the street by those dispossessed of their land by speculative capital might have to be read as poetics addressed to what had already transpired in the speculative yet-to-come. The lament of factory workers in a state of exploitation and fragmentation might ask to be heard beyond its time frame into the realm of future reassembling. A recent painting of those executed long ago in revolutionary truth-making might ask to be seen in iterations with other images to bend time around foundational acts of violence. The slightest flickering of shadows in refugee fictional stories might feel as if they can conjure more time when time has run out. And refugee forgetting somehow demands to be remembered in our very being simultaneously in and out of history.

In my early years, my mother would light incense at night and make me stand next to her to recite a short prayer that began with calling on the name Quán Thế Âm Bồ Tát, the bodhisattva of compassion known by many names including Avalokiteshvara. I was lost to any religious practice beyond childhood, except to now feel the invocation of Quán Thế Âm Bồ Tát as the pang of missing my mother, who passed some time ago. It is the recitation of that name that brings me into my mother's presence, and thereby into compassion with others including the part of myself that is not accessible through will and reason. When my eldest sister passed away in Vietnam, the family sought Buddhist rites for her in California. We chanted the Heart Sutra three times in a semi-impenetrable Sino-Vietnamese sprinkled with twice-transliterated Sanskrit. The chanting sped up with every round and the words chased each other into incantations. While the incantations made rote the assertion that "form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form,"⁸⁵ what I remember feeling was hearing many more voices beside our own, easing us into a darkness that felt expansive. That

capaciousness seemed to elude the doctrine of identity and difference I relied on to understand my world, trained as I was in reason. Feeling the dark in that instance opened me up to an intimacy with others who, alive or dead, were/are/will be related to me in ways I did not yet fully know, just as passion could open us to compassion unsnared by the dialectic of mastery and enslavement.

I have found that family and personal memory can crack open the door to being in the world that exists in the slippages and hence relations between identities in ontological categories. Y  n L   Espiritu has opened up a new path of critical refugee studies through listening for “unsaid things by relying on other senses such as feelings and emotions,” and looking for “the hidden political forces within the site of intimate domestic and familial interaction.”⁸⁶ It is the intimacy of knowledge from these sites that connects refugee practices to war, militarist, imperial, national, and transnational dynamics. Pushing back against the thesis that the mass killings in Cambodia were a discrete “something that happened over there,” Lina Chhun foregrounds her own and her parents’ connections to the entangled histories of revolution and empire as well as refugee memory.⁸⁷ Such intimate and locational method can ground us in time and circumstance while it shows us the relations beyond our spot in history. Vinh Nguyen offers the idea of “refugeetude” that conceptualizes “refugee subjects and the relationalities that extend beyond the parameters of refugeeness, generating connections to past, present, and future forms of displacement.”⁸⁸ This non-finitude in the condition of the refugee appears in a story Nguyen tells of finding an image of his mother in a Thai refugee camp in a *Los Angeles Times* clipping during the first hour of his visit to the Southeast Asian Archive housed at the University of California, Irvine. That instance called forth a host of words and things that pushed Nguyen to step out of “a logic unable to accommodate immateriality,” which had been part of his formal training, because he felt haunted in that encounter by a past that was “not even past.”⁸⁹ Nguyen gestures to autoethnography as a way to that past. Even as his mother “looks happy” in the photo, Nguyen finds the moment haunted by melancholic loss. Saitya Das points to melancholy, not as a pathological condition of failed mourning, as Freud would have it, but “as philosophical attunement and which as such is inseparably connected with profound ethico-political questions concerning responsibility and justice, with work and play and with a possible phenomenological disclosure of the world as a whole.”⁹⁰ I want to explore this melancholy in iterations as a method that can elude the sameness and difference in duality and teleological cognition underwriting humanist sovereignty and progressive historiography. This requires a demeanor of melancholy in both the language of narration and in a philosophical posture that does not presume to deliver stable objective knowledge. The care in the intimacy we feel leads us not to an aestheticization of the misfortune of others when the others are close, when the others are often us.

If Freudian psychoanalysis excavates challenges to the formation and maintenance of the ego, it is because it emerged historically from within the field of the

humanist sovereign subject. Melancholia is pathologized precisely because the ego of the melancholic is read as being “overwhelmed by the object.”⁹¹ In Hegelian terms, the melancholic would be read as unable to maintain the objective truth of a sovereign subject in a dyadic relationship of domination over the other as object. By way of historical contextualization, Benjamin reaches back to an earlier time before the consolidation of modern humanist sovereignty shaped our understanding of pathology in relation to melancholy. His study of the Baroque sorrow play as allegory shows the crisis underlying the subject-object duality within humanist sovereignty. The sovereign in these Baroque plays acts like Freud’s modern melancholic in that he is haunted in an incessant return to his lost self in a world emptied out of meaning, but here because he flounders in his exercise of his sovereign power to act under the weight of an arbitrary state of exception no longer held aloft in God’s grace, and therefore irredeemable in any stable symbolic representation.⁹² The Baroque centuries of early colonial plunder, the slave trade, political and religious strife, and crisis of sovereignty and representation were the grounds from which emerged European Enlightenment humanism. Now, in our ruins of the modern humanism that had risen to bear such state of exception in God’s absence, maybe we can return to that moment of crisis for insights in those troubled roots of sovereignty. Maybe we can now move away from the modern symbolic representation of sovereign selves in a redemptive future, towards an allegorical mode of recognition whereby things and meanings can be connected in an open number of possible assemblages, however transitory. Rather than guiding the melancholic towards an extraction and replenishment of the ego away from loss, we can stay lost with those who are lost. We can stay undone so that we can be connected to others who might have also been undone.

A MAP OF AFTERS

The book does not aim to investigate the latest developments in global investment and protest, work and labor organizing, the visual art, literature, or memorialization. Instead, it explores significant moments in Vietnam’s neoliberalization and incorporation into global capitalism, as well as relevant moments in American entanglement with Vietnam and refugees. Neither does this book follow a linear progression from past to present and future. The chapters circle back to issues of sovereignty in historiography and how vulnerable people live with the accompanying catastrophes in overlapping contexts of ruination in the various afters: after marketization and the attendant political neoliberalization, after the revolution, after the end of war, after the exhaustion of time’s promise. Those who grieved, laughed, witnessed, and conjured time in these afters make us see and perhaps feel the state of exception that reveals the foundational violence at the limit of sovereignty. I hope to preserve the integrity of different contexts and avoid flattening the experiences and ways of being among refugees and those displaced from their

homes by speculative capital, workers on the global assembly line, or those killed in colonial and revolutionary violence. There are, however, resonances we can listen for amongst these people who were barred from humanist sovereignty while subjected to its violence. To do so, we need to approach those different locations in the ways they might be connected through larger processes or through the grief that holds them in relation to each other. The chapters propose we move with the poetic, the allegorical, the iterant, the haunted, and the untimely as responses to the interdictions of the human.

Chapter 1 examines the land commodification in Vietnam during the first two decades of this century, when accelerating speculative capitalism rendered whole communities into rubble and treated inhabitants as refuse. The moment could be marked as late-socialist in a global postsocialist moment, when the state still retained the apparatuses of monopolistic rule by the Communist Party but operated like a developmentalist state in conjunction with transnational capitalism through the promotion of neoliberal freedoms for investors, producers, and consumers. The state not only encouraged domestic and transnational investment through the promotion of industrialization and modernization, it also carried out the forced eviction of residents from their homes or farms so land could enter into lucrative speculation based on its imagined future value once developed.

I follow the responses of those displaced after eviction. I acknowledge but do not focus on the more traditional form of large protests that depended on voicing by members within a polity, not because this type of protest swiftly met with state suppression, but because such demonstration of sovereignty could do little to accomplish its purported rational goal of perverting the very basis of neoliberal freedoms made available to the investor-subject by the state. Another form of land protest appeared between 2007 and 2010, when people who lost their homes dressed in white and briefly gathered in different locations with illegible signs and pictures of their dead. Watching these brief and mobile gatherings that included short marches, I am reminded that acts can engage images, evoke emotions, and impart an alternative knowledge. These acts did not demonstrate political power through the self-evident truth of a group's presence and hence of their demand for representation in a polity. Because such humanist recuperation would not have been possible in the face of devastating loss that evokes the end of their world, I read them for a poetic knowledge that opens to relations after Césaire and Glissant.

As these marchers take refuge in grief, we are called to their grief, which resonates with that of refugees and others displaced by socialist dispossession, French colonialism, or Vietnamese settler colonialism in preceding eras. Such resonance need not conflate and equate these multiple histories that may remain opaque to one another, nor forget the accountability attached to each of those locations. In this way, the marchers could take us to tentative relations, not in the wholeness of the humanist subject unavailable to them, but in the whole of time beyond the supremacy of future gains to be redeemed in speculative capitalism.

Chapter 2 explores the responses of Vietnamese women workers to their treatment around the turn of the century, when Vietnam became fully integrated into global production. The self-proclaimed socialist state promoted global capital's use of Vietnamese women as a source of disposable labor, thereby barring them from the symbolic order of the masculinist proletarian subject of progressive history that had fueled revolutions throughout the twentieth century. Nor could these women enter into the freedom embodied by the neoliberal consumer. They were not paid enough to buy products that urban middle-class women could afford while capital used the idea of progress to assign pay according to gradations of human worth in temporal-spatial zones differentiating between the metropolitan West and a place like Vietnam on its periphery, and between the urban and the rural within Vietnam itself. Yet these women contested their devaluation as a surplus labor force, making visible their bodies as the site of temporal-spatial subjection by financialized capitalist production as well as its attendant neoliberal state discipline under a late-socialist regime.

These women were subjected to a fracturing process because global production treated their bodies as usable in their parts like keen eyesight or nimble fingers, and because neither the late-socialist state nor capital offered them humanist symbolic integrity. Their acts and cultural narratives in such condition demanded a different mode of reading, not for the wholeness of body or subjectivity, but for the fragments that might elude capture in the historiography of progress. These women's low-waged work at the turn of this century recalls the history of the "coolie" that characterized the experience of Vietnamese refugees who entered the global racialized division of labor in the United States and elsewhere two decades earlier. Although distant in time and geography, modes of recognition attentive to what might connect their conditions could also allow us to be open to potential reassemblages of meaning and being. Prompted by Benjamin's treatment of allegory as a mode of intimation in a fractured world, I read the perilous positions, practices, and woeful utterances of women workers, in juxtaposition to an at-once comedic and sorrowful fictional story about characters in a similar social location. Allegorical schemata allow us to undo the symbolic representation of humanist sovereignty that failed them, in order to see their fracturing within postrevolutionary ruined time and the capitalist time of ruins operating on their bodies. The task may be not to reassemble fragments into a human whole, but to allow human fragments to be connected otherwise, perhaps taking refuge in a future of yet-to-be-known assemblages.

Chapter 3 interrogates visual memorialization and witnessing of modern political killings in the name of liberation. I start with displays of actual human remains from the Khmer Rouge mass killings of the 1970s and images of people about to be executed during the North Vietnamese Land Reform campaign of the 1950s. To win and maintain sovereignty against colonial and imperial domination, revolutionary authority identifies and eradicates aberration as error from within its

ranks. I ask if efforts to recuperate the human subject from the abyss of political killing would not reproduce the life/death and truth/error divide in Enlightenment formulations of the human that brutalized the colonized and fueled liberatory violence in the first place. Memorials like the Vietnamese-erected displays of Khmer Rouge atrocities in Cambodia put viewers in the present, at a safe distance from past errors of mass murder to absolve us from being implicated and to reaffirm our humanist values of truth and life. Instead, in viewing a series of photographic images taken on site by a Soviet photographer of the trial and execution of a landowner in the North Vietnamese Land Reform campaign, together with a later painting by a Vietnamese artist depicting the same event as looping iterations of one another, I suggest that this haunting quality of return implicates us in spirals of modern violence and the required production of truths about those who must be killed. Because the liberatory formulation of the human predicates itself on the linearity of temporal rupture and redemption to win national sovereignty, I suggest we contemplate what remains of the murdered that returns in errant iterations. Errant because with each return, we run astray of the foundational sovereignty of the kill. If the past cannot be undone, our witnessing of it may yet trouble the truth of who we all are, assigned to us in the calamity of sovereign violence.

Deeply troubled by George Floyd's murder, witnessed and brought to us by Darnella Frazier through her video, I reconsider our viewing of an iconic photographic image from the Vietnam War, to contemplate how we might bear witness to killings. As refugees, we are asked to produce testimonies that will qualify us for asylum. These, in order to be legible, must conform to the Enlightenment epistemological transparency of representation. As such, they cannot register the witnessing that refugees know from self-bearing their history. It is the kind of witnessing that demands our own dissolution at the threshold of the knowability of self and other, of life and death, truth and error, of the future and the past. In an approach that hovers at this threshold, we can bear witness for others like us, unlike us, only when we come near our own representational, emotional, and sometimes corporeal undoing. Rather than trying to represent the dead, the maimed, the marked, what we witnessed in the past must loop in how we feel now in our own body into an intimate, relational, and tentative state of being to contend with the terrible humanist truth that guarantees its redemption only in a determinate future time. This may not seem like refuge, but it is what witnesses can offer from the place of catastrophes.

If the Fanonian colonized must win their sovereignty in the anticolonial nation, what happens to them when their postcolonial nation is foreclosed? Chapter 4 delves into Vietnamese-language writing that seeks to extend time across the violent closure of their sovereignty when South Vietnam perished in 1975. I read three short stories by Vietnamese American refugee writers, in continuity with a South Vietnamese story that portends the death of that nation, within the global context of the commodity phantasmagoria connected to the accelerated finance capitalism

of the decades since the 1970s. I begin with questions of genealogy to explore how we might be able to read across historical rupture stories from South Vietnam before the end of the war and the refugee community after. There is a significant body of Vietnamese-language refugee writing that contains ghostly and occult elements anchored in material objects, haunting the characters therein. Refugee literature in the first decades of settlement is often read through the lens of exile, a scholarly endeavor Timothy August likens to “distant reportage.”⁹³ Such reading feeds the assumption that refugee is but a transitory state awaiting either assimilation into the dominant language and society, or contestation from a second generation better schooled to recognize forms of inequality. Far from just nostalgic and fleeting, this body of Vietnamese-language refugee literature spans more than four decades thus far while it contemplates the politics and ethics of living across endings.

I read the haunting in these stories as a response to the lack of South Vietnamese recourse to anticolonial sovereignty due to occupation by American military forces and later the defeat of South Vietnam by North Vietnam, as well as refugees’ lack of access to American sovereignty due to racist exclusion. In the impossibility of sovereignty, these tales take refuge in the feminine occult, sublime, and aporetic, and the queer sociality that will allow life, albeit haunted life, to continue on beyond its violent end, alternative to the bankrupt reproductive nation. We are invited by this body of fiction to explore the ethics raised in the impasse between self and other, the living and the dead, without engaging in a symbolic recuperation of the humanist subject of either national or universal history. If the previous chapters propose modes of engagement that are open to the poetic, the allegorical, the iterant as responses to the dissolution of the human in economy and politics, this chapter reads for the haunted refuge that gives time when there is no more time.

Chapter 5 is written much more explicitly from my own location in family and refugee history in Vietnam and the United States. By way of refugee remembering and forgetting in the convulsions of Vietnam as one of the catastrophes that precipitated our global time of ruin, I look into how triumphant or melancholic reorganization of memory by the Vietnamese state, the American one, and groups therein discount refugee knowledge when such knowledge can only be understood in humanist cognition of mastery and capture. I believe the location of Vietnamese refugees can elucidate the operation of racial hierarchy, nation, and empire as formations that draw on humanist sovereignty. I believe Vietnamese war foes and their descendants can work with each other in new alliances. I believe allied and coalitional politics should be pursued amongst groups differentially marginalized in American history. But what I do not believe is that these relationships can be forged simply on the basis of humanist progressive politics as though we all had equal access to these ideals. As such, I do not use Vietnamese refugee memory to validate a progressive political project when such project issues from racial or class privilege at the center of empire. Engaging feminist critiques, I reread *Antigone*

against Hegel's promotion of reconciliation as the mechanism that dialectically moves human history forward to greater universality.

The history of universalist attainment has thus far been borne by conquest, slavery, dispossession, and mass murder. I see instead the irreconcilability in the tragic as a mode of expression and being, and push its possibility in an ethics towards those who are relegated to the past. For refugees, reconciliation becomes antipolitical because it jettisons them from political exchange by a presentism that flattens their history and marks them out to be overcome. Instead, I learned from my mother, whose condition of aphasia and dementia allowed her to insist on a time when the people she loved lived again. In a moment of our interaction towards the end of her life, she shattered my distance in learned objectivity within a history that annihilated so much of our shared past. Against ableist assumptions, her condition taught me how to take refuge in the untimely, refusing history as accomplished, to allow the dead to live on when they, like her, had lost a future in which to reach the humanist telos.

Viewed in the hope that holds aloft progressive politics, these responses by people who were denied full human status undoubtedly appear ephemeral, abject, failing, pathetic, or even pathological. To embrace these acts requires a readiness to undergo a dissolution of our own frames of reference, hence ourselves. This is a project about learning to be attentive to the connections that tie together ways of being in people and what they do, across incommensurate but entangled histories. I search for the possibility of being and feeling, momentarily or endlessly bereaved, that constitutes those almost futures beside the financial and political cannibalization of both life and death.

AT WORLD'S END

This introduction begins with the election of Donald Trump. It ends when Americans enter the 2024 election cycle with trepidations as unprecedented indictments of a former president acknowledge mortal perils to electoral democracy itself. Half the country seems ready to abandon popular sovereignty through majoritarian rule to defend white supremacy as demographics shift. The other half desperately wishes to remember Trump as a glitch from which we can recover and resume our forward march as a nation. Why assail the idea of progress now, when it is already under siege as populist, white supremacist, anti-immigrant, antirefugee movements around the globe are seizing power and clamoring to promote assaults against women, queer folk, Blacks, and people of color? Why discredit universal humanism now, when autocracy and great power conflict intensify and so many more people become refugees? Why question reason now, when Q-Anon rewrites the world in free-fall resentment, when some mass shooting awaits around any corner as we denounce one another in moral indignation, and when human-made climate ravages this earth to the point of no return?

As an Asian woman of refugee history, I am gripped by the same fear, sadness, and rage. How can I not be, watching routine police beatings and killings of Black and Brown folks, daily mass shootings, and some kind of open season on the most vulnerable Asians? To my devastation, the Trumpian turn among many Vietnamese in Vietnam and the refugee community has incinerated some of my dearest personal relationships. Much of this turn relates to resurgent nationalisms in the Pacific region in response to the rise of Chinese nationalism, as Vietnamese nationalists in and outside of Vietnam believe Trump to be the anti-Chinese choice. And needless to say, racist structures in the United States have worked to push many vulnerable Asians to seek safety in the obedience that white power expects of us, creating rifts within the refugee community as well as with other communities of color. The appearance of the South Vietnamese flag in white supremacist rallies, including the January 6th takeover of the Capitol by pro-Trump forces, has added to the urgency of thinking our way out of what Viet Thanh Nguyen has called “radicalized nostalgia,” linking refugee resentment over the defeat of South Vietnam to the Confederate Lost Cause long after the two civil wars ended a century apart with vastly different conditions and implications.⁹⁴ But what if this alignment between some refugees and MAGA populism is not nostalgic, but a radicalized claim of belonging for those who do not have access to the same economic, social, and cultural capital available to educated professionals? What if, for those refugees, this is recourse to a mode of populist engagement with American sovereignty, not least because MAGA taps into the disaffection of decades of capitalist dispossession not just of the white working class, but also across large swaths in communities of color?

The last thing to serve any kind of reconciliation is to call on others to mop up their resentment and catch up with history. To act in relation to one another, we may need to do the hard work of acknowledging our unequal relations to each other in entangled pasts and presents, and to work with one another across class lines within as well as across racialized communities. Whether we reconcile with what transpired and those in control of what is transpiring, the most vulnerable of us continue to face deportation, imprisonment, terror, murder institutionalized into an authoritarian or racist carceral state, and battery routinized into global production and financial management. If the reward of reconciliation is entrance into liberal respectability and its celebration of representation in the truths of whoever we all choose to be, then we are far from saved. Who we choose to be often runs up against nonadmittance by despotic, racist, heteronormative structures, or co-optation by capitalist commodification, all in the name of progress. We have arrived, not at the humanist telos, but at this moment of cumulative catastrophic climatic and political upheavals, when the future can only promise historical returns in war and its threat—not just Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, which are not past, but Ukraine and Gaza now among the hundred odd armed conflicts and refugee crises across the globe, then maybe Taiwan or the South China Sea

later in a Cold War 2.0 with tactical and strategic nuclear warfare on the horizon, possibly managed with Artificial Intelligence. As Robert Hullot-Kentor puts it, “We are, without a doubt, the occupants of the most catastrophic moment in the whole of human history, in all of natural history, and we cannot get our wits about ourselves.”⁹⁵ Such devastation we feel in this moment, the people in these pages knew well. The world ended for them again and again as their homes got torn down, their bodies worn, their loved ones killed, and history refused their admittance. It is how to be, in the words of Saeed Jones, “alive at the end of the world,”⁹⁶ that the people in these pages can teach us. For those of us who both had a hand in bringing about as well as being decimated by modern economy and politics, refuge is trying to live across endings, strike new alliances, fight untimely battles without the kind of blithe reconciliation that promises healing not for us but for those ashamed of people like us who haunt humanity’s bright future.

I cannot reconcile with white supremacy even when I understand it feeds on despair, and I expect neither can most readers of these pages. I imagine I must resist MAGA and other forms of economic and political brutality in whatever way I can. We will each have to pursue our own conscionable politics, but let us not tell others to bring up the rear towards a future that has been harnessed in economy and politics against the most vulnerable among us. To be free of memory, our own, each other’s, maybe we should not condemn it to a past that must be overcome. Could we allow for time to unfold various pasts and futures in the here and now with all the expansiveness it can give to our troubled connections to each other? Shall we release one another from cruel hope, yet let ourselves be undone in our accountability to each other? Perhaps it is the peering into the historical depths of our grief, sorrow, rage, inability to reconcile, in other words, our undoing, that might lead us to the doing and living otherwise. Here be refuge. Those walking the earth in this moment do so across the chasm at world’s end. All we have behind and in front of us are almost futures. Free of redemption.

The Sovereignty of Grief

Land Protest and Speculative Time

The sun was setting behind the high-rises on the Ho Chi Minh City skyline that included the now iconic Bitexco tower across the Saigon River. On this side of the river in Thủ Thiêm, Vietnam, my friend and I sat finishing off the remains of a meal in the clearing littered with the rubble of a homestead demolished for future urban development one late afternoon in July, 2014. Fields overgrown with grasses, reeds, and water palms over jagged clumps of cement and bricks extended as far as I could see. The desolation seemed only enhanced by the two remaining structures: a small dimly lit Buddhist temple whose keepers refused to vacate, and an illuminated cross on top of a church whose nuns in its dòng Mến thánh giá or les Amantes de la croix convent had threatened to lie down under any demolition vehicle sent by the government. These handful of faithfuls were the last to stall against the gleaming future promised by both the state and global capital.

The city and its skyline across the river showed what awaited Thủ Thiêm, Vietnam. On this side of the river, a long row of government billboards, painted in the old socialist realist mobilization style, looked down on the now endless field of rubble overgrown with grass. Borne aloft by steel scaffolding, they called on the now evicted citizens of a socialist state won after decades of war to “push hard towards industrialization and modernization of the countryside,” and featured men and women staring intensely into a future that was no longer socialist in the way Vietnamese understood it to be (figure 1). Yet, seen from the city’s side, the backs of these same mobilization billboards sported a row of red stars in Heineken beer advertisements promising another happy future. Crickets and toads sounded off as half a thumbnail of a moon rose opposite the brightly lit city. It looked as though nature had reclaimed the land from human use, returning it to its fauna and flora.



FIGURE 1. “Push Hard for Industrialization and Modernization of the Countryside,” government billboard facing Thủ Thiêm, Vietnam. Photo by author, July 2, 2015.

Earlier in the afternoon, an elderly man netting fish in a small stream had explained to me that the water was so clear and full of fish because *mặt bằng* or (potentially) commercial sites had been *giải phóng* or “liberated.” Perhaps not ironically, “liberation” is an official term referring not just to socialist revolution and national liberation but also to this process of freeing a plot of land or a whole neighborhood of all human and social encumbrance so that it can become available for capitalist redevelopment. Thủ Thiêm, Vietnam used to be Saigon’s margins, where struggling folks and rebels sought refuge. Now it was a suburb of Ho Chi Minh City recently cleared of low-income residents to await urban development with middle- to high-income housing, five-star hotels, and a high-tech park. This was a 770-hectare government-sponsored project in collaboration with private investors.¹ Thủ Thiêm, Vietnam as a place was the past about to become the future. The process reduced the place to rubble and its inhabitants to a kind of human refuse (figure 2).

For the past three decades, this scene has been recurring all over Vietnam. What may look like nature’s reclamation of land is actually the stripping of people, dwellings, markets, churches, temples, history, down to an imagined extra-, para-, or precapital state of nature, to await its reincorporation into capitalist circulation. This process involves private local and transnational investors and developers. The government serves as investor and/or enforcer of a multistep process: the



FIGURE 2. Some former inhabitants return after eviction to eke out a temporary existence in Thủ Thiêm, Vietnam. Photo by author, January 3, 2014.

compensation and eviction of residents, the demolition of homes and places of worship, and the repossession of the land. The government's hand in laying waste to places, communities, and people is justified in the now nostalgic language of socialist realism—futurist, hopeful, collectivist, and militant—in documents, press coverage, and mobilization billboards. This language of the socialist future past is deployed to rhetorically facilitate the move towards speculative capitalism under one-party rule. This is what Erik Harms refers to as “late socialism,” in which there is still “a staunch belief in the possibility for rational human planning to pave the way to a better future.”² In continuity with twentieth-century state socialism underwritten by Marxism-Leninism, the future of Vietnam as a place and places within it is, as Harms puts it, “framed by the linear notion of progress forward through time on the path toward modernization (*hiện đại hóa*).”³ That better future is now speculative in new ways. Development requires capital investment, and hence an opportunity for speculation as the land awaits projected value-added transformation in forward-looking time. The process could also be understood in the reverse: it is speculation that spurs this process of repossession and development. Future time determines the social relations of the present as it strips the present of its past. What at first looks like a simple progressive temporality towards modernization may work in complex ways to produce profit for

state and private, local as well as transnational, investors. What fuels speculation is the perceived differential between land's seeming state of nature and its value in the circuits of exchange propelled by fetishistic encoding of space in time.

For the state, freeing up land for development was a rational goal to create more wealth for itself, some of its officials, and some citizens while moving the country forward in a modernist understanding of time through infrastructural, industrial, and urban development. Some land-use title holders do benefit from this process of valuation as their smallholding—the narrow plot on which the usually tiny house sits, or the rice field—acquires monetary value on the real estate market. But most evicted inhabitants experience the end of home, livelihood, loved ones, or an entire social world as they know it, as whole neighborhoods and districts are grazed. Such irreplaceable loss can later haunt or disrupt new life under redevelopment. In pastoral and idyllic tableaux of “liberated” land awaiting visions of modern cities lurks a dread that takes on different forms. One Cấn Thơ community near an area undergoing government repossession of land for future development reported an invasion of poisonous snakes into their homes from the now overgrown land on the site of a former neighborhood.⁴ As Harms shows, the evicted experienced time in multiple ways during the years-long or even decades-long process of displacement, both suffering uncertainties and forging forms of everyday resistance.⁵

This chapter presents two modes of collective response by those already dispossessed of their homes and farms.⁶ The first, briefly examined here, is the more familiar public protest as a form of showing presence and voicing grievances with demands for redress. At one of the largest protests of this kind, farmers and other citizens took to the streets from June 22 to July 19 of 2007 to ask for redress for the appropriation of their land for capitalist development. The second, examined here at length, is a more muted mode of ghostly appearance by small groups of dispossessed residents, some of whom were farmers, in what could be called white marches between 2007 and 2010. This was during the height of state and capitalist appropriation of land before a lull of a few years in real estate speculation in Vietnam, which came a little later than the recession and real estate crash in the United States. The color refers to the choice of white clothing and signs by participants, constituting a particular iconography of absence and grief. Rather than the human refuse that speculative capital and the state made them out to be, these people grieved as a way of being in their world. Like refugees, these people were displaced from their homes and made home out of their grief. This grief moves to its own time beyond the short-term future gains of speculative capitalism. The sovereignty of these marchers depended not on the dialectic of mastery or the politics of representation. Their truth was evident in their mourning, and their world moved to a tempo that suspended that of dialectical progress.

While presenting on these white marches, I was often asked if they succeeded in getting government redress or raising public awareness about land rights,

peasants' plight, or developmental issues. Indeed, the above-mentioned large demonstrations, new forms of Vietnamese citizen mobilization over the internet like blogs, Facebook, and petition circulation, and even the media coverage of unrest surrounding land issues lend themselves to such analysis of collective action by agents of social resistance.⁷ Yet, the mainstream literature on social movement seems ill-fitting as a framework in which to make sense of the white marches. Much of this scholarship defines social movement as an organized and sustained public effort to make collective claims, including identity claims, through politically recognizable means like demonstrations, rallies, letter or petition drives, with concerted efforts to represent the aggrieved and their legitimacy, unity, and commitment.⁸ In the words of two contemporary social movement theorists, a social movement is a goal-oriented, thereby rational, "form of political association between persons who have at least a minimal sense of themselves as connected to others in common purpose and who come together across an extended period of time to effect social change in the name of that purpose."⁹ Such formulations rely on instrumental reason and liberal conceptions of sovereignty in representation. They feel distant from the immediate grief expressed in these brief gatherings and marches. Placed in these paradigms of representational politics relying on existing or pending recognition of legitimate collective subjecthood and interests, these white marches would be illegible or read as failure.

Such narrow confines of the mainstream literature on social movements exclude, and yet spur explorations into, alternative modes of expressive collective action. Jennifer Chun opens up new venues for the literature of protest when she foregrounds how workers' staging of public dramas expands particular labor disputes into questions for visions of justice.¹⁰ Similarly, rather than asking whether these white marches as political action either failed or succeeded in focusing public attention and getting government redress, thereby reading them in frameworks of representational politics, I suggest we read the white marches for the poetics in the grief that draws us to the very process of dispossession itself, required by finance capital and enforced by the state. I am inspired by seemingly disparate bodies of literature from ethnic studies, where questions of racial and gender oppression challenge rationality-based approaches to collective action, complicating the distinction between purposive action and being, between politics and culture. Black feminist literature has opened fresh grounds to ways of being, hence to attentively see, listen, feel, and know in relation, however vexed, to one another. In Sylvia Wynter's words, these approaches speak to "another possibility of a livable being" in the face of an imposed Ellisonian "invisibility."¹¹ Such a possibility seems vital in places that had been assigned to the past, its inhabitants stripped of any possible identifiable life or mode of subject formation by finance capital.

Because we are speaking of dispossession and displacement, I would be remiss here if I did not raise the complex contradictions arising out of multiple histories of settler and other forms of colonialism relevant to this context that shapes

my own location as a refugee from Vietnam. The complex relationship between refugees and Indigenous peoples in settler colonial places like the United States demands care.¹² To add to the intersecting and successive waves of historical dispossession, Vietnamese, including many of the people addressed in this chapter, were descendants of settlers who depended on the early modern Vietnamese empire to dispossess the Cham, Khmer, Ê Đê, K'ho, Mạ, X'tieng, Châu Ro, and many more communities in its expansion into Cham and Cambodian territory from the twelfth century to the eighteenth. Then, from the late nineteenth century, many Vietnamese depended for livelihood on the French colonial economy and administration, which favored the dominant Kinh over other groups in Vietnam and the rest of Indochina. The postcolonial Vietnamese states in North and South Vietnam both settled Kinh populations at the expense of Indigenous land-based livelihood and attachment. Two Indochina wars saw the deadly incorporation of Indigenous peoples into racial hierarchies of human worth by French, American, North and South Vietnamese states, decimating Indigenous communities and extending the land grab. For reasons of security and economic development at the end of the war in 1975, the unified Socialist Republic of Vietnam expelled southern populations from urban centers to the New Economic Zones, displacing Indigenous inhabitants in those zones. The same socialist state also sponsored settlements of the dominant ethnic Vietnamese from northern Vietnam into the Central Highlands, dispossessing Indigenous communities there again for economic and security reasons.¹³

Some of the people displaced in this latest wave of capitalist dispossession had taken homes or land from southern inhabitants under the facilitation of the victorious socialist regime from North Vietnam. The waves of dispossession chased one another in a sorrowful history. Many families in or from Vietnam, including my own, can likely trace some lineage to those persecuted and dispossessed communities in the long history of Vietnamese settler colonialism, if I may use that term without making claims of sameness with its forms in the Americas. But many of us grew up with the social privileges attached to being part of, or assimilated into, the dominant ethnic Kinh in Vietnam, and therefore cannot claim Indigenous status or the political and moral positions that come with it.¹⁴ My family, along with a very large number of others who made homes in southern Vietnam from such inheritance of ancestral conquest or colonial economy, lost our homes to socialist dispossession riding on war victory in 1975. The grief of displacement we feel as refugees urges me to relate to the grief of those now dispossessed by speculative capitalism. Grieving for land and home, we enter into vexed relation with one another across landscape and time, without minimizing the responsibility of different kinds of inheritors of historical dispossession. We cannot speak of an equivalency of loss, but many of us feel loss as an untethering from land as the place of dwelling and community. From a position of refugee loss, 2021 National Youth Poet Laureate Alexandria Huynh writes, "Their only desire was

to be together in the home they loved,” when she imagines those displaced or killed in climate disasters from floods in Vietnam to fires in California.¹⁵ These are clearly incommensurate but relational locations.¹⁶ And the poetics of grief allows us to feel such relation beyond equivalency without forgetting the accountability attached to each of those locations.

Writing about poetics in another difficult context, where Asian Americans are captured in Orientalizing speech as a mode of representation in fraught relations between the United States and its sites of Asian wars, Josephine Park reads Thesesa Cha’s *Dictée* as problematizing speech itself, performing a “shamanistic labor” in that Cha “must be a speaker for disparate voices.”¹⁷ Shamanism continues to evolve among Vietnamese and Vietnamese refugee communities and supports a wide range of practices, from *bùa phép* or magic to *lên đồng* or spirit possession in *Đạo Mẫu* (Mother Goddess religion). These shamanistic practices, here as in many other contexts, involve channeling voices incongruent to those of the medium. Through theater that includes visual signs and poetic speech, shamanism brings the past to the present, the dead to the living, the spiritual to the material. In *lên đồng*, Nguyễn thị Hiền writes, “theater becomes reality ‘where spirits . . . converse with men in human voices.’”¹⁸ In Cao Đài religious practices, poetic scriptures are written down as they are received in communion with the sagacious and writerly dead.¹⁹ The shaman in this poetic labor reaches across disparate worlds through acts and words that seem ritualistic because they depart from the goal-oriented rationality of humanist action. Bringing forth disparate voices without closing the gap of incongruity recalls Édouard Glissant’s poetics of relation and the insistence on the right to opacity eluding forces that seek to assimilate or annihilate the other in a “principle of generalization.”²⁰ I propose reading these expressions of grief by these land marchers as a shamanistic poetics that attempts to speak the disparate voices of the dead or otherwise made absent through dispossession, and therefore incongruent, to the representational politics of recognition in humanist sovereignty. The marchers invoke an expansive sense of time beyond modernist history and capitalist speculative projects that partition time in order to privilege the future only to reduce it to returns in profit. These marchers showed themselves as a ghosting site deprived of socially constituted place. The imagery these marches projected, as though in a poem, evoked grief over what was, is, or will be lost—the residuals of the whole in what could have been or can still be.

POETIC KNOWLEDGE

Wynter enables us to think about the moments of transformation in the social coding of self and other, resulting in the substitution of one set of differentials for another while maintaining the human/non-human, white/non-white-Black, free/unfree classifications.²¹ She traces the historical moments when these transformations happen. In the pre-Copernican era, sin was used to differentiate

God-redeemed Man from fallen flesh in the Christian formulation, which allowed the just enslavement of the latter. With the beginning of the rise of the state in Europe, reason was used to define humanist secular political Man in opposition to irrational Natives and Africans, enabling both groups to be incorporated as serf labor in the *encomienda* legal system under Spanish colonial rule and its legacies, or outright enslaved labor in the transatlantic trade. Wynter reads Darwin to have mapped this secular code of Man onto a biocentric chain of beings as the basis for domination and enslavement even while it made possible the rise of the life sciences as well as the human sciences that construct Man as object of knowledge.

Such historical tracing of substitutions allows Wynter to claim, following W. E. B. Du Bois's famous formulation, that the color line unites analyses of a number of historical situations from colonialism to slavery, to First World–Third World domination, to the impoverishment and imprisonment of jobless people of color in the contemporary moment. This reading of the color line in these disparate historical situations reveals a structuring code that merely substitutes one set of human/non-human categories for another at certain historical junctures. It is this substitution that bestows intelligibility on social critique or opposition. This insight gives us a way to understand the limits and potentials of social resistance. Whatever critique deemed intelligible, hence visible, becomes incorporated in the moment that it enters that Manichean battle. A social act becomes understood as an opposition to that descriptive statement of the human in our head when such action is being incorporated by that master code. It is the incorporation that organizes acts of opposition and gives them that visibility, intelligibility, coherence, or efficacy.

The Enlightenment reason in Wynter's excavation of the modern era epistemically codes the difference in self and other, where the latter can be identified and represented in a structure of intelligibility of any social opposition. Perhaps Wynter's insight gestures towards acts that are illegible, incoherent, and futile. The acts that become legible and therefore incorporable do not comprise the entirety of the forces at play. Socialist revolution becomes legible in the moment of capitalist incorporation, and likewise democratic social movements become legible in the moment of authoritarian reinscription. Yet, such reinscription necessarily must leave a less than legible residue that could destabilize the incorporative binary.

Towards the end of her exploration into the master code of Man, Wynter gives a nod towards Aimé Césaire's essay "Poetry and Knowledge," in which Césaire proposes poetics as an alternative mode of knowledge from Enlightenment reason. Césaire privileges the poetic image in which "A is no longer A," or "A can be not-A," or it is "not necessarily A or not-A."²² The indeterminacy of the poetic image bypasses Enlightenment reassurance in the reliability of social scientific knowledge and its politics of identification and representation in variants of modern political thought. Césaire suggests that poetic knowledge can transcend the humanist master code that gave us Man and his differentiating knowledge based on the binary code of self and other, life and death, the real and the imaginary.

Disillusioned with one variety of Enlightenment political thought after another, Césaire kept returning to the indeterminacy of poetic knowledge because the various political solutions from liberal French republicanism to radical revolution, to Marxism, which insists on being called scientific socialism, kept reinscribing the master code of Man in both incorporation and resistance. In his 1956 resignation letter to French Communist Party leader Maurice Thorez, Césaire wrote that if serving the party “pillages our most vivifying friendships, wastes the bond that weds us to other West Indian islands, the tie that makes us Africa’s child, then I say communism has served us ill in having us swap a living brotherhood for what looks to have the features of the coldest of all chill abstractions.”²³ His rejection of chill abstractions in favor of life in friendship, historical bonds, and brotherhood speaks to the relationality that poetic indeterminacy could evoke. Glissant’s opacity in the other cannot be annihilated into the transparency of oneself and others in these chill abstractions. Instead, it is the existence in relation to the other that gives one the right to opacity, movement, and indeterminacy. Tiffany King notes such “tidalectic” movement in Caribbean poetics that eludes Hegelian dialectical progress and makes possible “a kind of life that is beyond transparency.”²⁴ Life to Césaire is not opposed to death, self is not opposed to other; A is not opposed to not-A. Rather, life can refer to the whole of being. Césaire writes:

It is not merely with his whole soul, it is with his entire being that the poet approaches the poem. . . . All lived experience. All the possibility. . . . And the most extraordinary contacts: all the pasts, all the futures. . . . All the flux, all the rays. The body is no longer deaf or blind. Everything has a right to live. Everything is summoned. Everything awaits. Everything, I say.²⁵

If the necropolitics of enslavement, mass killing, exploitation, disposability, and imprisonment operate by virtue of the differentiation of Man from not-Man in the master code, the transcendence of poetic indeterminacy accesses a contingent primal wholeness of life where everything has a right to live, through the capacity to feel. Purnima Mankekar characterizes affect as that “intensity that exists prior to its capture by language.”²⁶ Perhaps such intensity eludes language even while it draws on being alluded to in words, images, signs, and gestures, hence requiring that radical noncommitment to meaning in the poetic “A is not-A.” In such transcendence, Man gets recoded, reconstituted beyond himself and his humanism: “The blossoming of mankind to the dimensions of the world—giddy dilation. And it can be said that all true poetry, without ever abandoning its humanity, at the moment of greatest mystery ceases to be strictly human so as to begin to be truly cosmic.”²⁷ Such knowledge eludes capture, rendering it ill-fitting instruments for the purpose of possessing the world, that task Enlightenment humanism set for itself. If Louis Althusser proposes a radical antihumanism in the dissolution of the human subject in favor of making visible the materialist social relations in their “determinate absence” that produce and govern this human subject

in ideology,²⁸ Césaire proposes we transcend Enlightenment humanism with its reason in instrumental possessive knowledge, its representational politics of those who count versus those who do not. He proposes we move towards the imminent potential of the world.

This felt poetic knowledge of that totality, which Enlightenment reason breaks down into mind and matter, self and other, the teleological past and future, allows us to see the relationship between what is made visible and what must remain absent. The white marches produce this poetic knowledge of grief that links violent processes to things that are there and not there, things that are known to things that are felt. They also signal to what was and could be. It is only through this poetic process that these marches constitute a form of collective action.

SUPERFLUITY: THE EXISTENTIALLY SURPLUS IN TEMPORAL ZONES OF EXCEPTION

In a Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation's (HSBC) Vietnam investment advertisement shown on Cathay Pacific flights to Ho Chi Minh City in the summer of 2013, a Vietnamese mother-in-law figure exhorts her white investor son-in-law to "buy land. They don't make it anymore," rendering land a diminishing commodity unencumbered by human ties and ready for speculation. Given that Vietnam at that point could not easily continue its historical territorial expansion, land speculation functioned at the intersection of older forms of accumulation of land by conquest and the speculative logic of finance capitalism. Land speculation conjured the fiction of the fluidity of the land through the assignment of its monetary values—its compensational market value shadowed by its speculative values. These numbers would then spur the assignment of the status of redundancy or surplus to the people who had ties to that land so that land could exist in commodity relations. Accompanied by a replay of the colonial sexual logic between the white explorer/conqueror/colonizer/investor and the native daughter, the in-flight investment advertisement conjures both the possibility of monetization of land and its not-yet incorporation. This state of "not-yet" actually required stripping the land of its human ties formed in previous cycles of settler colonial and socialist acquisition in order to make it available for imagining future numerical values. Farmers working the land or others making a home on the land became economically unprofitable, therefore redundant and to be dispossessed in areas that became zones of exception. These inhabitants became what Hong calls the "existentially surplus" when she draws our attention to the creation of value "not through the material processes of production but through the immaterial processes of speculation."²⁹ Like surplus labor to production, the existentially surplus are expendable, yet indispensable to the relevance of the state, as shall be shown.

Marx notes interest-bearing capital as distinct from two other capital conversion processes. Productive or industrial capital conversion involves the producer

selling his product as commodity capital to convert it into money capital, with which he then purchases new means of production as a different kind of commodity capital in $C'-M-C$. Commercial capital conversion, on the other hand, can be represented in $M-C-M'$, where M is money, C is commodity, and M' is money plus profit. In other words, the merchant advances his money to buy the commodity only to turn around and sell the same commodity later, converting it back to money, hopefully with a profit.³⁰ In contrast, the credit-driven formula of financial capital can be understood as a shortened $M-M'$ process for the investor, where money makes more money, seemingly bypassing the commodity phase.³¹ Using Marx's formulation of the various kinds of capital allows us to see that what today's investors speculate upon is not the future value of the commodity, but the future value of the money that has absorbed the commodity phase into itself. Beyond the stock exchange where investors speculate on the future profit of companies providing goods and services, this speculative capital functions in loans not only bearing interest but, more importantly, generating debts with risks that can be speculated upon as though they were commodities. Where Marx thought such dimension of capitalism would stay in check in relation to the rest of the economy until periodic moments of crisis when debt servicing outstrips the means of debtors to pay, interrupting the possibility of conversion of money into commodities and back again, our economy since at least the 1970s has embraced its financialization in which the circulation of projected "fictitious capital" outpaces production in the commodity capital conversion process.³² In the United States, according to the Flow of Funds Accounts published by the Federal Reserve, "the value of total financial assets was approximately five times US GDP in 1980; by 2007, this ratio had doubled."³³

The trend is replicated in other economies around the world. In Vietnam, while some of the appropriated land did go into creating factories for industrial capitalism (whose profit is also to be speculated upon), the mere specter of future value in the land itself fueled the feverish pace of dispossession. Those forced off the land were barred from full access to this added value, as they were evicted and compensated at the bottom price in the first moment of capitalist conversion. Even as exorbitant price increases were plain for all to see, the inhabitants could not hold on to their land or dwelling in order to sell later at a higher pricing cycle because of pressing economic needs or government coercion. The small domestic investors were usually allowed to buy the plot of land now cleared and rezoned for later housing, or a housing unit in a project to be built, in order to sell at a higher price. Their comparatively small cash-outs at each price cycle were necessary to make speculative value appear real to all involved, driving the process forward. The vision of the development projects that drove the clearing of large neighborhoods or parts of town, however, involved large transnational capital funds that promised returns to their investors in many cycles of $M-M'$ before, and regardless of whether, these projects actually got built. This process of speculative

conversion reduced whole neighborhoods or even districts to rubble and the lives of their expendable inhabitants to death or near death. While superfluous and expendable, they were also indispensable, in that state eviction of their presence on the land made the state relevant to global capital. And as their occupation of the land was made anachronistic by the anticipated future, the inhabitants' removal made imaginable the potential added value to attract speculation by transnational capital funds.

Achille Mbembe proposes that we note the ways in which superfluity functions in capitalism. Superfluity refers to an aesthetics of surfaces that can "hypnotize, excite, paralyze the senses."³⁴ Billboards, magazine, television, and other media marketing spreads, as well as the appearance of some completed projects, indeed hypnotized and excited would-be investors in an "emerging economy" like Vietnam's. Superfluity involves "the general conversion of number into fiction" or fiction into numbers, which "is also a way of writing time, of forgetting and remembering."³⁵ What gets forgotten in this numbers game is the previous social relations to the land, and what gets remembered is the land's fantastic future value in a new cycle of speculative capitalist social relations encoded into narratives of modernist progress.

Conveniently, the temporal progressive forward movement of modernization as a state project facilitated the temporal backward movement in the conversion of land into capital for speculation. Backward in that the future became a projection that justified the dispossession of inhabitants in the present, relegating the land's existing social relations to the past. Future time designated an existing sociogeographical area as anachronistic, therefore to be destroyed, preparing land for its temporal incorporation. The fate of its inhabitants had to be abandoned to bear the cost of underwriting the fiction of future time. These constitute zones that Neferti Tadiar points out would be policed "for untrammelled speculative movement, zones which are no longer merely geographical but also temporal."³⁶ Giorgio Agamben calls Carl Schmitt's state of exception "the legal form of what cannot have legal form" and argues that this condition lies at the heart of any theory on "the relation that binds, and at the same time, abandons the living being to law," since the law employs its own suspension as "its original means of referring to and encompassing life."³⁷ Enforcement in these spatiotemporal zones of exception necessarily encompasses the extrajudicial as the law binds living beings to itself.

This extrajudicial dimension of the state of exception, of course, does not mean the state is absent from this process. Far from it: the state is the enforcer of this incorporation of life-forms through both its laws and their suspension, hence increasing its sovereign power over the subject population. Not surprisingly, having this sovereign power of death (or relegation to zones of death) over this surplus population strengthened the developmentalist state's hand at the global table. First, it was with land that the state could make a bid as a player in the global capitalist game, opening up a geographical state of exception (the "underdeveloped"

country or parts thereof) to temporal manipulation in global financialization. Second, as Tadiar notes, the creation of a surplus population at its disposal becomes another asset for the state to buy into the global speculative game.³⁸

The state's facilitation of capitalist generation of value in progressing time needed judicial and extrajudicial enforcement using a combination of land laws, zoning ordinances, and other less legible means, with devastating consequences for inhabitants. A series of land laws, enacted from 1993 through the 2000s, allowed for ownership of land use and transfer of these land rights in a socialist country where land had been previously appropriated by the state.³⁹ Zoning was the development instrument through which the state could control the bulk of these transfers in the new market economy. By first zoning a piece of land for one purpose, the local government, or officials therein, could appropriate the land at a low compensational price. It would then proceed to rezone it for more profitable development, selling it to developers at a significantly higher price. For example, one farmer reported that land was taken from him by the local government, which compensated him at 16,000 VN Dong per square meter due to its zoning; after the government appropriated his land, it was sold at 1.6 million VN Dong per square meter.⁴⁰ The government could also go in as a partner in a joint venture with private investors, using seized land as its capital. In the mid-1990s, Saigon South (Nam Sài Gòn) or Phú Mỹ Hưng, a hub the size of 750 hectares, quickly became the model of urban and suburban development for Vietnam, with Taiwanese-based transnational capital in a joint venture with state capital, comprising land that the Ho Chi Minh City government seized from residents and farmers.⁴¹ The Phú Mỹ Hưng development company's slogan of "Đô Thị Văn Minh-Cộng Đồng Nhân Văn" or Civilized City-Humanist Community speaks the language of statist and capitalist progress.⁴² Many of the evicted complained that the price of land compensation at the start of the project was roughly 20,000 VN Dong (less than one US dollar at the time) per square meter because it was zoned as agricultural land. By 2014, adjacent areas, now rezoned commercial and residential, ran anywhere from 40 million VND per square meter to 76 million VND per square meter, or 3,800 times the compensational price. Initial investors did not need to wait that long for the price of land to skyrocket.

The human consequences of such joint state-private ventures were hard to overstate. Mrs. Soan (a pseudonym) was a fixture when I saw her several times in 2014 in front of the office of development company Hồng Linh in Phú Mỹ Hưng. Gaunt and dressed in faded clothes, she was crying to anyone willing to stop and listen because the company had refused to help her any further. Very early on in the planning of the development of this area, she said the developer was paying 2,000 VND per square meter. She did not agree to that compensation price for her 2,000-square-meter plot adjacent to Phú Mỹ Hưng, which would have paid her about 200 USD total. Twelve years later, her home had been burned seven times in efforts to evict her. Her husband died, she said, of illness resulting from

the stress. Her two children were also ill. She had asked the local government for help to resolve the conflict, but they referred her back to the same development company, which offered her a higher compensation price but only for 360 square meters, while they would take her 2,000 square meters. She insisted she could not make a new living from that amount and continued to haunt the offices of Hồng Linh.⁴³ This distressing scenario repeated all over Vietnam. In another case, Construction Company 8, belonging to the Ministry of Construction, offered compensation to displaced residents at the rate of 500,000 VN Dong per square meter in 2010. Even as local police were forcibly clearing one property of the mother and daughter owners who in protest stripped naked to show the indignity of the process, this same state enterprise was already offering the same parcel at the rate of 5 million VND per square meter.⁴⁴ As soon as land was about to leave the hands of farmers and be put into circulation, speculation immediately drove up the price tens, hundreds, or even thousands of times the original compensational price. Local officials usually pocketed a portion of the difference as developers bribed them or as they themselves got in on the speculation game by buying and selling some of the land, while the local province or county gained both prestige for embracing economic modernization and a new source of revenue. Socialist government corruption, a routine in socialist bureaucracy, now facilitated capitalist appropriation in the name of modernization and development. According to the Ministry of Resources and the Environment, between 2001 and 2007, the amount of farmland lost in that same period to capitalist development was between 1 million and 1.5 million hectares out of a total of 9 million hectares of agricultural land in Vietnam.⁴⁵

One local county illustrated the problem well. In Bình Châu, Xuyên Mộc, farmers, including those who had lost their land to government-assisted appropriation, complained that they could no longer buy land for cultivation because the price of land had been driven up by speculation. The local state-owned bank retained a lending monopoly in town, which allowed its loan officers to charge a 3–5 percent rate of commission on the loan amount.⁴⁶ Such conditions made it too difficult for farmers to acquire enough land for cultivation, effectively turning the area to potential agribusiness conglomerates or nonfarm development. Small landholders were squeezed between the pressures of agricultural modernization, which required large tracts with deep capital investment, and pressures of nonfarm redevelopment. For farmers, the loss of land meant the direct loss of the means of agricultural production. But land dispossession meant more than just the inability to farm. As compensation, the government might offer cash, which could take years to materialize, a small plot of land in a housing project, or a condo in a high-rise for the displaced family as compensation. Developers sometimes offered to build cheap housing for the resettlement of displaced residents in exchange for the right to develop the appropriated land. The result would be quality housing for middle-income buyers and low-quality housing for resettlement on the periphery. Whatever compensation these folks got, either from the government or from the

private developers, it was often not enough to begin a new life.⁴⁷ As one farmer put it, the government was “not compensating,” but “driving people to a dead end.”⁴⁸ Whole communities would be destroyed. With them went opportunities to earn a living by peddling small goods or offering small services to their neighbors. With dispersed communities went feelings of long-cultivated attachment to places and people. Even as the government at times offered compensation by way of relocation, evicted communities could not be reconstituted as people scattered to find ways to eke out a living. The displacement, life disruption, and resulting despair not infrequently caused illness and death in the family. The physical dislocation and sometimes isolation translated to social devastation that was personally and deeply felt.

Those governmental tools facilitated fantasies of modernization, which in turn justified state violence. Erik Harms points out that city planning, with visions of beautiful and modern neighborhoods, shaped the desires of displaced residents in Thủ Thiêm, Vietnam on the edge of Ho Chi Minh City.⁴⁹ Newly appropriated land all over Vietnam hosted industrial zones, tourist resorts, and new condo high-rises or luxury villas. With its slogan of “Industrialization and Modernization,” the Communist Party–led government now legitimized its rule on Vietnam’s integration into the global economy, in which Vietnam would provide export processing zones employing cheap labor, tropical paradises for tourists, and middle-income to upscale residences, all for the building of a modern nation with modern cities. These visions to be built were the stuff of fantasy-enabling superfluity. Time had to be organized in two mutually reinforcing ways: it forced Vietnam to catch up to other Western and Asian places in a linear progression towards the modern telos; and it imposed the sense of future value that speculation requires on investment returns, even when hardly any time elapsed between the confiscation of land and the rise in its speculative value.

The state’s dream of modernization conflated the current requirements of integration into the global capitalist economy with older socialist visions of a modernity marked by Leninist electrification and Stalinist industrialization. In this moment, the fastest way for a peripheral economy like Vietnam to actualize its industrialization vision was to provide cheap labor and sites for post-Fordist outsourcing by large East Asian, American, and European buyers. Industrial zones now line Vietnam’s highways. By 2011, Vietnam boasted 256 industrial zones and 20 economic zones,⁵⁰ attracting 80 billion USD in twenty years, according to a February 2015 report by the Ministry of Planning and Investment.⁵¹ To date, the number of industrial zones has increased to 381, which will see a one-and-a-half-times increase in the next ten years.⁵² The web of highways and their industrial zones has reconfigured the landscape of Vietnam. The highways leading to cities and ports string together industrial zones, and these latter in turn necessitate the building, widening, and maintenance of highways. For example, Highway 51 connects the financial hub of Ho Chi Minh City to the tourist and port destination

of Vũng Tàu-Bà Rịa. Riding on the back of a motorcycle along this stretch of 90 kilometers, I would pass Nhơn Trạch industrial zones I, II and III, followed by the Đồng Nai industrial zones, and then those that belong to the province of Bà Rịa-Vũng Tàu, like Tam Phước, Mỹ Xuân, Cái Mép, and Phú Mỹ I, II, and III. Residential areas and small shops sprang up around these zones and along the highways. During the day, motorcycles darted back and forth laden with goods for small commerce, and trucks roared down the road carrying materials and goods to and from factories. The morning and late afternoon hours on these highways would bring floods of workers in uniforms walking or riding bicycles and motorcycles to or from those same factories.

Not only did these industrial zones shape the lives of workers in the factories, as discussed in the next chapter, they also structured the lives of those who lived around them. One kind of impact is environmental. One example was Vedan, a Taiwanese factory producing the food additive monosodium glutamate or MSG, located along Highway 51 in one of Đồng Nai's industrial zones. Crews on ships docking in the nearby Thị Vải River had long noticed the corrosion in the hulls, but it was not until 2008 that foreign ship companies filed complaints and the Vietnamese authorities had to admit that local government corruption had allowed Vedan to drain its untreated industrial waste into the river. For local residents, the waste poisoned the fish, and fishing as a livelihood was no longer an option.⁵³ Neither was growing fruit orchards, as the poison seeped into the ground. Agreeing to sell their land to Vedan for the growing of manioc used in MSG production and becoming its workers were among the few livelihood options available to local residents. In similar ways, more and more land left smallholders and turned into land that held potential for either agricultural or nonagricultural development, hence acquiring speculative value for investors.

Tourist resorts built to match visions of tropical paradise comprised the next category of land development that infused numbers with speculative fantasy in Vietnam. These projects required land appropriation, and hence most would require dispossession of local residents. Vietnam received increasing numbers of tourists each year. In 2019, the last year before pandemic disruptions, Vietnam received 18 million foreign visitors, generating an annual revenue of 755 trillion VND, or 9.2 percent of its annual GDP.⁵⁴ Vietnamese tourist resorts number in the thousands, attracting both foreign and domestic tourists. Each tourist resort has a history that speaks to this process of dispossession through land appropriation and development. One high-profile hub is the Hồ Tràm Strip, spread out along 2.2 kilometers of sandy beaches. The Hồ Tràm Strip is an investment project in a Vegas-style playground consisting of casinos, hotels, golf courses, restaurants, multiple housing sites, and other recreational sites. The Asian Coast Development, Ltd., based in Canada with transnational capital, won the government concession for the first integrated casino resort development project through its subsidiary the Hồ Tràm Project Company, Ltd., in 2007.⁵⁵ The first phase of hotel

accommodations opened with 541 rooms in 2013, and another 599 rooms in 2015, at the price of 138 USD a night. The Bluffs, its golf course designed by the supposedly “legendary” Greg Norman, teed off in October 2014.⁵⁶ While it was being built, construction workers were getting paid an average of 3 million VND per month, less than 150 USD, and receptionists with college degrees earned an average of 4 million VND a month after its opening, roughly the price of one night in one of its hotel rooms.⁵⁷

The resort got the highest blessings from the Vietnamese government under Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng, whose office was projecting huge revenues. But more immediately, projects such as this one would benefit investors and local government officials because speculation would exponentially raise the price of land the moment they released news of the future resort. Before the project began construction, fireflies darted around the surrounding communities and bushes in the sand dunes at night. But even then, Hồ Tràm as the simulacrum of Las Vegas, that quintessential node of simulacra, was already ripped out of social time and place to exist in commodity relations, and enjoyed in aesthetics of surface.

The fantastical simulacra also included villas and condominium high-rises, promising the realization of dreams of modern luxury or middle-class urban living. About 10 kilometers southeast of Hanoi is the Ecopark project. Ecopark was a vision of six gated residential communities and infrastructure that would distinguish its residents as living in “a world class city, with integrated communities and iconic elements.”⁵⁸ The 500-hectare development displaced villagers in Văn Giang district, Hưng Yên province, who continued to protest for more than a decade since 2006. Capital investment companies projected dreams of lifestyles matching world cities of the West and its ultramodern refraction in Asian cities. They purported to deliver that future-elsewhere to Vietnam in a libidinal economy, propelling residential development projects all over the country following the 1997 showcase urban development of Phú Mỹ Hưng, or Saigon South, mentioned above. In Ho Chi Minh City, the development company Novaland advertised its Sunrise City project with two huge billboards over a highway. One shows an upper-class couple, drinks in hand, the man looking out with self-satisfaction and the woman looking down on the brightly lit city through a wall of glass. Her bright city imposes itself over the low-rise neighborhood beneath the billboard, layering time and space. The caption reads: “This luxury flat is not in New York.” The other shows department storefronts on the ground level of high-rises, with the caption that reads: “This vibrant urban commercial hub is not in Paris.” The negation of New York and Paris boldly affirms Ho Chi Minh City, but as an emerging copy of those other cities that have been reduced to markers of a future time that would admit Vietnam, represented by its class of the newly rich.

These simulacra brought Vietnamese primordialized space to meet the time of the modern, as another billboard in the new urban development of Nhơn Trạch, in the province of Đồng Nai, rather bluntly proclaims in English that it is the place



FIGURE 3. Political billboard among developers' visions of a future Nhơn Trạch, Vietnam. Photo by author, September 10, 2012.

“where space meets time.” This place in Vietnam was to meet modern time, world time, money time. Above images of happy people in modern settings was the towering image of Hồ Chí Minh reassuring the People that the local government and Communist Party had not abandoned socialism, next to ads calling on resident pioneers—the “People of Nhơn Trạch”—to participate in credit-finance funds (figure 3). Since the poor residents had already been evicted and middle- to high-income dwellings were being built, this call was directed to the anticipated future residents of the new city, the new People of a late-socialist Vietnam in a global postsocialist moment. What first looked like a hodgepodge of things old and new, socialist statist and private capitalist, on closer examination worked in patchwork fashion to bring the land into future-oriented capital conversion, and turned the anticipated inhabitants now anointed with the moniker of the People into neoliberal investor-subjects in the financialization of capital.

This new city of Nhơn Trạch was built on cleared land for urban development and export processing in the province of Đồng Nai. Nhơn Trạch sits on a grid of major thoroughfares named after communist leaders, none of them local: Nguyễn Ái Quốc, Lê Đức Thọ, Tôn Đức Thắng, Trần Phú. Erasure of local resistance fighters against the French or the Americans in past wars doubled in the removal of local inhabitants now, dispossessing them of the land that memorializes top revolutionary leaders. In a way, erasure and memorialization both functioned to empty out the space for capitalist speculative development. The memorialization of top

communist leaders delegitimized local resistance to this development in the present. The present was presented as the seamless and hence noncontestable meeting place between past revolution and the modern capitalist future. Previously, the revolution had garnered its force from a socialist future. Now, it just delivered a speculative capitalist one instead. Much of Nhơn Trạch still sat empty for a decade after the first clusters of buildings were built, as did many others of these speculative projects.

Speculative time either compresses or stretches out, swallowing all of time with past violence and poverty now sutured to a spectacular future. All over Vietnam, many billboards rusted out, their visions of high living in a modern environment bleached and torn by the tropical weather. Some in Nhơn Trạch suffered the same fate after development projects stalled for more than a decade. They nevertheless served their purpose as projection screens for the future, drawing on the quickened heartbeats of frontiers and gold rushes of the past. Anna Tsing aptly proposes the notion of “spectacular accumulation,” which “occurs when investors speculate on a product that may or not exist.”⁵⁹ Superfluity here was about a rearrangement of time, suturing yet eliding Vietnam’s historical time of war and socialist futurity to Western capitalist modernity, with its relocated industries and playgrounds to frontiers simultaneously new and old.

Such fantasy, once it became “real” in a pending development project approved by the government, necessitated concrete measures that treated the people who lived on it as existentially superfluous in a zone of exception where coercion was the order of the day. Once marked for redevelopment, the building, the neighborhood, the part of a city, the town, or the rice field got relegated to the past antithetical to the future, and its place became a zone of exception that eradicated its inhabitants and rewrote time into money.

If the project was financed by private investment, the compensation rate would have to be negotiated with the existing holders of the land rights. This was part of what was called “voluntary land conversion.” However, once a certain percentage of households in the affected area agreed to sell their rights to the developer, land conversion for the rest would become compulsory.⁶⁰ Compulsory land conversion also covered (1) national or public projects; (2) investment projects with 100 percent foreign funds; and (3) “special economic investment projects such as infrastructure for industrial zones, service zones, high-tech parks, urban and rural residential areas and projects in the highest investment fund groups.”⁶¹ For these categories, often the Provincial People’s Committees set the price for compensation.⁶² These varied by locality. For example, in Hanoi, the compensation rate usually hovered at 50 to 70 percent of market value, while it was generally higher in Ho Chi Minh City.⁶³ Market value here referred to the value of such land/dwelling at the time of acquisition, before the next spirals of speculation raised them exponentially. According to land laws, if the land was designated as agricultural land to be appropriated for other purposes, the price was set by the rate of agricultural

profit, which was extremely low compared to the market value of the land at any point before or after state acquisition.⁶⁴

With such broad categories of property that were supported by compulsory land acquisition with such low compensation rates, a large number of Vietnamese were subjected to forced removal should they refuse to leave under terms imposed on them by their local government. The stories of how residents came to the point of being removed illustrate multiple rounds of possession and dispossession. Those like Mrs. Tường and her husband Mr. Hùng were war refugees from the central coast who settled in Saigon before the end of the war.⁶⁵ After the war, the new regime removed people like them to New Economic Zones.⁶⁶ Fearing residual resistance among local townsfolk, the new government broke up southern communities and scattered them to cut down forestland for cultivation in places close to guerrilla bases during the war. These New Economic Zones also allowed for the easier implementation of collectivization of the means of production, and the reeducation of southerners in the model of the New Socialist Man. The result was dispossession for those town and city dwellers who lost their original homes, but also deforestation, which deprived Indigenous communities of older forms of livelihood connected to forestland, thereby decimating them.⁶⁷ Mrs. Tường and her husband were sent to make their living in the New Economic Zones of forestland in Đồng Nai province after the war. Her husband died of malaria, along with other family members from illness or work accidents while clearing the land. A sister never recovered fully from falling timber, and a brother-in-law lost his genitals to parasitic infection and later died as the infection spread. Mrs. Tường headed her household and eked out a living for her four children and extended family off the new land, only to lose it to government appropriation under eminent domain when they built the Trị An hydroelectric dam, which opened up the area to urbanization and later rounds of speculative accumulation.

Once residents had exhausted all venues to keep their homes, forced removals were carried out by local police. I witnessed such a scene more than once, where the police showed up early in the morning with bulldozers. Occupants were pulled out, and the bulldozers went to work to demolish walls or corners of a dwelling, exposing the fresh remains of people's lives. In some cases, evicted residents struggled with the police, resulting in injuries and deaths. There were many cases where women of different ages stripped naked to exhibit their state of abjectness and to shame the police. In many cases, people threatened or undertook suicide, sometimes by self-immolation.⁶⁸ Some evictees would later die of illness resulting from extreme emotional distress or simply loss of livelihood. Shocking photos, videos, and reports of these removals, where resisting residents were beaten, shot, run over or buried alive by bulldozers, were posted on YouTube or the various independent blogging sites that had begun to spring up by the mid-2000s.⁶⁹

Of these thousands of instances of violence involved in the removal of residents, one of the most shocking in the past few years was in the village of Đồng Tâm, in the outskirt of Hanoi. The string of incidents there started in 2015 when the government assigned land that villagers had farmed for decades to the Viettel Group, a for-profit enterprise owned and managed by the Vietnamese Ministry of Defense, for the construction of factories. Villagers fought back. By 2017, when the police came to arrest some villagers, the dispute escalated into a situation where thirty-eight government officials and other personnel were taken hostage and then released by villagers. By 2020, a police assault on the village to keep villagers from trespassing into confiscated land resulted in the deaths of three police officers as well as Mr. Kinh, the leader of the village resistance. Social media users circulated images of Mr. Kinh's body, with extensive and heated discussions about suspected bodily mutilation by the government. The incident resulted in twenty-nine convictions with prison sentences for participating villagers, and the usual state media accusations of collusion between villagers and "reactionary" and "foreign" elements.⁷⁰

DEMONSTRATIONS

Farmers and others responded collectively in various ways to the entire process, which was rife with corruption at every level and every government office involved, favoring investors with money to grease every palm along the way. One form of collective response was demonstrations, one of the biggest of which took place in 2007.⁷¹ On June 22, after the general election of the new National Assembly, roughly fifty to a hundred persons, mainly women, came from six provinces in the South to congregate with posters in front of National Building 2 in Ho Chi Minh City. I was able to observe only intermittently this growing protest when I could get through lines of plainclothes police and security agents. Even with tight security, the protesters' number swelled to seventeen hundred trucked in from nineteen provinces by the fourth week.⁷² Very quickly, spokespersons emerged to make their demands known to the government and the public. The protesters' posters and banners denounced local governments and appealed to the central government to help them get fair compensation for their appropriated land or homes. To make their message intelligible to a state whose language was for so long one of Manichean struggle between the People and its enemy, some of the biggest of their banners read: "The government of the Tiền Giang Province is bought by the enemy to corrupt the policy of the Party and government." Visually, these protesters deployed the recognizable iconography of socialist struggle. Banners and flags were uniformly red, creating a revolutionary color effect.

This large demonstration of June–July 2007 would seem familiar to us, because it fit squarely within the framework of representation. We would see demonstrators claiming a collective sovereignty by coming together to make known their perfectly legible grievances and demands in what Habermas might call a public sphere.⁷³

The format of the large demonstration seemed very much a part of Enlightenment reason and political representation, with its claim to the will of the People.

Seen in such framework, this demonstration was successful in galvanizing support from other nascent civil society groups who began to create space for a public sphere even while these groups were fighting for acceptance, if not legal recognition, by the government. The United Buddhist Church of Vietnam (Giáo Hội Phật Giáo Việt Nam Thống Nhất) appeared with food and water for the protesters. This was the famed Buddhist church from the days of self-immolations in protest against the war and the Ngô Đình Diệm government of the Republic of Vietnam in the early 1960s. This church was now persecuted by the late-socialist government for not putting itself under the control of the Communist Party. Its leader, the Venerable Thích Quảng Độ, appeared at the protest site and called for human rights and social justice, which he said could only happen with the “end of the scourge of monopolistic rule” in Vietnam.⁷⁴ He was denounced in the state-run press and arrested by the government for this act more than a month later.⁷⁵ Another nascent grouping was Bloc 8406, an advocacy coalition for democracy that also voiced support for the protesters and denounced government repression of the demonstration.⁷⁶

According to Bloc 8406, the government sent in a force of about two thousand security and military personnel, with electric whips, tear gas, batons, handguns, rifles, and vehicles to physically remove these protesters in the late hours of the eighteenth of July into the first minutes of the nineteenth, the day of the opening of the new National Assembly.⁷⁷ Some protesters tied themselves to the chain link fence. The police beat those who resisted and put them on trucks to be transported back to their provinces. Their presence, in signs or bodies, was completely erased by daybreak. After this forced removal and orders from Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng for farmers to return home and seek redress with their local governments, collective expressions often took the form of smaller gatherings.

WHITE MARCHES

Before the big demonstration in June–July 2007 was suppressed, farmers and other evicted residents had tried out small, quick gatherings and marches on the streets of big cities, particularly Ho Chi Minh City. From late 2007 on, the frequency and consistency of such occurrence lent this public expression a fairly stable set of visual signs distinct from those of the big demonstrations. To elude the police, groups of mostly women sometimes accompanied by children congregated or marched for a short time, often as fleeting as fifteen to twenty minutes. If they did not scatter by themselves, the police would disband them and make arrests. Spectators were wary of coming too close for fear of police action. When I tried to take photos of one of these appearances, I was manhandled and briefly detained by some plainclothes police personnel, who confiscated my camera and deleted

my photos. In these brief and smaller marches, evicted residents appeared in white tops and conical hats, with slogans written on small signs or on their clothing. Let me first address the color in the visual language of these marches.

When monks in Myanmar protested military rule in 2007, some bloggers in Vietnam called for their support. Someone called Tầm Tình Tuổi Trẻ, for example, posted on the blogspot *Burma-wind of Change* that a “white revolution” was forming in Vietnam, juxtaposing photos of these marches in Vietnam with the “saffron revolution” in Burma in which the white of the Vietnamese marches stood equivalent to the crimson of the Burmese monks’ robes.⁷⁸ The vivid color, of course, recalls the “color revolutions” in many places involving tech-savvy, nonviolent popular demonstrations to bring down authoritarian governments, tracing back to the fall of the East Bloc, like the Velvet Revolution in 1989 Prague. The governments targeted by color revolutions invariably denounced U.S. instigation. In this case, I found no credible evidence to suggest that these Vietnamese white marchers relied on any American support in their demonstrations. And the color they had chosen perhaps should not be read as intent to follow in the genre of the color revolutions. Rather, I suggest that the choice of the color white was part of an iconography that lent itself to a distinct poetics of grief, shamanistically projecting a knowledge that revealed the process of dispossession and its impact on people.

In the case of the color revolutions that aimed to bring down authoritarian figures or governments, the color acted as a visual expression of presence. The “people,” in other words, “spoke” in a language of corporeal visibility, asserting their presence and their will in sheer number, creating a sight of bodies en masse by wearing the same color, or making the same sound. It was apparent that the protesters in these instances came together as a people appealing to the classical liberal political assumption that sovereignty was an expression of popular will. In Thailand, such claim of popular will might be contested as opposing sides adopted clashing colors of yellow and red. The expression of popular will through the demonstration of presence relied on the way color often functions. Spectators would see the visual effect of a mass of color, and think bodies. John Berger has noted that painting started with pigment as a way to make present the flesh of bodies. Pigment, in other words, makes bodies “palpable and immediate.”⁷⁹

In contrast, the Vietnamese white marchers seemed to negate a collective expression of will by way of a performed effacement. There were no red flags that would recall the Vietnamese socialist revolution in the earlier big demonstrations. The expressions and demands written on red banners during the June–July 2007 demonstration were replaced with writings worn on the bodies of protesters, either in the form of small pieces of paper or cloth signs, or directly written on the white of their shirts and hats. To passers-by in vehicles or to spectators who would not dare approach too close for fear of getting into trouble with the security police, it was near impossible to read these small, handwritten words disappearing into the white background of the signs or clothing, in contrast to the block letters

on huge red banners seen in the June–July 2007 demonstration. Often, the paper signs used in the white marches would bear poorly reproduced photos of loved ones who died, and whose cause of death was blamed on the loss of their land and livelihood in a direct or indirect way. The illegibility of the messages and images of the dead seemed ill-suited to expressing the will of these aggrieved people. The incompleteness of the messages, sometimes on torn pieces of paper, and the seeming inarticulateness evoked their absence even as the protesters silently congregated and moved on crowded streets vibrant with commotion.

Nowhere would spectators see the color white making bodies palpable, proximate, or countable. In Vietnam, ordinary people often choose to wear a white Western shirt when engaging in official business as a sign of propriety. White is also often seen in student uniforms, particularly with schoolgirls in white *áo dài* as the color of purity. The white tops that these marchers wore, however, were neither the Western shirts that would appear proper nor the white attire on the young that would speak of innocence. Instead, the shapeless shirts, hats, and sometimes makeshift face coverings worn by marchers recalled white as the color of grief in gestures of self-effacing mourning. These marches resembled funeral processions in which women and children wore white, bearing photos of their dead.

Without clear messages and demands, what spectators would feel, looking at all that inarticulate and opaque white, was the sense of grief. Grief over the loss of loved ones and things that exceeded the ownership of land itself. Things like community, family, and continuity that went into the attachment to that land. In this way, land grievance was not just about the land, but all that is in excess of land, against the speculative fantasy as another kind of excess projected through governmental tools of zoning and eviction for capitalist appropriation. It was this force in the fantasy's power of dispossession that the evicted residents experienced as grief. The white marchers in their grief belied the fiction that grazed and configured land for speculation in the first place. As such, they gestured toward the futility in the success of the Vietnamese revolution itself, in its previous rounds of socialist dispossession and its current rounds of capitalist dispossession through shadowy remains of late-socialist governmental apparatuses.

Without articulate calls for redress, those dispossessed of their homes called themselves *dân oan*. *Dân* means ordinary people, but also constitutes *nhân dân* or the People, an appellation overdeployed in the language of people's revolutions. *Oan* means having to suffer an injustice that remains hidden from view, illegible. *Dân oan*, in their funereal iconography, recalled the idea of *oan hồn*, or ghosts that appear to the living in order to tell their secrets about their wrongful and untimely deaths. These ghosts did not die the good deaths that were valorized by the state into legibility.⁸⁰ And like the secret borne by the aggrieved ghosts, their stories in the near-illegible signs and the badly reproduced likenesses of the dead were difficult to decipher because of the irreducible incongruence when the living try to bear the images and speak in the voices of the dead. The dead were

not being represented; they were summoned by marchers who appeared half dead themselves, dressed in the color of mourning attire but also of funeral shrouds. Rather than speaking for the dead, these marchers asked us to grieve with and for the living and the dead. Rather than showing they are the People, the marchers in this case showed the impossibility of fomenting the sovereign popular will in the paradigmatic representational politics through a demonstration of presence, because their sovereignty had been vacated when they were considered existentially superfluous to the land being incorporated by speculative capital. Instead of an alternative to the Enlightenment formulation of sovereignty coded in possession, be it private or collective property in liberalism or socialism, respectively, *dân oan* marchers seemed to claim an affective tie to the land, but formulated no alternative form of sovereignty in relation to it. Nor could they claim indigeneity after so many waves of historical dispossession.

Without a demonstration of sovereign will, these mostly women marchers in effect refused legible categories in any master code, be it the People versus its enemy, revolutionary bearers of history versus reactionary elements, or Man versus not-Man. In the iconography of these marchers, there was no People in palpable bodies assenting to live in the afterlife of national sovereignty as its heroes and alibis. The spectral appearance of *dân oan* revealed the apparitional character of the People. Such apparition also mimicked and therefore pointed towards the spectral projection of postcolonial national sovereignty enforced by necropolitical means of past war sacrifice and ongoing repression in the service of global speculative capital. The marchers' opaque gatherings showed themselves as a ghosting site, where they had been disappeared, treated as superfluous, where the destruction of their lives had gone unacknowledged.

These vagrant hauntings disrupted both the state's and capital's compartmentalization of time into a privileged future that would consume the present and its past. These hauntings by the evicted were not the revenge of the past against the future. Rather, they allowed us to apprehend the span of time at once like in Césairian poetic knowledge. The grief that recalled the whole of time could help us refuse the dictates of the speculated future that must make everything before it comprehensible only through its organization of time for profit. Caught up in the zone of exception in the present after the end of their world, the dispossessed had been dislodged from place and all the social relations that bound them to that place and time. Fleeting, they became the wandering apparitions whose passing through the city reminded their fellow citizens that the future, however firmly promised in visions of steel and concrete, was also transient in its assignation of value. If collective action means to bring about change together, often through the politics of recognition, then this was not a demonstration of common interest or lasting identity of a People, but an accusation of its vacuous capture. This poetic expression of grief as a chip off the world gestures towards the whole, including the whole of time that had been lost.

Yet, rather than remaining in the immaterial, their grief summons us to the materialist conditions of capitalist relations as well as the materiality of their ruined lives. Residing in the memory of their loved ones, these marchers carried their dead in and on their material body like the mediums of a séance. This bereaved habitation of the body feels familiar to refugees. Ocean Vuong evokes this materiality from a refugee lineage of death, disappearance, and brutality when he writes, "Show me how ruin makes a home / out of hipbones."⁸¹ The knowledge that these marchers transmitted to us is not quantifiable in metrics of land measurement, those square meters and hectares, nor in the numbering of decrees and land use laws, nor in amount of money convertible into soft national or hard global currencies. Rather than Hegelian and Marxian dialectics, their grief, read poetically, places the immaterial and the material in "tidalectic" relation and movement of overlapping historical waves of dispossession.

As a means of addressing social injustice, John Berger distinguishes poetry from prose. Prose, Berger suggests, was the writing form of choice in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to right what was wrong because prose still trusted in the power of reason to redeem the future through a revelation of truth. Our time, when we no longer trust in a redeemable future, is "the hour of poetry" because it "speaks to the immediate wound."⁸² If the color revolutions and larger land demonstrations of June–July 2007 trusted in a kind of Enlightenment reason and its contemporary expressions of popular sovereignty expressed through presence and will, then these small white marches left their negative imprint in a kind of poetics that spoke to the immediate wound. In its futility, such poetry, seen here in the ghostly images of the dead, the silent funereal movement of bodies that dispersed just as quickly as they had gathered, the not quite legible words on torn sheets of paper that evoked yet could not contain the anger, grief, or dismay, also allowed these emotional states to elude linguistic capture that had been coded with Enlightenment political reason.

The grief that came of this immediate wound resisted codification as universal truth accessible through reason. Contemplating American post-9/11 grief, Judith Butler points to a melancholic unacknowledgment of the loss of the others whose lives were taken by the United States and Israel, and a consecration of the loss of those whose lives were narrated into nation-building: "Some lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as livable life and grievable death?"⁸³ It follows that the act of public grieving for some becomes "an 'offense' against the public itself."⁸⁴ Rather than the Habermasian public sphere of reasoned discourse, Butler's insight points to a public sphere that constitutes itself on the prohibition of this public mourning of those who cannot be mourned. As addressed later in this book, this public ungrievability in places of settlement like in the United States has long pushed

refugees to mourn themselves as their own dead, a condition akin to that of these land mourners. While those in the large demonstrations counted on a public sphere of a shared discourse of socialist struggle by the People, which had not done them much good, the white marchers showed that such public sphere was constituted on the very ground of the ungrievable loss of those in this zone of exception, produced by political deployments of time in conjunction with the financialization of capital.

The white marches approached but never quite reached the point to be recognized as resistance. Like a poem that eludes summation, the self-effacing acts approached but never reached that universal knowability. They constituted a state closer to absence than presence, death than life, inarticulateness than articulate will, all the while drawing for us the shifting material and immaterial relations that held these binaries together in constellations. It was not that these marchers, these persons of loss, would not want to be fully compensated for all that was taken away, to have their loved ones returned to them, their world made whole, but that the despair, the impossibility of it all, could only be felt and exhibited in a grief opaque to such reason that had constituted subjecthood in an Enlightenment political formulation, be it liberalism or socialism. Incorporation by the authorities of the terms of their state of grief would have to make articulate, legible, intelligible, and transparent their demands issued from their location and their subjecthood. The marchers' whiting-out of such issuance made this incorporation impossible. Their grief renounced recognition within that structure because it mistrusted the substitution of another universality for the universal order, be it Man or the People. While it remained a moment of potentiality, this grief turned the universal order into a mere imminence, as it called us to our world. The grieving drew out the end of their world—the world—yet also impossibly signaled a residue in the oppressive master code of the human.

Assemblages of Laughter and Sorrow

Women Workers and Allegorical Fragments

“I complain [about extra hours] but with just my salary and subsidies (less than 150 US dollars a month), my children would not be able to go to school. This is the reason I must cling to the company and work like a machine. I know my body won’t have the strength to work like this for long, but I must work when I still can. Really, I feel like I would die with extra work and die without it,” a single mother with two small children lamented to a journalist her predicament as a factory worker in Vietnam as the country continued its earnest incorporation into global production.¹ We can hear in her speech a particular mode of production that organized her future death beyond the shop floor. To this worker, the process turned her into a machine-like body while she could still work to make ends meet, and it would leave her dead at the end of its process of extraction. Similarly, representing workers at a 2016 forum debating the Ministry of Labor’s proposed higher retirement age in Vietnam, Lê Thị Nga, a worker from the Pou Yuan factory, voiced her concern: “I am a garment worker. Forty-five years old and my eyes are already blurry, my hands shake, and I cannot compete with younger workers. I can see nothing left that my body can yield in another five years, so the current retirement age of 55 already exceeds my strength, let alone raising it further.”² If the previous chapter deals with how the conversion of land into capital in global financialization turned the former inhabitants into the existential surplus or ghosts of themselves, we now turn to the ways in which the global economy, with its financialization through consumers’ debt and offshore subcontracted production, required a feminized surplus labor force, from whose bodies it extracted living time. What remained were parts of a body that aged at accelerated rates. These workers’ bodies became ruined and fragmented in the temporal-spatial organization of contemporary capitalism that oriented them

to a future elsewhere, rendering them unable to enter into humanist sovereignty in the political sphere of postrevolutionary Vietnam. As the land protesters grieved for what was lost in the chrono-economics and politics of speculative land conversion, these workers, the majority of whom were women, contested their devaluation as a surplus labor force through organized action, wagering the worth of their bodies and making them visible as the site of ruinous state and capitalist practices. If these acts were not enough to reverse capitalist harm, they nevertheless pointed to tactical assemblages in the face of capture by capitalist deployments of progress and worth in the humanist model of sovereignty, albeit in the late-socialist moment. These low-waged working conditions in Vietnam resembled those of Vietnamese refugees who entered the global racialized division of labor in the United States and elsewhere two decades earlier. Both of these groups were subjected to racial capitalist assignment of value in labor employment through geographical reorganization of production as well as migration. Neither Vietnamese workers nor refugees were afforded conditions to access humanist sovereignty in the political sphere. If Vietnamese workers' organizing met with repression by a Vietnamese late-socialist state actively seeking global investment and job creation, refugee workers encountered racist political institutions in Western countries of settlement that marginalized them. Modes of recognition attentive to what connected their conditions in racial capitalism could allow us to think relationally across national boundaries and political regimes that separate nationals from refugees.

The position Vietnamese women workers occupied was one produced by post-Fordist capitalism reorganized since the 1970s around an intensified gender and racial division of labor in temporal spatial zones based on progressive valuation of human worth. Populations and places deemed less advanced along the progressive historiographic color line were devalued and utilized as such to reduce labor costs and recuperate higher profits given the energy price hikes in the 1970s. Even while it looked like the production assembly line was brought to wherever labor was devalued by locality, race, and gender, the process also relied on migration, temporary or otherwise. Not only were factories built in countries deemed less advanced and powerful, hence pressed into offering tax and other regulatory concessions to global capital; they were also placed in proximity to urban centers, connecting them to other services, transport nodes, and cargo ports within those countries. As the countryside within these countries was relegated to a further historiographic lag and therefore of lower worth compared to their cities, companies would recruit workers from these rural zones. Most workers working on this global assembly line migrated at least temporarily from the countryside. Their precarity at work would be compounded by issues of alienation due to their class and devalued status as outsiders to the urban environment. In this way, these women workers were caught in a process that also played out in global metropolises with racialized populations who were there as refugees and immigrants.

Vietnamese refugees who settled in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s found work that was organized to take advantage of the precarity of those who came from “backward” places and were racialized with less worth. Whatever parts of post-Fordist production were not yet offshored, they employed refugees and immigrants along the global gender and racial division of labor. From the late 1970s to the early 1990s, refugees worked in food processing and assembly line manufacturing. While many Vietnamese refugees who were men ended up in shipbuilding or electronic technician work, women often ended up in some kind of electronic assembly, or in garment sweatshops and piecework at home. Both my parents cycled through these kinds of low-waged jobs, with similar precarity in bodily damage, trading one part of their bodies for another. My mother’s fingers were shredded in glass lantern assembly work until she switched to soldering microchips onto circuit boards, breathing in toxic fumes. She suffered a heart attack shortly after she could no longer work these assembly lines. My father came home with hammered hands assembling skateboards to time quotas before he became a yet-to-be unionized electrician at the shipyard of San Pedro, where he collapsed with his first major stroke in the bilge of a ship with its high temperature and poor ventilation. Their work did not offer health insurance, and we could not access any kind of medical care for a decade before my parents received indigent care with their first heart attack and stroke. My parents and other refugees in the community often lamented their status as coolies, connecting their condition historically to the colonial use of low-waged Asian labor in Asia and the Americas. The French colonial government employed Vietnamese, Chinese, South Asian, and other Asian low-waged labor in French colonies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, especially on the rubber plantations of Cochinchina, now southern Vietnam.³ This would have been the first context in which Vietnamese refugees heard the word, with its implication of semienslaved labor. And of course, being in America, they could not miss the historical legacy of the recruitment of Asian surplus labor from the late nineteenth century. Vinh Nguyen has made this connection between refugee and coolie status.⁴ Growing up in the community, I heard this *cu li* lament as part of our refugee tongue, creolized in its multiple geographical applicability. In the context of North America, David Roh and others draw out the coolie robotic assemblage in a “techno-Orientalist discourse” that “constructs Asians as mere simulacra and maintains a prevailing sense of the inhumanity of Asian labor—the very antithesis of Western liberal humanism.”⁵ What connects the various coolie formations is of course this antithesis imagined within humanist horizons. Vietnamese workers and Vietnamese refugee workers cannot be reducible to one another in their modes of subjection and identification. Rather, they are connected to one another through disposable labor regimes that dehumanize them, aided by historically specific regimes of political governance.

In both of these contexts, people voiced bitterness and sorrow that prompted laughter in a reassemblage that allowed them knowledge and resilience. From

the damage and the time stolen from them, there was another story to be had. Some of the refugees I knew bought expensive shirts with their first paychecks to recover some self-worth. Many dedicated themselves to finding ingredients to innovate and share food dishes nourishing to their body and pleasing to their palate. My family went on picnics with other refugee families in local parks and on beaches where other immigrants also came to eat together and escape the tight, hot quarters that housed us. We tried to make lives as livable and rich as possible for ourselves under adverse conditions. And some refugees even tried to collectively ask their employers for better pay or working conditions, like the workers at the almond sorting and packing factory where my parents worked for a couple of years. Their ability to invent life in such regimes of devaluation allowed refugees to laugh about the sorrow of how they became coolies after liberating themselves from colonialism, and after settling in a country wrapped up in the rhetoric of prosperity and freedom. They laughed about the absurdity of the interdiction of the human behind their predicament because it allowed them access to a different sense of dignity in the ties and lives they forged with one another. Their precarity in racialized work in the late 1970s through the mid-1990s would be inherited by the women workers I address in this chapter from the late 1990s on, as globalization intensified and as Vietnam liberalized its Leninist command economy.

I look at some Vietnamese women workers' collective action, such as work slowdowns or stoppages in relation to their consumption, to think through how these women used their bodies as sites to counteract their surplussing.⁶ These strategies bring forth questions of class belonging or the (un)inhabitability of class identifiers that traditionally might have allowed workers to assert collective self-worth or mobilize via class solidarity familiar in socialist modes of mobilization. Yet, in late-socialist Vietnam, where the Communist Party worked hand in hand with global capital, women workers would encounter obstacles to the invocation of the symbolic power of the proletarian class. I look at aspects of the state's changing discourse on women in state-sponsored representation in public spaces such as state museum exhibits to explore how the state situated itself in relation to its interpellation of young women, most of whom came from the countryside, into workers for this global assembly line from the 1990s and beyond. If socialist historiography was about the deliverance of humanity through the advancement of the proletarian class, these women were not called upon to imagine themselves as proletarians at a time when the self-proclaimed socialist state served in the capacity of a neoliberal one in relation to global capital.

What then in terms of their own responses and our ability to understand their position, if they were not called into the time of the human? To contemplate these questions, I juxtapose what these workers do and say to a reading of a short story about young women who are about to join this disposable surplus labor force. Published in Vietnam in 1994, the short story "Tiệm May Sài Gòn" (The Saigon Tailor Shop) by Phạm Thị Hoài features the voice of an urban middle-class woman

narrator about a group of rural young women preparing to enter the global economy as workers and consumers only to end up with the dismembered corpse of one of them. Historically, print fiction in Vietnam since colonial times has remained a highly contested site as first colonial, then nationalist, and socialist authorities struggled with societal groups over symbolic representations.⁷ Juxtaposing the women workers' personal consumption and collective protest to this fictional story shows the capacities and limitations of both. The women's practices focus our attention on the body as the site of extraction and recuperation. The women's understanding and negotiation of their social location contrasts to the story's urban middle-class narrator's comedic maneuvering around expressions of dignity by working-class women in an adverse context. Yet, the story's sorrowful tone shows the limits of workers' recuperative efforts as they run up against the contradiction in Vietnam's temporal and spatial location within the global capitalist system. The urban middle-class location of the narrator's condescending voice provides comedy as it renders abject the social location of working-class women. Nevertheless, this abjection, enforced by the middle-class gaze and voice, allows the reader to be read into the matrices of subjectification for working-class women, which include the centering of middle-class consumption. Read in the context of Vietnam's location in the global economy, and juxtaposed to everyday responses by workers, the story's laughter and sorrow draw attention to the woman worker's disaggregated body, opening up new ways to think about the economic practices of our time.

Through the very body that is organized and disorganized in an economic intelligibility of profit, the worker's lament in the opening quote transmits to us the despair and outrage, and draws out empathy in us, momentarily restoring her to the position of speaker in a social web of beings. It is not my place to recuperate the humanity of workers to counteract the economic organization of their living and dying body. That is a strategy that these and other workers already took up themselves in the face of state-sponsored violence in a long history of workers' resistance against capitalist exploitation. Nor do I want to oppose the whole and living subject to the abject remainder of the fragmented and used-up body in its varying stages of progression towards death as the quoted comments suggest. What I want to think through is how strategies of humanist recuperation run up against the current dissolution of time's promise, and that there is a crisis of representation when it comes to reconciling the material destruction of workers with their imminent freedom in both socialist and neoliberal discourses. As such, I want to contemplate the relationality that emerges in assemblages connecting these women's fractured bodies and their acts to us when we read and listen. Together, we enter with them into contingent assemblages to be imagined in relation to the body-as-fragment in and beyond temporal-spatial states and capitalist intelligibilities of security and profit.

As the opening quotes indicate, the very materiality of the workers' bodies are made malleable, usable, and disaggregated as body parts are reassembled in

connection to machinery and shopfloor organization for specific tasks in industrial production. If eyesight goes because of poor lighting, then the lungs because of toxins and dust, then the back or the steadiness of the hands because of confined posture and repetitive motion, what remains from this depletion of the biological time of these surplus laborers is a remainder in the fragmented body. In other words, the Vietnamese woman worker undergoes a fragmentation of her body in capitalist production, organized through the redeployment of a fractured Enlightenment progressive historiography in spatial-temporal zones of lags, while losing her symbolic integrity in a crisis of representation as state socialist proletarian discourse (which was masculinist to begin with) accommodates global capital. Given this threefold fragmentation of humanist practice—bodily, temporal-spatially, and representationally—I find useful Walter Benjamin's treatment of the fragment in his exploration of the Baroque *trauerspiel*, the sorrowful mourning play as allegory, itself "a fragment, a ruin."⁸ It gives me a way to think about the ruined body not just as an abject site producing forensic knowledge, or even as merely posterior to the working body as its remainder, but also as fragment and ruin that can be reassembled beyond total capitalist and statist capture. Benjamin sees the Baroque mourning play as a response to a crisis of representation failing to reconcile the profane in the world of things to the Christian sacred order. The Baroque man's sorrow in his inability to access symbolic unity between the material and its transcendence is anchored in the materiality of human remains, particularly the Baroque death's head. Allegory foregoes such unity to embrace the fragment in the ruin that comes after man's fall from grace. This crisis arising from the recognition that the Baroque man has been abandoned to his fate might have set the stage for its reassemblage in the rise of European Enlightenment humanism from the eighteenth century on.

Our return to the Baroque allegorical mode of expression may at first seem ahistorical. In what we call the Baroque, roughly from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-eighteenth century, Europe engaged in venture capitalism that fueled colonial expansion and plunder, the enslavement of Africans and other subject populations, and technological achievements accompanying fundamental political and religious conflicts that fomented a crisis in sovereignty and representation. From such European economic and military brutalization of the reachable world, alongside the political tumult and spiritual fragmentation, arose the familiar Enlightenment formulation of the human that transferred sovereignty from monarch to citizens as masters of their own fate. Yet, our time of the expired humanist promise may allow us to return to the troubled roots of modern sovereignty to sift through the ruins once more. Benjamin's recovery of the Baroque allegorical is also a move out of time. Writing from a decade of the twentieth century in the fresh ruins of one world war as it rushed towards a capitalist collapse that required another world war for bailout, Benjamin saw in the Baroque the allegorical mode at the threshold of the modern humanism that led us to that moment. This move across

time allowed him to connect moments of ruin and see in the Baroque the utterly material fragments because their unity with their transcendence in the symbolic was no longer possible. I read Benjamin in a way that allows me to recognize elements of our ruined time in his reading of the Baroque. Benjamin's allegorical, as an untimely move, offers us a way to read practice and cultural work with the crisis of representation in our era's fragmentation of progressive historiographical time and the instrumental deployment of time's ruins by the developmentalist state or global capital. These workers become human fragments because of their work regime and because they can no longer enter into the unity of symbolic representation of the human, either as proletarian subjects or as neoliberal consumer-subjects.

The bodily remainder shows us the capitalist extraction of the worker's biological time to produce the speculable commodity and its future-time orientation at the expense of the present for many of us. Yet, just as importantly, the bodily remainder as fragment and ruin, with its insistence on the material broken off from symbolic unity of the redeemed human sovereign subject, begs interpretation and reinterpretation, waiting to enter into new assemblages. As socialist modes of subjectification go bankrupt, giving way to neoliberal ones that in our time bald-facedly celebrate the life-enriching and freedom-actualizing consumption in the progressive and conscience-bearing consumer subject, the ruined body as human fragment becomes perhaps one of the last sources for knowledge about ways of being that reject these matrices of humanist subjectification. Allegory has the potential for retelling another story from the moment of the symbolic exhaustion of the human. If allegory is speaking otherwise, then allegorical thinking about the ruined body as fragment in ruined time keeps open epistemological and ontological possibilities yet to be imagined. As Benjamin might say, the allegorical fragment leaps towards resurrection rather than redemption.⁹ If workers are refused entry into the time of the human in our current understanding of their condition, then we need to keep open possibilities in ways to know and to feel about how people act in rather crushing material conditions and the fragility of the human body.

SURPLUSING THE BODY, AND ITS REMAINDER

The 1990s marked Vietnam's first major push for industrialization and integration into the global capitalist economy, including industrial production and the rise of a consumers' market after the Vietnamese Communist Party decided to pursue this path under the terms of *Đổi Mới* or Renewal in December of 1986. The state, still governed by a communist party while becoming neoliberal in its governance, has justified its push for industrialization and modernization in slogans of *Công Nghiệp Hoá Hiện Đại Hoá Đất Nước* via integration into global capitalist production through narratives of progress, dovetailing its earlier calls for advancing to

industrial socialism. In an active Vietnamese labor force of 38 million in the 1990s, 36.4 percent work in industrial production, and women made up the majority of workers in light industry,¹⁰ where garment and electronic manufacturing predominated. Estimates in the 1990s put the rate of women workers at 80 percent in the textile garment industry, and at 75 percent in the Export Processing Zones.¹¹ By the 2010s, Vietnam became the second largest exporter of apparel and textile into the U.S. market, and the garment-textile sector became the largest source of private employment in Vietnam with more than 2 million workers.¹² And by 2017, the labor force in Vietnam has grown to 54 million, but the percentage of women working in textile, shoes, and garment remained high at 70 percent according to the Vietnamese Institute of Labor and Society,¹³ or even at 80 percent according to a Better Work report.¹⁴ Up until global capitalist incorporation, the Vietnamese socialist state valorized the proletarian class as the masculine bearer of history. Now that women made up the majority in global subcontracted production in Vietnam, how would they imagine themselves in the biological time-extracting conditions of their work and the life they could afford with their pay?

Marx observes that capitalist accumulation produces a “relatively redundant population of laborers, *i.e.* a population of greater extent than suffices for the average needs of the self-expansion of capital, and therefore a surplus-population.”¹⁵ The relative redundancy of this surplus labor force allows capital to use it for absorbing the shocks of market volatility by rendering it superfluous in times of crisis and employed in times of growth. One way to create such a surplus labor force is through land dispossession in the countryside. According to a 2013 Better Work report on Vietnam, roughly 84 percent of women workers and 82 percent of men workers came from rural areas.¹⁶ Beyond Marx’s description of capital’s need for a redundant workforce, the financialization of capitalism in our time expands its use of this surplus population. Neferti Tadiar notes the connection between the creation of a surplus labor force through land dispossession and contemporary finance capitalism as taking place not just in one economy but across the global North-South divide.¹⁷ Products made with cheap refugee, immigrant, and off-shored labor support consumers’ subject formation as well as credit in the global and national metropolises, feeding speculative finance capitalism. Grace Hong emphasizes “surplus labor as producing the very forms of racialized, gendered, and sexualized difference that capital requires but cannot entirely manage.”¹⁸

Indeed, by naming it *racial capitalism*, Cedric Robinson draws attention to how racialized, gendered, and sexualized difference has always played a role in how capitalism functioned as the latter made use of preexisting modes of differentiation.¹⁹ Following practices of the widespread importation of labor during the colonial period in what Lisa Lowe calls the “intimacies of four continents,” it has always been imperative that modern capital create labor reserves with its global reach. But if these surplus labor populations are to become superfluous when necessary, they must be differentiated and made vulnerable by their difference.

Roderick Ferguson points out that in “the United States, racial groups who have a long history of being excluded from the rights and privileges of citizenship (Africans, Asians, Native Americans, and Latinx, particularly) historically make up the surplus populations upon which U.S. capital has depended.”²⁰ Such difference may be produced by the state’s historical need for a “homogeneous citizenry,” thereby marginalizing nonconforming others.²¹ The state’s nationalist marginalization has usually been accompanied by a racist literature mirroring populist fear that a surplus population is exactly what capital historically needs. Eric Hayot notes the racist literature at the end of the nineteenth century that paints a picture of the Chinese coolie’s endurance for pain and repetitive tasks like an automaton while needing to “consume only the most meager food and lodging” in “an almost inhuman adaptation to contemporary forms of modern labor.”²² These surplus bodies were often differentiated from the white male working class as rice-eaters versus meat-eaters, to the point where calls for Chinese exclusions pitted “American manhood against coolieism.”²³ This racialized, gendered, and sexualized marginalization in the political realm enabled capitalist practices of employment.

In our time, David Harvey elaborates on the reigning mode of capitalist production since the 1970s as post-Fordism characterized by flexible accumulation, where capital takes advantage of differences it finds and reinforces or creates across the globe, including in the employment of labor.²⁴ Long Bui shows how global capital and rich nations envision a “roboticized, Asian future” based on racialized, gendered, and sexualized difference when, for instance, South Korea outsources to Filipina workers for their “telepresence” in English-teaching machines.²⁵ Those are but short hops from imaginings of Asian labor in the emasculated and automatized body of the coolie in the late nineteenth century, to refugee and immigrant low-waged bodies racialized as agreeable and disposable following the 1970s, to feminized Southeast Asian bodies gendered as docile and dexterous, needing little by way of biological requirements in our contemporary moment. This description of the automaton matches the feeling of becoming machine-like in the worker’s comment quoted at the beginning of this chapter. Not only does the surplus worker’s labor become alienated, but so does her entire body, as it enters into its life as a commodity in speculative calculation when industrial projects are financed. Imaginings of cheap labor feminized and racialized with expectations of dexterity and docility in the global South drove capitalist restructuring in the 1970s to offshore subcontracted work in the special industrial and economic zones like the nearly four hundred such zones currently in Vietnam.²⁶ This spatial differentiation operates by nationalized cultures within or across state-enforced borders, by state-created favorable taxes or other labor and environmental regimes to attract capital, and by the structure of power relations derived from both geopolitics and the global capitalist system with center-periphery or North-South inequalities.

The difference that feeds into flexible accumulation must be reinforced at every turn. If land dispossession allows for the creation of a surplus labor force just as

it did in Europe's early stages of industrialization, surplus workers from countries and their rural areas now imagined to be less developed and lagging in historiographic time become disposable, and these workers' shortened biological time becomes collateral to facilitate both investment in industrial projects and debt-based consumption accompanying finance capitalism. Angie Ngoc Tran found in Vietnam this maintenance of difference in low wages through piece rates, with long working hours during peak seasons that would allow the displacement of seasonal or other market contractions onto workers.²⁷ This new mode of accumulation involves counting on the state in these developing economies to repress dissent and keep workers from organizing. Until 2021, in Vietnam, all forms of workers' self-organizing beyond a state-run union were criminalized. Changes that went into effect in 2021 still restrict workers' ability to effectively organize.²⁸

The production and reproduction of difference involve relying on the state to temporally and spatially interpellate lower-class Vietnamese women from the supposedly backward countryside into workers on this future-oriented global assembly line. This trend continued to grow: the Vietnamese General Statistic Office estimates that the number of migrant workers from the rural areas working in various sectors in the cities could have been as high as five million in 2019, half of them women.²⁹ Young Vietnamese women found themselves valued as workers only in a global racialized and gendered division of labor where their bodies were devalued with cheap pay that could not sustain their basic needs, and yet enticed into desiring consumers' objects that they could not afford. Even if credit was yet to be extended to them in these earlier stages of their incorporation, their cheaply made products enabled the financialization of the consumer economy through consumer credit extended to their middle-class counterparts in their own country and beyond, in a web of markets connecting industrializing economies of the global South and postindustrial economies of the global North. Their racialized and gendered devaluation resulting in short working lives as disposable workers served contemporary capitalism by absorbing volatility in flexible accumulation and by facilitating its financialization through extended debt, which in turn becomes financial commodities for further speculation.

Clearly, the difference underwriting flexible extraction of value from a surplus population presents itself as not only spatial but also temporal in the financialization of capital. Forward-moving time, in terms of both future returns and historiographical progress, figures into the calculation and extraction of surplus value. As Tadiar puts it, "surplus populations are nothing but an entire global zone of disposable life-times for speculative maneuvers."³⁰ As future value fuels speculation on the yield calculated upon the extractable time out of the lives of workers, historiographical time allows zones of enduring temporal lag—that is, the "underdeveloped" or "emerging" economy, and within it, the even less developed countryside—to be created, differentiating them from the zones of consumption in the city or the global metropole. This temporal-spatial structure creates

zones of exception, as discussed in the previous chapter. Temporal-spatial zones constitute bodies in relation to each other as well as their intelligibilities. The body of the worker on the periphery, for example, would be constituted in relation to the middle-class body in the local urban centers as well as bodies of consumers in the metropolises.

Writing about the new slavery of our time, Kevin Bales notes the disposability of persons whose sexual or productive labor is coerced from them. Bales links such disposability to the shift in global just-in-time production from "ownership and fixed asset management" to control and appropriation for shorter-term labor needs.³¹ What Bales observes in the new slavery also applies to work regimes in flexible accumulation, rendering the worker, albeit in less immediately violent ways than the enslaved, "a consumable item, added to the production process when needed, but no longer carrying a high capital cost."³² Henry Giroux connects disposability to neoliberal biopolitics, which withdraws life support from groups such as immigrants, the poor, and people of color who are deemed to be a hindrance to market freedoms and consumerism.³³ As such, modern slavery is imagined in terms of disposability, and Vietnamese women workers are treated as disposable in the quick depletion of their working and even biological time.

Such depletion happens because of both overwork in bad conditions and salaries that cannot cover basic reproductive costs like food and housing. The plight of workers in Vietnam well illustrates such disposable use of a surplus workforce. One study prepared for the World Bank by a team of investigators including two scholars at the Indian Institute of Management looks at conditions of workers in the late 1990s at one of the five Nike factories in Vietnam owned by Korean and Taiwanese subcontractors.³⁴ The study found that this factory's labor pool depended on rural women migrants whose separation from their communities rendered them even more vulnerable than local residents. Workers were forced to work overtime every day for a salary of 40 US dollars a month, an amount "insufficient for survival," and that "besides unhygienic working conditions" where they were exposed to "toxic solvent-based cleaners and glues," workers were "subject to verbal and physical abuse by managers."³⁵ The garment workers I met at the turn of the century raised similar concerns: dim lighting, which strained their eyesight; long hours in stationary positions, leading to back pains especially when the peak season workday could go from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m.; lack of time for gynecological hygiene, particularly during menstruation, with limited breaks; and high density of dust particles from textiles, resulting in sinus infection, asthma, and bronchitis, among other ailments.³⁶ Government regulations were ill-enforced. One Labor Ministry study investigating 1,294 manufacturing plants registers heat, dust, and noise to be grave issues in garment-textile factories.³⁷ Workers inhaled dust, which could measure at fifty-two times the permitted standards.³⁸

Living conditions mirrored the disposability of workers at the factory. Many young women who came from the countryside to the city and its outskirts to

work in the garment factories lived in boarding rooms. The rooms I saw ranged from 3m × 3m, shared by two workers, to those that are 3m × 5m, shared by up to five or six workers. The quarters were cramped, and damp if there was a washing area in the room. One room I visited had a water pump inside. The noise was deafening and prevented conversation except during the intervals when the machine stopped. Many of these young women from the countryside could not prepare meals because they worked long hours, particularly during peak periods, and were too tired after work to make sure that they ate well. The workday sometimes did not allow enough time for lunch breaks, or the piecework system compelled workers to skip lunches and breaks to complete more items. Some workers said they went without food at times because it took too much time to go down to the cafeteria to eat, or they could not afford to eat regular meals at home.³⁹

These conditions have not much improved in the decades since the turn of this century. More recent Vietnamese news outlets continue to report on the shocking living conditions of workers that continued. One pregnant worker showed a reporter how she made do with a 7,000 VND meal, an amount that converted to about 30 US cents and bought her a bit of fried processed gluten and leftover rice.⁴⁰ While a manager claimed that workers' health is fully insured, and that medical expenses as well as missed wages are paid by the factory, workers told a different story about the healthcare facilities provided by employers.⁴¹ A shoe factory worker complained that health insurance required the worker to pay a percentage of her salary, and the quality of care was very poor with very long waits.⁴² In short, toxic working environments, long working hours, substandard living quarters, hunger, and ill-health plagued workers in the early stages of Vietnam's incorporation into global production in 1990s, and they continue today.⁴³

This is a form of necroeconomics, where life is extracted through low-waged time units. The piece-rate system in Vietnamese factories was calculated based on how many units the factory expected the worker to complete per hour. This rate of production per hour was then translated into the piece rate, so physical conditions that would interfere with work, as well as any seasonal or market downturns, would be borne by the worker, stabilizing speculation.⁴⁴ This system of extraction of life was backed by neoliberal governance on the part of the Vietnamese state.⁴⁵ These workers were worked to exhaustion, and replaced with new workers. The number of Vietnamese workers would drop sharply after thirty years of age, and to a mere 5 percent after age forty.⁴⁶ To refer to the exhaustion of her material body, Ms. Nga in her quoted statement uses the phrase *hết xí quách*, which literally translates to running out of even leftover parts of pigs or cows like bones, sinews, and fat used for soup base and eaten as the last edible bits from an animal. What she gestured to was her consumed body, on its way to becoming useless and replaced in her disposability to capitalist production. What this process leaves behind is the remainder of the ruined body. As the site of capitalist organization of this extraction from the span of a worker's working life was the worker's body,

it became the site of workers' collective action taken in a changed field of symbolic representation of the proletarian class in a socialist sovereignty.

COLLECTIVE ACTION AND THE WAGERED BODY

Given Vietnam's history of official socialism, one might expect that workers could easily organize in the name of "the working class" or "the proletariat." Yet, labor activists in Vietnam as a matter of course found themselves subject to government harassment, police arrests, beatings by police and by civilians employed by the security police, imprisonment, or even disappearance. As Vietnam moved deeper into its role within the global capitalist system in the first decade of this century, well-known women labor activists like Lê thị Công Nhân and Đỗ Minh Hạnh repeatedly experienced beatings, arrests, and imprisonment with and without prison sentences at the hands of the state. Lê Trí Tuệ, one of the founders of the Independent Labor Union (Công Đoàn Độc Lập) that formed illegally in 2006, reported multiple beatings by both civilians hired by the security police and policemen in uniforms before he fled to Cambodia in 2007, applied for asylum, and promptly disappeared to this day despite efforts by his family to engage international assistance in finding him.⁴⁷ The situation compelled Human Rights Watch to investigate and issue a document in 2009 detailing "Vietnam's suppression of an independent workers' movement."⁴⁸ The document reported fresh crackdowns leading up to and following Vietnam's hosting of the 2006 Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit, when "dozens of activists—including eight independent trade union advocates—were sentenced to prison in 2006–7 on dubious national security charges, joining more than 350 persons imprisoned for political or religious activity in Vietnam since 2001."⁴⁹

The end of 2006 was Vietnam's formal debut as a player in the global economy. Its hosting of the APEC summit was quickly followed by its coveted admission into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in January 2007. The WTO grew out of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the American-founded international body to promote free trade at the foundation of the post-World War II liberal order. This was not the first crackdown on labor organizing outside of the state-sponsored union, but it was the biggest since Vietnam opened its economy to global capitalism. That both worker agitation and government crackdown coincided with Vietnam's accelerated integration into the global economy was significant. Human Rights Watch, among other sources, reported that in 2006 alone, 350,000 workers participated in 541 strikes deemed illegal because they were not authorized by the state-sponsored union.⁵⁰ The state under the Communist Party had to protect the latter's monopoly of rule written into the Vietnamese constitution, and any civil organization independent from the mass organs of the Communist Party posed a potential threat. Both the security of party rule and of capital investment dictated violent repression of workers' demands. Offering a

docile surplus labor force was what allowed Vietnam and its ruling Communist Party a place at the global table. Collective action short of forming independent unions directly in competition with the state union was not easy either, as the state feared these would gather into more organized movements.

This state vigilance in its fear of losing control bears out in the 2021 authorization for workers to form representative organizations that limited such activity to the confines of each company, preventing them from becoming either a real force for labor bargaining across an industry, potentially replacing the state general union or, worse, a social and political force in competition with party monopoly.⁵¹ Workers felt a sense of alienation from promises of a brighter future. A young woman from the countryside working the garment assembly line on the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City complained that she did not see any changes in the years she had worked despite the state's proclaimed industrialization and modernization project. She explained that she would not be able to continue for long, as this work significantly affected her eyesight and the lint dust in the shop caused chronic inflammation of nasal passages. Yet, management and state health insurance refused to acknowledge that her condition was work-related.⁵²

Nor did the workers at this factory, most of whom were women, stop at identifying the conditions and the people responsible. Unable to get the state-sponsored union's help, dozens of workers organized a work stoppage to demand the "diligent pay" the company owed them. The state-sponsored union refused to pay for their lost income in the work stoppage. Company management threatened to fire strikers and brought in a contingent of armed security guards to intimidate them, taking down names of those who would not break ranks with fellow strikers. One worker explained the stakes involved: "I ask you, workers all have worries facing the line of security guards. We are renters who depend on our salary. We can't go without any part of it. We do not dare quit because we need our bowl of rice."⁵³ Enumerating the material requirements of living—rent, food—she showed how workers in effect wagered their bodies' subsistence to demand their due, in the face of physical intimidation. They put their bodily existence on the line.

In such acts, workers not only fostered collective knowledge about and collective action for their interests vis-à-vis owners and management, they also countered the state's detached and empty discourse about them by showing its historical promise of future deliverance to be bankrupt. They countered it with a performance, not of official Marxist-Leninist materialism, but of the materiality of bodily stakes, revealing their present embodiment of capitalist relations.

The temporal language of revolution calling the proletariat into their sovereign place in history now contained mere apparitions of itself as the material itinerary of its symbolic field became vacuous and ruined. By staking their bodies with material requirements in a work regime that treated these bodies as disposable, these women workers called out the state's bluff and the capitalist gambit. They had to fight from their worksite to reveal that the state's proletarian names for them no

longer cut the path across the interval between the material and its transcendence in the symbolic.

FROM PROLETARIAN VANGUARD TO GUARDIAN OF THE FEMININE BODY

A 1931 Indochinese Communist Party document reminded cadres that the party did not belong to all “the wretched” or *cùng khổ*, but solely to the proletariat.⁵⁴ All through the nationalist mobilization for two wars, first against the French, and then against the Americans, the party had always maintained this proletarian identification. In practice, the exclusive class identification of proletariat was translated to a party membership based on “belief in the party’s ideology and obedience to the party’s regulations.”⁵⁵

True to its Leninist allegiance, the aggregate subject of proletarian sovereignty was the Communist Party, which promised collective redemption in a future time. Tố Hữu, the poet laureate of the Vietnamese revolution, imagined in 1941 the resolve arising out of the worker’s life: “The proletarian heart must carry the love of humanity / Our will, once forged forever advances!”⁵⁶ Yet, in our time, the poet’s “forever” had run out, and there was to be no going forth except in the fragmentation of progressive time into the promise of future dividend and consumers’ plenitude, both out of reach for the worker.⁵⁷ The redemptive time of the human might have lit the way in the expectant decades of the twentieth century, especially in the colony that was Vietnam. But the time after the revolution and liberation had become an “absolute end of a temporal journey.”⁵⁸

Integration into the global capitalist economy through the reforms of Đổi Mới meant drastic changes to the class system that existed in North Vietnam before the end of the war. There was a bourgeoisification of the new moneyed class that consisted of party-cadres-turned-capitalists, the so-called “red capitalists,” and a rising middle class in the new market economy. Social stratification became a hot topic among party theoreticians and social scientists by the turn of this century.⁵⁹ To retain its relevance and justify its continued monopoly of rule in Vietnam, the Communist Party parlayed images and narratives about valiant workers into a national goal of “Industrialization and Modernization of the Nation” proclaimed on billboards and mobilization posters dotting the nation’s landscape. The delivery of freedom was still always coming for workers in a promissory future. The state sponsored a union for all workers, the Tổng Liên Đoàn Lao Động Việt Nam or Công Đoàn for short. As Angie Trần has argued, the negotiations between this state general union and employers were complex and its efforts included its state-owned press coverage of working conditions, as well as lobbying for minimum wages and other labor laws.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, this Công Đoàn from the beginning of marketization mediated workers’ interest with little substantive input from workers, who were criminalized for self-organizing. And this union did so from the

location of a state whose policies became neoliberal to facilitate economic growth through the incorporation of Vietnam into the global economy. As mentioned, from 2021, employees are finally allowed to form self-funded representative organizations within each company, but not across companies, even within one manufacturing sector. These would not be trade unions. The only legal trade unions remain part of the state general union Công Đoàn.⁶¹ All other self-organizing activities on the part of workers remain criminalized as of this writing.

The speaking worker in Tố Hữu's poem is a man who resolves to trade the lives of his wives and children for those of ten thousand other women and children because he must "sweep aside petty loves / to embrace the great life."⁶² The proletarian subject seeking sovereign will in the revolution is decidedly a masculinist one whose women and children are exchangeable. As Vietnam opted for integration into the global capitalist economy, the party-state, that old vanguard of the masculine proletarian revolution, had to refashion itself the guardian of feminine virtues that bound women to global capitalism.

Catering to both the labor and consumption demands of the global economy, the state awkwardly incorporated new elements into how it imagined women at the intersection of transnational production and the commodity market. An example of this discourse was evident in the 2002 exhibits at the Women's Museum in Hanoi. In one exhibit, new color photos of women working in garment factories joined older black-and-white ones to establish historical continuity with the older discourse valorizing workers. One life-size installation showed a full mock-up of a woman engaged in home textile work for Nha Trang Textile and Garment Company, thus bridging the productive and reproductive realms, the public and the private, marking the feminine character of "Vietnamese women." The goods produced in bulk by the women workers were displayed as textile and garment products, filling orders for both domestic and global consumption. In this form of official representation, the state attempted to capture women in their role of workers for the global economy.

But such embodied representations of femininity and production work became inadequate as the market economy also needed to make consumers out of women who could afford such status. The state, in its clumsy attempt to fold within its own rhetoric feminine subjects with new desires produced by the commodity phantasmagoria of the market, settled on beauty pageants and fashion. In these exhibits, women were shown in pageants where they embodied the nation by wearing the proper attire like the *áo dài* and *áo bà ba*. These body markers of national culture now entered the market as fashion items. The less than subtle state representation of women in relation to work and to market goods marked a space of anxiety that the state had to guard in order to regulate Vietnamese femininity, which connected laboring to consuming selves. If the revolution promised a final resolution to the historical contradiction in capitalist relations, it was now content to replicate the contradiction in the subjection of women to productive and consuming

roles. It is to this place of contradiction that Phạm Thị Hoài's story speaks with laughter and sorrow.

THE COMEDY OF SORROW AND DISMEMBERMENT

"The Saigon Tailor Shop" positions the urban middle-class narrator and the working-class characters in relation to consumption. As rural women came into the outskirts of cities to work in the garment factories that treated their bodies as disposable, they came into a field of advertising that aimed to turn urban middle-class women into consumers in the creation of a local market. Working-class women attempted to recover the worth of their bodies in relation to surplus labor regimes by creating meanings for the products they could afford. I have made the argument elsewhere that garment workers in the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City consumed national and transnational body products—clothing, accessories, toiletries—in ways that showed they contested transnational work discipline enforced by factory management, as well as deploying notions of authenticity, nation, and foreignness to legitimize their position within a local context of social stratification.⁶³ Such complex negotiations exceeded what the late-socialist state could offer, shifting from proletarian sovereignty, imagined as working men owning the means of production, to its latter-day patriotic femininity. Phạm Thị Hoài's "The Saigon Tailor Shop" is based on the author's experience training at a sewing shop, and it is one of the few Vietnamese literary works in the global era that deal at length with women in garment work. Though written in an urban middle-class narrator's voice that tends towards the abject and misses women workers' resourceful negotiations in consumption as well as their collective action focusing attention on their body as the site of capitalist organization, the story speaks to this location of profound contradiction in which these women were caught.

"The Saigon Tailor shop isn't in Saigon, isn't in California," begins Phạm Thị Hoài's story.⁶⁴ Saigon is the old capital of the vanquished Republic of Vietnam, renamed Ho Chi Minh City by its northern conquerors. And California is home to the largest community of South Vietnamese refugees. Saigon, with its remittances from refugee relatives and residual business habits from before unification, was quick to revive to an economy no longer entirely dependent on allocation within the socialist state's central command economy that punished this city's inhabitants. And if refugees meant traitors to the Vietnamese state and uncivilized elements to be assimilated to the American one, their home in California still beckoned to many Vietnamese as a place of future promise.

At the start of Vietnam's global integration in the 1990s, both Saigon and California signified desirous market prosperity. The negative syntactical construction locates the shop in a geographical space of lack. The story's readers find out later that the shop is located in the current capital of Hanoi, where it gathers roughly twenty young women from the countryside to study under two

male “professors” how to cut and sew garments that will be sold under fake South Korean labels. Ms. Snow, a middle-aged woman, runs the shop. She is known to the young women as Mamma, like a madam managing and channeling the sexual energy of her charges in a new market economy. The narrator, a young Hanoi middle-class woman, comes upon the place in her search for an occupation in a rapidly changing Vietnam. The closest that this tailor shop comes to Saigon is its location next to a railroad crossing on the North-South Unification Express.

All day, the “girls” calculate, cut, sew, and shout out body parts of garments: collars, sleeves, armpits, breasts, buttocks, legs . . . Amidst the dismembered garment parts, the young women try to reassemble themselves into new incarnations as they undress and dress, open and close their thighs, modeling each other’s latest urban middle-class fashion imitations. The narrator becomes the model of choice among the twenty country girl imitators because she cuts an “urban figure,” the closest they could come to a Saigon appearance. The narrator takes pride in modeling an imagined middle-class fashionability, and in her ability to speak a “Vietnamese language that takes its time with punctuation marks,”⁶⁵ in contrast to Mamma. Mamma speaks Vietnamese in one endless run-on sentence. It is as if she is perpetually trying to catch up with the new speed of life in the new economy, or as if she is trying not to let loose her girls in the market through the gaps that might creep in between her words:

. . . no cleaning and leaving the iron plugged in it’s like you just shit right there leave it to this old bitch to clean it all up I get to carry this big stomach around to serve you young whores and what are you learning but to be sassy and you can’t sew in a straight line buttons hanging out all over the place like cunts button holes full of threads and watch it or I’ll chase all of you out of here this is a decent business people here are educated they know poetry properly this ain’t a whorehouse this ain’t the kind of whorehouse you can walk in and out anytime you like this is not a market this day and age who’s feeding who and if not me then let the dogs love you . . .⁶⁶

Mamma’s declaration that “this ain’t a whorehouse” or “a market” curiously echoes the tension in the state’s discourse as guardian of proper femininities at the juncture of global production and the commodity market. The state’s frequent antiprostitution campaigns were reminiscent of Mamma’s insistence exactly when Vietnam became a market as well as a supplier of industrial and sexual labor.⁶⁷ In the story, the women’s desires, expressed in their sexual exhibitionism through material things, are to be harnessed in their transformation into urban working women. Both the state and Mamma must discipline the young women precisely at the joining of the two demands the global economy makes on them: to be a feminized worker and a feminized consumer, corresponding to a laboring and a desiring body.

What constitutes whoring in Mamma’s guardian discourse is the open pursuit of goods in the face of the women’s lack of docility and dexterity in their work. This

puts them in a compromising position as though their genitals are hanging out. It is the inability to control excesses in their desires that marks the women as unseemly and earns them the connection to whorehouse and market. Such anxiety has precedents in the history of modern capitalism. Rita Felski reads in French novels of the late nineteenth century the same anxiety about young women from the countryside seduced by city goods to the point of “selling their bodies” to satisfy their newfound “appetites.”⁶⁸ Instead of revealing the market conditions that pressure young women to want things, Mamma’s speech calls them whores in order to discipline and channel their libidinal energy into docile and dexterous work.

Herbert Marcuse suggests that in a capitalist market economy, “merchandise which has to be bought and used is made into objects of the libido.”⁶⁹ The narrator’s sexualization of the young rural women in the sewing shop does not take the form of sexual liaisons with men, but of the desire for things that conjure up urban and middle-class fashionability as femininity. In this way, the middle-class narrator mirrors the libidinous workings of the market and displaces them onto the working-class women. The story dwells on lengthy descriptions of the young women’s endless appetite for urban clothing as they learn to sew the same items that would appeal to other young women like them who have come from the countryside to work in the city. It is a desire that escalates in its tenor. At first, the young women are taught how to make outfits consisting of light blue shirts and purple pants because Mamma thinks they would appeal to women from the countryside. The workers-in-training themselves soon become “intoxicated with pleated collars and puffed sleeves.”⁷⁰ Under the aesthetic tutelage of the male professor from the School for the Arts, “Orchid,” the most successful urban imitator in the place, forsakes country tastes. She makes and sports a smart outfit of pink jacket with white miniskirt. During one of Mamma’s anxious disciplinary run-on sentences, Orchid threatens to place herself in front of the train:

Orchid came down. She was wearing her favorite, the pink overcoat and white miniskirt. High heels. Lipstick. Hair like a waterfall. She dropped down step by step, stopping on each, her legs parting and closing, mesmerizing. Halting in front of Ms. Snow, she said, “Mamma, you don’t stop, I’m going to put my head in front of the train.”

Ms. Snow wanted to but couldn’t. When she had a crisis, her avalanches just wouldn’t stop. Orchid rushed out on the streets, crawled through the barriers, and placed herself across the tracks. When all heard the screeching breaks and ran out, it was too late. She was cut into three, the mesmerizing legs pointing toward the shop, her hair falling toward the flower shops. Her coat and her skirt were red. You could only see the pink and the white if you looked close enough.⁷¹

This outfit becomes the rage among Orchid’s peers even after they witness her body in it dismembered by the Saigon-bound train. Elizabeth Grosz suggests that erotic desires disaggregate the body-image, that lust is connected to the horror of the

dissolution of bodily organization.⁷² According to the narrator, the young women in the story rush to their disaggregation because of their consuming desires for these libidinal objects in the phantasmagoria of a commodity economy, which contrasts with what I found in the practices of women workers in the same time frame, as mentioned above.

The “Saigon Tailor Shop” narrator’s depiction of working-class women and their desires for material things departs from earlier depictions of rural women in Vietnamese fiction written by men. In the 1930 novel *Con Nhà Nghèo* (The Poor) by Hồ Biểu Chánh, Lựu, another rural woman, is forced into a sexual relationship and impregnated by the landlord’s son.⁷³ Another man from her own class, an honest farmhand, falls for her and offers to adopt the bastard son. Through Lựu’s active decision to marry the man from her class and transfer her son’s paternity to him, she undoes the landlord’s appropriation of her body and violation of her class. To wash off the moral taint, Lựu gives away the jewelry given to her by the landlord’s son during his seduction of her. The male authors of the older generation insisted on integrity based on patriarchal morality in the face of temptations and desires as their women characters are redeemed into the symbolic representation of their social location. In Phạm Thị Hoài’s story, where both the author and the narrator are women, the old patriarchal order in the countryside is not valorized as the origin that begs a return in its reorientation of proper desire. There is no promise that this would be the source of wholeness for the young women. Orchid’s father comes to the city looking in vain for her. He appears in the story as a pathetic figure reduced to tears by his failure and his loss. Nevertheless, the story still posits this origin as the place left behind when the women turn toward their own alienation in their inability to enter into the symbolic name of either workers or urban middle-class consumers. To counter this disaggregating effect in the new symbolic field, the young women in this story try to reconstitute themselves by assembling their objects of libido in the garment parts that double as surrogate body parts. The clothes as libidinal objects are accessible to these young women only through the armpits, breasts, buttocks, thighs, and shoulders of the garments that they must assemble into a bodily whole as if these were parts of an already dismembered body. These future workers assemble the parts to call forth the future as a vision of wholeness through either consumers’ fulfillment, or alternatively, the fulfillment of their own labor. Neither proves feasible in the larger context of low-paid and alienated work that awaits them.

Terry Eagleton identifies a sense of the ludicrous that draws comedy out of the mismatch between concept and its percept, as when readers of Schopenhauer perceive his lofty and relentlessly grim concepts of the world through his use of metaphors of lowly and vulgar body parts.⁷⁴ Through her urban middle-class narrator, the author also draws comedy out of the ludicrous as mismatch: the conduct unbecoming on the part of the young rural-women-turned-workers when they clothe themselves in things external and inappropriate to them, things that would

befit the narrator with her contrasting urban middle-class figure. This functions as a prohibition against the young rural women entering the symbolic order of neoliberal subjectivity via consumption. This prohibition against workers consists of their lack of material means to afford nice things as enforced by their wages and the market, as well as their lack of discerning knowledge and suitability to wear the nice things as policed by middle-class tastes. Feminist scholar Laura Kipnis has pointed out the homology in Bakhtin between “lower bodily stratum and the lower social classes.”⁷⁵ Phạm Thị Hoài’s use of unadorned or vulgar names as stand-ins for body parts draws out the discrepancy between the young women’s lowly position and the middle-class status they covet. The story draws its laughter from that sense of absurdity and incongruity. The depicted class-based mismatch heightens the hilarity of Mamma’s torrents of superfluous words, lowering the state’s high-minded revolutionary poetics of the past about the mission of the proletariat down to the guardian discourse of a madam. In the end, the story’s ludicrous comedy draws on the mismatch between the humanist promise of sovereignty for workers and regimes of economic interdiction.

Saigon, the former southern capital, haunts from within the existent glare of the triumphant renaming of it into Ho Chi Minh City. The narrator laments that she herself, by paying the dues for training at the sewing shop, is “purchasing a ticket on an express train ride into a future full of market-stall shirts and windbreakers marked with South Korean labels.”⁷⁶ Saigon in its association with capitalism beckons from the postsocialist future, but only as a ghost of itself in its vanquished past. To the rural women in the story, Saigon serves as a destination of escape and it marks the tailor shop as a “blackish engine crowded with dreams.”⁷⁷ For these northern women, Saigon cannot provide knowledge about their material conditions because it had been erased by the socialist North. The name Saigon becomes the stuff of dreams, immaterial, phantasmatic. As Saigon is relegated to the past of the ancien régime, it returns as an elsewhere in a future time of plenitude made for longing.

As the story performs middle-class policing of working-class consumption, it also highlights the women’s symbolic disaggregation as they are oriented towards a phantasmatic fulfillment. Such disaggregation results from the location that Vietnam occupies in the global economy. In its incorporation of racial and temporal-spatial differentiation for maximum profits, transnational capital treats Vietnam as a supplier of low-waged feminine labor and as an emerging market while holding up promises of developmentalist and humanist fulfillment. The state, responding to these simultaneous demands, no longer tries to produce women who can subsume themselves in relation to obsolete categories of masculinized proletarian subjects. Rather, it must now manage women as feminized libidinal subjects who at the same time must work to produce what the local or transnational market demands. The Saigon Tailor Shop is a site that mirrors the contradiction in Vietnam’s temporal-spatial location in the world.

The story suggests that the disaggregation happens through the place-in-time towards which the market directs the young women's desires. The train that dismembers Orchid runs on a track that should connect the material bodies to their symbolic representation by connecting their lives at the Hanoi shop to the Saigon of their aspiration. Instead, this path cuts right through Orchid's material body:

This was the Unification Train on an express run to Saigon. Still owing her tuition, Orchid could now leave the three pieces of her body in Hanoi and send her soul, without paying the fare, directly to Saigon. She could use her real name there. No way her father would find her there.⁷⁸

The narrator views Saigon as where the young women could recover their true proper names given to them by their fathers at home, rather than their fake urban names adopted when they came to Hanoi. In this phantasmatic Saigon, Orchid could finally escape her rural origin, presided over by the pathetic father. As it turns out, Orchid's articulation with her false Hanoi name leads to her disaggregation; but her articulation with her rural given name, "Tiny," could only happen in an immaterial place of their fantasy, always placed in an out-of-reach future time that admits not her body but her soul.

As the urban middle-class narrator attempts to find a gainful occupation for herself, she displaces her own temporal-spatial confusion in the global division of labor onto rural women destined for the global assembly line. As a young woman living in Vietnam, the narrator is also called upon to become both a worker and consumer. Yet, as a member of the Vietnamese urban middle-class, she places herself in the role of desirous model of urban femininity who understands fashion. By rendering the libidinous existence of the rural women ludicrous, the narrator enables herself to leave behind both the training shop and her tenuous boyfriend. By showing the dismemberment of the rural-turned-working-women, the narrator attempts to preserve her own integrity. This disturbingly comic portrayal of the young women's desires as ludicrous places middle-class and urban significations as *external* to working women, thus setting the latter up for certain failure to fit an intelligible collective name within a coherent symbolic field. At the same time, in showing the disaggregating effects on these women in the humanist symbolic field given the racialized and gendered temporal-spatial global division of labor down to the subnational level, the ludicrous element in the story prevents readers from believing that a middle-class consumer's future awaits the young women in the story. It thus questions the ways in which the promised national progress and capitalist prosperity function to organize life for those relegated to disposability.

Butler reworks Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection to draw attention to the "exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed," requiring "the production of a domain of object beings," those "not yet 'subjects'" in "unliveable and uninhabitable zones."⁷⁹ Reading the story's urban middle-class displacement of temporal-spatial contradiction onto rural women next to workers' consumption practices

or collective action, we could say workers resisted their assignment to these zones that surplus workers into abject beings. In juxtaposition, the actual workers' articulation of their physical condition and their responses in consumption practices or collective action hamper our reading of the ludicrous in the story. Nevertheless, the story's deployment of the dismembered corpse allows us to explore the potentials of the abject to threaten the boundaries of the subject and its foundational repressions in neoliberal sovereignty. The corpse, the exemplary abject, irrupts into and threatens the humanist symbolic order as it exhibits its irreducible materiality. The corpse and its severed or disintegrating parts can frighten in their utter refusal to console us with the web of meanings that constitutes our subjecthood. Orchid's dismembered corpse spooks Mamma to the point where she must recapture its site in rituals beyond socialist or neoliberal humanism. Mamma spends her days replenishing offerings of flowers and incense to Orchid's spirit on the track as the train crushes them daily. Perhaps Orchid's fate can be read as a double act, given the material stakes made apparent by the actual workers' collective action that wagered their bodies as discussed above. Orchid may have been dismembered by answering the callings emanating from the contradictions in the economy. But she also claims her compromised existence by wagering her body in the most dramatic way she can think of in order to stop Mamma's torrents of disciplinary speech covering up the material conditions in which she and other women are caught. Before Orchid's death, Mamma merely fulfilled the state's guardian function in relation to working-class femininity. After Orchid's death, Mamma fulfills another of the state union's functions: taking care of the funerals, the spiritual life of workers, still falling short of addressing the materiality of their life and death. But as a result of Orchid's wager, Mamma adopts the young woman posthumously as her own, acknowledging her accountability for both the young woman's life and the ultimate consequence in her death.

The workers' body-focused articulation and action allow us to infuse materialism into our reading of the story. The story prepares no feasible space for a common name that could belong to the women captured in global production and its social imaginings. The story's comedy merely enunciates the errant path that leads not the bodies to the name, not the material place of the young women's rural-urban trajectory to the symbolic proletarian sovereign of history, but to death by dismemberment on the railroad track. There is to be no reconciliation between the material precarity of the woman and the immaterial phantasmatic of the commodity. If the South lagged behind the North in the latter's Marxist historiographic chimera at the moment of unification, the North now lags behind the South in capitalistic dreaming at the postrevolutionary moment. The story reveals the impossibility of unification between North and South in their temporal mismatch, between the women and their calling, between their present and the promised future. If the political unification of North and South could only happen by bloody war, symbolic unity in historiography simply did not happen after war.

This comedy of the ludicrous appeared at the moment of a crisis of representation. And with Orchid's impending fate, the laughter takes us to sorrow.

Benjamin makes the distinction between the classical tragedy that contains a mythical heroic dimension and the Baroque *trauerspiel*, the sorrow play, that lives under the crushing weight of "the profane world of things."⁸⁰ And "comedy," writes Benjamin, "is the essential inner side of mourning which from time to time, like the lining of a dress at the hem or lapel, makes its presence felt."⁸¹ Phạm Thị Hoài's comedy draws out the ludicrous in the discrepancy between the market's twin expectations of feminized labor and feminized consumption, and between the state's proletarian pronouncements and its neoliberal management of such contradictions. Ultimately, the comedy leads us to sorrow following Orchid's death as the consequence of such contradictions, in this world of things.

Baroque sorrow acknowledges the separation of Man from God, and death as the material fate to be claimed by Man in the emblem of the Baroque death's head. This emblem holds "everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful."⁸² In its crisis and conflict, this period offers less redemptive hope than the "transitoriness" and "infinity" in the "realm of dead objects."⁸³ Sovereignty had collapsed under the weight of the arbitrariness of its own state of exception when God no longer gave it meaning. The Baroque drama revels in the sorrow that precedes the Enlightenment's herald of humanist time progressively unfolding as Man claims his destiny. In the Enlightenment, Man would reconstitute his sovereignty, popularized in republican forms of government. But now, in our time of Scott's "absolute ruin," we can revisit the "untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful," free of the anticipation of humanist progressive time and its telos of sovereignty. Ours, like the time of the Baroque, is one of brutal plunder, bloody conflict, exhausted hope, ravaged bodies and minds in the face of riches and technological achievements. In other words, a time of the fragment. If the Baroque man was but a fragment cleaved from God's creation and whose existence resided in the allegorical mode because symbolic unity with the divine order had collapsed, the Vietnamese woman worker shows us an existence in the fragment of that modern human if we can read allegorically. In different ways, many of us, refugees included, share with her this status of the human fragment in our ruined time populated by corpses in wars and used-up bodies in the speculative commodity economy.

ALLEGORY AND BODY ASSEMBLAGES

In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin turns to the commodity and its production process in capitalism, which he thinks the Baroque allegory can, in an untimely fashion, address. If the commodity exchange since the end of the nineteenth century, now enmeshed in capital's further financialization, has created a phantasmagoria of meanings in a closed symbolic economy where everything can be redeemed

with money or credit, there is no need or possibility for symbolic unity between the material and its transcendence beyond debt. In this crisis of symbolic representation, allegory can be revisited as the cultural form that seeks neither a return to the religious symbolic unity of the age before the Baroque nor an Enlightenment humanist redemption after. The Baroque penchant for living with fragmentation offers us some potential at the destructive arrival of the commodity in the nineteenth century, capital's consumptive financialization in the twentieth, and the postliberatory moment of ruin in our twenty-first. Reiterating Marx's observation of the fragmentation resulting from the isolation of each detail in the production process, which in our post-Fordist time is strung out across vast geographical distances encoded in historiographical time lags, Benjamin sees the "Baroque procedure" in "the set of fragments" of the whole that the process of its "production has disintegrated."⁸⁴ The Baroque emblems, according to Benjamin, could be "conceived as half-finished products which, from the phases of the production process, have been converted into monuments to the process of destruction."⁸⁵

The current destructive capitalist practice of employing disposable labor is one that disintegrates not only the product during phases of industrial production across the globe, but also the human workers as they lose their eyesight to eye-strain, organ tissues to particle dust, nerves to toxins and repetitive motion, and strength to lack of life-sustaining food and rest. And with these, the destruction of the world to the point of extinction-level climatic catastrophe. For people living in the Mekong Delta in southern Vietnam, who include the women workers addressed here, daily life already brings flooding due to rising sea level. Much of their world will be entirely under water within the next three decades.⁸⁶

Of modern Man, Benjamin writes, "the death's head of Baroque allegory is the half-finished product of the history of salvation, that process interrupted—so far as this is given him to realize—by Satan."⁸⁷ At this moment of the failure to enter into the whole human, by way of either recuperation in the neoliberal narrative of entrepreneurial and consumerist freedom or redemption through proletarian revolution against racial capitalism, workers, and those of us who share their condition of precarity, require a different frame than the humanist salvation that underwrites each and every one of the liberatory political ideologies put forth since the Enlightenment, including Marxism. Would it be possible for us in our time to, in a manner untimely and against Wynter's Man, treat bodily remainders as emblematic and allegorical, not of the human, but of parts and potentials thereof?

If the project is not to arrive at a redemptive integration because it is no longer, if it ever was, possible in a time bereft of possibility, how should we treat the fragments of the material in their allegorical potentiality? Forging a new critical position between the social constructivist insistence on a critical theory of race that does not get mired in the mud of essential ontology that insists on a natural body anterior to its social inscription, Rachel Lee proposes an exquisite corpse "straddling the humanist, organismal structure of bodies and a proposed 'future'

but really contemporary moment of distributed and symbiogenetic materiality where the enzymatic, cytoplasmic, metabolic, and regulatory activities of cross-species biologies coassemble with other chemical, informatics, and toxic force flows.”⁸⁸ Lee’s approach is that of the game of the exquisite corpse, where assemblage of material fragments engages a “transversal thinking across platforms,” not to “expose a hidden truth but paradoxically to cultivate an openness to the wonders of the aleatory, the chance event, and the insight of the accidental networked through unacknowledged amphotropism.”⁸⁹

Although much more exuberant in tone than what I can muster here, Lee’s exquisite corpse points to how we may see the dismembered corpse as allegorical fragment of the human and not as symbol of a recuperable unified proletarian martyr or free producer and consumer in the impossible redemptive symbolic order of either socialism or liberalism. Margaret E. Owens suggests that Benjamin’s “Baroque allegory works to fragment and to reify the human body, to render it a ruin,” or “a collection of allegorical ruins,” whose true meaning “is their thing-like status, their seemingly infinite exchangeability and the deferral of any redemptive unity.”⁹⁰ Rather than the symbolic in a sovereignty of meanings, allegorical knowledge offers no assurance, political or epistemological. Such allegory of the unassembled fragments of the human awaiting momentary assemblages can gesture to a more hopeful Spivakian “politics of the open end,”⁹¹ or a less hopeful politics of ruin beyond the redemptive impulse in a time of afters that seem bereft of the future as salvation.

For refugees, attempts at recuperative unity of meaning usually took the form of a deferred humanity. The bodily and emotional damage from the low-waged work my parents’ generation undertook usually got narrated as sacrifice for their children’s future as full members of the nation and thereby the human race. This deferral put undue pressure on the younger generations, and at the same time as Espiritu points out, fed into the “good refugee narrative” and fueled model-minority racialization.⁹² Each generation was supposed to get us closer, pushing against the racist and classist interdictions to full humanity. Yet, young and old, current and former refugees continue to find they are barred from full sovereignty, if not outright legally then in actuality. The assaults on and killings of Asians in the United States during the pandemic shattered façades of humanist progress towards equality long time uncoming through the length of American history. Born American, my children underwent big and small demeaning experiences of racism much of their lives. Others less fortunate in education and employment opportunities because of ordinary and extraordinary institutional racism continue to suffer worse fates, including deportation.⁹³ Deportation is the ultimate expulsion from sovereignty, as deportees would effectively be stripped of rights that can only be protected by nation-states. If the nation-state is the standard bearer of modern popular sovereignty, deportation returns children of refugees to statelessness and the dangers from which they fled.

Alongside the hopes or despairing sorrows of waiting for deferred humanist sovereignty in their children, refugees engaged in other ways to live in dignity akin to those of the Vietnamese workers addressed here. Thanhha Lai's autobiographical verse novel recalls how her refugee mother comes home "with two fingers/ wrapped in white," because "the electric machine/sews so fast."⁹⁴ But the girl narrator also humorously curses the English language that wounds her with its implied or explicit racism, defense against which her mother teaches her to chant "A Di Đà Phật," the Vietnamese name for Amita Buddha, and "Quán Thế Âm Bồ Tát" for the bodhisattva of compassion, so that her "whispers will bloom" and "shelter" her "from words" she "need not hear."⁹⁵ The incantations under their breaths are "mother's response" to the bodily and psychic damage to their life in the land of refuge.⁹⁶ The mother's unmentioned daily bleeding fingers from garment work become the corporeal ruin that could enter into a momentary assemblage with spiritual breath blooming into shelter. The intimate speech of incantation and laughter on the *cu li* tongue gather refugees into a community of common experience even as it speaks or holds itself silent on the damage inflicted by racialized global capitalism. The *cu li* tongue knows well those interdictions to humanist sovereignty discursively, materially, and corporeally, but it inhabits the here and now of its moment. Beside the perilous deferral of humanity to the next generations subjected to further racist interdictions, other assemblages momentarily or imminently remain possible.

Likewise, by drawing attention to their depleted bodies in utterances and collective action, the workers in Vietnam were not clamoring to become either the valorized proletarian subject or the enticed consumerist one. Instead, they showed us the remainder of the necroeconomic process, whereby the fractured progressive temporality was deployed as developmentalist time lags to differentiate and render zones exceptional and its people surplus. They ran up against the impossibility of the symbolic order that granted no entrance, except to instrumentalize progressive time in the state's developmentalist narrative or the neoliberal promise of prosperity and freedom. Read allegorically, their practices gestured to the material fragments of their devalued and ruined bodies amongst the ruins of socialist historiography and the instrumentalization of a neoliberal one.

In the short story, the young women's journey of longing for what is rendered external to them takes them to a fate other than the symbolic unity of the material and its becoming, into the realm of the sorrowful ruins, not only in the form of the dismembered corpse at the end of the fictional story, but already before, in the state's narrated progressive time through industrialization and modernization, and in the use of their robbed biological time for capitalist returns on investment. While the workers show their assignment to zones of time lags but also affirmation of bodily worth in words and action, the fictional story, in its sorrow achieved through its comic verbosity, lays bare the temporal phantasm of

humanist progress, next to the corporeal horrors it produces. As such, the story points us to the fragment in and as allegory.

What use is it for us now to speak or think otherwise in the allegorical mode amongst these fragments of body and time? Our charge may not be the symbolic recuperation of the integrity of the human subject against its racialized and gendered dissolution in the production process or the commodity exchange. Our charge may be to hoard not whole humans but parts thereof in the small gestures of bodily worth left over from a bygone humanist era, or in the collective body wager at the gaming table seeking to insert a frayed materialist analysis. All these gestures and remainders are but the fragments allegorical to the condition of the ruined human subject in a historiographical time that cannot make us whole. If these workers could no longer embody the human universal as proletarians stripped of particulars,⁹⁷ perhaps they could now allegorically evoke the human in ruin when time promises not our salvation. Offering no epistemological guarantee, they show us not how to be human, but fragments thereof in possible assemblages of the now- and the yet-to-be-known.

Ours may be the time of the untimely, as Matthew Wilkens writes of the Baroque depository of the transitory and the incomplete: "These inexplicable narrative objects were then to be collected and stored as the raw material for a new schematization and as the basis of a new knowledge that would make sense of them, but which the age was not yet ready to produce."⁹⁸ That is the most I can imagine the future holds.

Iterant Remains

Witnessing Sovereign Violence

I took a photograph in August 2008 at the Choeung Ek Killing Field Memorial in the outskirts of Phnom Penh, Cambodia. It was of the pile of skulls on display in a wooden structure, opened on all sides. The stacking of the skulls and other bones for viewing by the curious felt like a violation of those who used to inhabit them. I imagine the families of those who perished in the mass killing and starvation in Cambodia would not have liked to see the remains of their loved ones like this, exposed. Years before, I had written about the mass killings in the context of the long history of Vietnamese, French, and American colonization of Cambodia. My impulse to take the photograph came from the training to document, to engage in evidentiary truth-making. The visual seemed the most salient proof of some objective truth. But what started as a pinch that maybe I should not have taken that photo grew over the years to something I might call in Vietnamese *áy náy*, the nagging feeling that you might have wronged someone and that you need to do something about it. By taking that photograph, I might have extended the violation that served the political agenda of those who set up the memorial.

Then there is the issue of my historical connection to the events in Cambodia as someone of Vietnamese heritage, and as a refugee among the millions who fled the kind of liberatory violence against imperial violence that engulfed what was called Indochina. Because I was now connected to this act of violation, the memorial as a form of mediation raised three issues for me. The first indexes the Khmer Rouge's enactment of postcolonial and anti-imperial revolutionary terror resulting in mass death. Yet such terror could not have been bookended neatly by the years numbered as 1975–1978. It had started centuries before with many participants and continues to implicate us today as inheritors and practitioners of modern

violence. The second concerns the subsequent visual memorialization set up by the Vietnamese occupation forces to denounce the Khmer Rouge mass killings as aberrant and self-inflicted by a crazed leadership of a cowered people. This memorialization reiterates how Vietnam had saved Cambodia from itself in the name of universal values placed upon human life. Its mode of memorialization evokes nothing of the long history of the colonization of Cambodia, in one way or another, by Vietnam, France, and the United States. It reassures many in the West that such horrors are the result of error and could only happen in a place distant from the Western value placed on reason and life. The third raises questions of the ethics of mediating violence that beg us to look at the catastrophe, not from our safe distance, but as witnesses from the threshold of its kill range.

Memorialization tells us what those in power want us to know, while witnessing demands questions. How am I implicated in witnessing, especially when I view these commemorative displays as a Vietnamese refugee? Witnessing has become central to refugee ways of knowing, and not only because it has become institutionalized in post-World War II international regimes of refugee asylum. Witnessing our own and others' destruction is also the way in which refugees can self-bear our own history. In other words, it offers us refuge in our witnessed history as the only history that does not entirely erase us. Long Bui poetically points to witnessing as belonging in the "refugee bodily orbits," where paradoxically, "What we cannot refuse / The Refuse, We cannot Witness."¹ Refugee witnessing is that impossible act that must nevertheless happen at the bodily threshold of life and death, rather than the remote viewing that political memorialization invites us to do on the side of life looking at death as an erroneous and accomplished event in Enlightenment humanist formulations.

With these issues, we turn from the displacement, dispossession, and disposability of people towards contemplating the ethics of viewing what remains of those murdered in acts of founding, which always double as endings. If, in the previous chapter, the cultural representation and practices of workers whose bodies were being ruined in economic processes ask for allegorical readings because their integration into the symbolic of the sovereign human was not available, what kind of contemplation could we bring to the encounter with human remains and images from political killings, particularly those done in the name of humanist progress, not just by the colonizers and imperialists from the West, but by others whose guiding political ideologies in their fight against colonialism and imperialism are just as much products of Enlightenment sovereignty and progressive historiography? As such, the violence committed by the imperial West and the revolutionary Rest cannot be examined apart from one another. In our attempts to understand efforts at mediation, are we responsible for the recuperation of the inviolable sovereign human subject from the abyss of the physical extermination of the victims? Is such recuperation even possible or preferable?

This effort requires us to think through Enlightenment epistemology in the politics of life versus death as it played out first in the colonial context, then in the postcolonial revolutionary context as a response to the former. Even in a crowded field of sites of political mass extermination in the twentieth century, Cambodia and Vietnam still stand out. These two places share a colonial past as colonies and protectorates in French Indochina, bound together in anti-colonial/imperial wars of liberation and socialist revolution, and pitted against one another as enemies in the wars that came after liberation. They are entangled in a history that produced mass exodus. I touch here on the most devastating political mass killing in the region perpetrated by the revolutionary Khmer Rouge in Cambodia to think through epistemological and ethical issues in relation to how we visually mediate or respond to visual mediations of such event. Among modes of mediation of mass political killings, the visual often shocks while it reassures viewers of its evidentiary value. Yet, what is it that we mean by “visual”? Do we mean the act of looking at events that are unfolding or unfolded long ago, or do we mean our understanding of it as framed by a practice of visualizing history?

With questions raised by the memorialization of the Khmer Rouge killings, I look at two visual modes of “capturing” another event of political mass killing that also created refugees, that of the Land Reform Campaign carried out by the Communist Party in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) between 1953 and 1956, to think through how a series of images captured in photography and painting relate to one another as we view the destroyed human in such an event. The photographic images of denunciations and executions of landowners and other kinds of enemies to the revolution were captured by Soviet photographer Dmitri Baltermants as this event unfolded in 1950s Vietnam. In turn, these photographic images were cited in a series called the Black Paintings by Vietnamese painter Nguyễn Thái Tuấn in the 2010s at the moment of Vietnam’s global integration, when some Vietnamese could, within limits, undertake some reevaluation of the history of socialism. Looking at these photographic images and their citational return in the painted version, I suggest we contemplate witnessing as a mode of mediation that allows for human remains to acquire not transcendence into the truth of humanist history nor redemption in its telos, but a quality of the revenant that returns in errant iterations. Errant because with each return, we run astray of the foundational sovereignty of the kill, contrasting such exercise of sovereign power to what Jacques Derrida calls a “majesty of the absurd in so far as it bears witness to human presence.”²

Finally, to pose questions of politics and ethics in relation to witnessing, I engage the moment of the one-year anniversary of George Floyd’s murder and the statement by Darnella Frazier, who took the video that sparked a renewed movement of racial reckoning during the pandemic. Informed by Frazier’s act of witnessing, I revisit another iconic image from the Vietnam War, taken by photojournalist Eddie Adams of South Vietnamese general Nguyễn Ngọc Loan in the

act of shooting National Liberation Front fighter Nguyễn Văn Lém during the Tết Offensive of 1968. To think about the ethics of viewing and witnessing violence that can perhaps circumvent the Enlightenment epistemic formation of truth and error, I begin with a brief overview of the relationship between modern violence and the humanist visualization of history.

JURIDICAL VIOLENCE AND THE VISUALIZATION OF HISTORY

In his critique, Walter Benjamin speaks of two functions of violence embedded in modern European political philosophy. The first is “law-making” and the second is “law-preserving.”³ Such view of the relationship between violence and the juridical order corresponds to Giorgio Agamben’s interpretation of Carl Schmitt’s discussion of the state of exception marked by sovereign violence. Far from marking “the suspension of law,” such use of force facilitates the “inscription of the state of exception within a juridical context.”⁴ We can see that this double inscription in law is designed to protect the rule of law, and that the site of this double inscription is the body. At a foundational moment of modern popular sovereignty erupting in the form of the French Revolution, the Marquis de Sade unveiled the logic of the Enlightenment dialectic of freedom centered on the body, where “any individual’s sexual and political freedom depends upon the servitude and abasement of others.”⁵ In Western jurisprudence, the writ of habeas corpus summons the body of the detained and the custodian’s reason for detention. It protects the liberty of the detained by offering such person an opportunity to appeal for legal recourse if the detention is unlawful. Yet, in times of emergency, habeas corpus would be suspended. If appearing in court shows the detained to be subject *of* law, the suspension of this writ reveals how the body of the detained is subject *to* the exceptional violence that underwrites the law.

Such sovereign power of exception enables history to move forward in increments or in spasms at moments of revolutionary founding that differentially gather bodies constituent of its body politic. It allows them to visualize progress in the laws that govern and thus can transform the polity in a promissory future of either more mastery for those already included or the inclusion of more in this exercise of mastery. The relationship between sovereign power and the visualization of history goes further. Nicholas Mirzoeff argues that visibility in the modern era has its historical roots in the plantation’s “surveillance of the overseer, operating as the surrogate of the sovereign.”⁶ Visualization then was the “making of the processes of ‘history’ perceptible to authority,” as “visibility sought to present authority as self-evident,” and therefore legitimate.⁷ Mirzoeff cites perspectives from the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that elevated history from a chronicle of events to a capitalized History that “was to speak of Origins, causes, and impersonal forces.”⁸ History acquired shape and direction, as well as the knowable dynamics that would move it towards a future ever closer to its telos.

What happens to visualization of the human and history when founding violence becomes so catastrophic to bodies that either it devastates any promise of a future, or the law as the everyday manifestation of foundational violence no longer holds time's promise? Would this moment of the end of humanist promissory future still hold some other possibility, and how would we recognize it? Mirzoeff thinks people can engage with visual practices against authoritative visualization, a kind of "countervisualities" that interrupt "the totalizing thrusts" of visualized History.⁹ While contemplating the possible "look" or "gaze" from a young Black woman in an exhibited photograph, Tina Campt feels compelled to remain open to a "contingency of fugitivity" that she explains in Fred Moten's words as "an inability both to intend the law and intend its transgression and the one who is defined by this double inability is, in a double sense, an outlaw."¹⁰ An outlaw, then, is unable to be in time or out of time as it is structured by the law and its underlying violence. The contingency happens in this double inability in relation to the double inscription of the law. Can we read visual practices in these conditions by anchoring them, not in history as visualized, but contingently in relational remembering that requires more than just remotely viewing the visual image? The visualized history framing this conversation has led us to this moment of the ruination of the future promised to all by Europeans, Americans, and those who opposed them.

LIFE IN THE METROPOLE AND DEATH IN THE COLONY

Foucault's tracing of historical narrativization notes race as a way to encode the idea of strife behind historical movement, which in the nineteenth century takes on the biological racist formulation; yet, he does not explore the colony or the plantation as the site of biological racialization in European empires.¹¹ Agamben also deemphasizes race as the limit of the human constituent to the identification of those who could be killed in catastrophic instances of sovereign violence like the death camp.¹² Aimé Césaire, on the other hand, identifies the colony as the site of modern European violence, which boomeranged back to Europe in the form of the Nazi death camps.¹³ It is significant that between 1904 and 1908, Germany perpetrated genocide against the Indigenous populations in its African colony in present-day Namibia, an episode German officials only just recognized in 2021.¹⁴ Achille Mbembe calls the colony "a terror formation" to show how European biopolitics depends on necropolitics as the exercise of exceptional sovereignty in the colony and the plantation.¹⁵ While promoting life in opposition to death, European biopolitics requires sites of displacement where life and death are entangled and death is the order of life. Whether in the colony or in Europe itself, those racialized live in conditions of the disavowed entanglement between life and death, where their death becomes the condition of protected life for others, whether those others are colonists, settlers, or Europeans in the metropole.

Enlightenment sovereignty is premised on the identification of those who can be harmed, neglected, incarcerated, or murdered. The colony is where this identification can be made. As discussed earlier, Sylvia Wynter traces what she calls the master code differentiating Man from those who are sub- or nonhuman, moving from a religious to a secular framework. The Enlightenment and the rise of the European absolutist state redefined Man through the faculty of reason while his others are marked by unreason, enabling their subjection to serfdom or slavery. Such irrationality was supposed to be evident in native savage practices when, according to Michael Taussig, it was the horror in European stories about native savagery that sustained colonists in a culture of terror, facilitating the horrific violence that turned people and jungles into forced laborers and plantations during the Putumayo rubber boom.¹⁶

European sovereignty based on mastery over others via the faculty of reason necessitated the narration of the colonial project as one of civilization—the White Man's Burden, or *la mission civilisatrice*. Reason was imparted in the form of “native” education, and the institutionalization of bureaucracy as goal-oriented and rationally organized administration for the suppression of native resistance to facilitate extraction of resources. The European march towards mastery over man's fate required the violent instrumentalization of all the world and its people, thought of as resources, raw materials. This forward march was narrated heroically in the enforcement of a temporality of salvation, both for the white man and his attempt to save others by uplifting them towards the human, all the while making sure that his charges could never close that temporal gap between them.

I begin this chapter not with colonial violence, but with anticolonial revolutionary terror. Surely, Europe cannot be held responsible for revolutionary violence in its former colonies. Yet, the delirious colonial violence and its effects on people of the colony that writers like Césaire amply capture had given rise to violent anticolonial responses.¹⁷ In his indictment of colonialism, Césaire cites evidence of such colonial violence from French Indochina.¹⁸ Helle Rydstrom concurs with chilling firsthand accounts of French authorities torturing and killing villagers in colonial Tonkin of French Indochina. In one account recorded by Rydstrom, French forces forced villagers to decapitate suspected rebels from their village, then to throw the heads into the village pond, and finally to comb the hair on recovered heads as a tactic of specularized as well as experiential terror.¹⁹ In this “zone of exception,” Rydstrom argues, the shocking torture colonial forces inflicted on Vietnamese villagers in Tonkin was facilitated by the collapse of the human into the inhuman.²⁰ The rise of American imperialism would restructure this racial taxonomy.

Global American imperialism arrived on the heels of its victory in World War II against fascism in Europe and the Pacific. The United States promoted a narrative of the self-determination of the existing anticolonial ethno-nation because this had become the singular expression of sovereignty for former or struggling colonies. Indochina became Southeast Asia in American rebranding shortly after the

United States supported France in its bloody effort to reclaim its colonies there in the First Indochina War from 1946 to 1954. In this American narrative, to seek protection under the United States in the postwar world was to choose freedom from all forms of tyranny—tradition, European colonialism, and communist totalitarianism. American freedom, unsurprisingly, did not cross the color line. While promised freedom and modernization, those in the nations under pax Americana were relegated to the zone of perpetual lag, in need of American advice, developmental aid, and oftentimes American military occupation. In the region, the pattern was repeated from the Philippines, to Japan, to Korea, to Vietnam. This American racial taxonomy played out in how the United States fought the war in Southeast Asia. What Davorn Sisavath calls American remote killing in secret bombing campaigns in Laos was mirrored elsewhere in the war. Between March 1969 and July 1973, while half a million tons of bombs were dropped on Cambodia, American Air Force general Curtis LeMay threatened to bomb North Vietnam “back into the stone age.”²¹ Remote killing was not limited to war technology; it also took the form of using fighters deemed lower on the scale of human worth to fight in place of Americans. The United States recruited Indigenous peoples like the Hmong in Laos and some nations in the Dega association in the Vietnamese Central Highlands for the war effort in order to spare more American lives. After the American-supported coup in Cambodia in 1970, South Vietnamese soldiers were sent to fight North Vietnamese forces there, foreshadowing the later Vietnamization campaign to disentangle American troops from the war when American imperial interests realigned geopolitically in the United States’ rapprochement with the People’s Republic of China in the early 1970s. Such remote killing of racialized populations accompanied the American domestic racial taxonomy where Black and Brown soldiers were overrepresented in deployment as well as combat assignment and those killed in action.²²

As such, the claim of the human issued from Europe and America must have turned into poison in the ears of “natives” in the colony and the postcolony. Frantz Fanon writes, “When I search for Man in the technique and the style of Europe, I see only a succession of negations of man, and an avalanche of murders.”²³ Life and humanity in the colony can only be forged in conditions of death. The grammar of revolutionary sloganeering in colonies preceded and succeeded Fanon in embracing the Enlightenment formulation of becoming human in the American “Give me liberty, or give me death;” the Cuban “Patria o Muerte”; or the Vietnamese “Quyết tử cho tổ quốc quyết sinh.”²⁴ The colonized must be willing to die and to kill to gain freedom in the sovereign nation. Fanon cites Césaire’s formulation of a slave’s baptism of blood when he strikes down his master to call for anticolonial violence that would give birth to a new nation through common cause.²⁵ In his preface to Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*, Jean-Paul Sartre further rhetorizes this violent formulation: “to shoot down a European is to kill two birds with one stone, to destroy an oppressor and the man he oppresses at the same time,” and “there

remains a dead man and a free man.”²⁶ In this formulation, people in the colony are expelled from the realm of the human, racialized through violence; they therefore must recuperate the category of the human through countervailing violence of their own. Hannah Arendt quotes Sartre’s explication of this humanist violence that the “‘irrepressible violence . . . is man recreating himself,’ that it is ‘mad fury’ through which ‘the wretched of the earth’ can ‘become men,’” to remind us that the idea of “man creating himself is strictly in the tradition of Hegelian and Marxian thinking; it is the very basis of all leftist humanism.”²⁷ As such, Fanon writes that it is the moment the native “realizes his humanity” that he “sharpens his weapons.”²⁸

As a child in Vietnam, I would hear of *tầm vong dạt nhọn* from my parents, who fought in the anticolonial Resistance, and in songs and stories celebrating Vietnamese independence. We were taught that these bamboo poles were straightened over fire and sharpened into deadly spears by Vietnamese in our parents’ generation to free us from European enslavement. The readily available weapons acquired a mythical status in the anticolonial nationalist imagining. This was how boys would become men of their nation. These handmade weapons now occupy space in many provincial museums in Vietnam. The symbolic act of striking down the master with whatever weapon was at hand to become human, however, obscured regional geopolitics in a global chessboard of the post-World War II era shaping up into a Cold War. The two wars fought in Vietnam against French colonialism and American imperialism required massive supplies of sophisticated weaponry on all sides. Sharpened bamboo poles did not deliver liberation. The battle of Điện Biên Phủ in North Vietnam, which conclusively defeated French colonial forces in 1954, required both trained personnel and modern weaponry supplied by the People’s Republic of China. The intensified war fought against the United States during the 1960s necessitated the Vietnamese Communist Party’s realignment towards the Soviet Union in the Sino-Soviet rift, because North Vietnam needed better weapons to fight American war technology.²⁹ This realpolitik of the nation-state speaks to both the mythical nature of anticolonial humanism and the level of destruction and slaughter required in this formulation of humanist recuperation.

Fanon’s “last shall be first” formulation demands violence, because “between the violence of the colonies and that peaceful violence that the world is steeped in, there is a kind of complicit agreement, a sort of homogeneity.”³⁰ He explicates how violence can produce the singular entity of the future nation:

For the colonized people this violence, because it constitutes their only work, invests their characters with positive and creative qualities. The practice of violence binds them together as a whole, since each individual forms a violent link in the great chain, a part of the great organism of violence which has surged upward in reaction to the settler’s violence in the beginning. The groups recognize each other and the future nation is already indivisible. The armed struggle mobilizes the people; that is to say, it throws them in one way and in one direction.³¹

This violence would found the nation with the spasm that binds those in its body politic, moving history forward.

Fanon prescribes the redistribution of wealth in response to the very real disadvantages faced by the new nation in a system resulting from exploitative colonial economic arrangements.³² However, violent class warfare serves a further purpose than just the redistribution of wealth and the removal of the means of production from colonial and neocolonial manipulations. Extending Fanon's twin prescription for true liberation that not only brings into a single line all class positions in the colony in its war against the colonial masters but also purges the new nation of its aberrant, again, Sartre writes: "Fanon hides nothing: in order to fight against us the former colony must fight against itself: or, rather, the two struggles form part of a whole." I have argued elsewhere that anticolonial liberation premised on the redemptive structure of the oppressed human subject can itself be repressive because it comes to rely on the singular mode of identification in nationalism. Vietnamese anticolonial nationalism itself had deployed colonial modes of racial differentiation in its war propaganda portraying Africans fighting in colonial forces as cannibalistic nonhumans during the anticolonial war of 1946–54,³³ and in the abjection of the nation's racial other in the minoritized Indigenous peoples to make imaginable redemptive universal citizenship in what might be called "the national singular."³⁴ This national singular requires its own racial as well as class and gender/sexual demarcations to promote the liberated citizen-subject. And it does so by demanding that those it promises to rescue from abjectness partake in violence against designated enemies of class and nation, whereby subjecting its citizens to terror in the name of liberation, which in the modern era often meant Marxist. Mbembe writes, "the subject of Marxian modernity is, fundamentally, a subject who is intent on proving his or her sovereignty through the staging of a fight to the death. Just as with Hegel, the narrative of mastery and emancipation here is clearly linked to a narrative of truth and death. Terror and killing become the means of realizing the already known telos of history."³⁵

TRUTH IN LIFE AND DEATH AS ERROR

Violent revolution must accompany the war of liberation in order to produce that national unity, that collectively redeemed human subject, but also the correct knowledge. Violence is not just a means to seize power, it is epistemologically necessary. Fanon writes, "The action which has thrown them into a hand-to-hand struggle confers upon the masses a voracious taste for the concrete. The attempt at mystification becomes, in the long run, practically impossible."³⁶ Here, Fanon seems to have confused the concrete with demystification reminiscent of Marx. Even while peddling in abstractions, Marx promotes a return to unmediated access to reality. In his identification of the commodity fetish in *Capital*, Marx observes in the commodity a "mystical character" that "does not originate, therefore, in

their use value.”³⁷ To explain away such mystery, Marx traces value back to labor, defined as the expenditure of life, making life the ultimate source of truth and value. Mbembe notes that for Marx, the abolition of exchange relations will make “things will appear as they really are; the ‘real’ will present itself as it actually is, and the distinction between subject and object or being and consciousness will be transcended,” thereby abolishing “the all-important divisions among the man-made realm of freedom, the nature-determined realm of necessity, and the contingent in history.”³⁸

Fanon’s emphasis on the concrete over mystification pushes Marx’s reduction of the whole of human interaction to “real” materialist relations, where violence on physical bodies produces clarifying knowledge in an epistemological cycle of reduction. Violence unto others makes the truth of oneself as human, supporting a unified anticolonial nation that can become an exclusionist project. Following other Black feminists, Tiffany Lethabo King cautions that this new exclusionist version of humanism should be subjected to scrutiny.³⁹ If liberation means to become human, Fanon has bound the soon-to-be-former native to the Enlightenment temporality of redemption. Mastery, whether it is over man’s fate through the European instrumentalization of the world’s land and people or through the overthrow of the master, demands relentless violence that cannot stop at the founding but must continue to operate through instances of exception.

Citing David Bates on the French Revolution, Mbembe charts the conflation of Enlightenment reason and terror: “Terror thus becomes a way of marking aberration in the body politic, and politics is read both as the mobile force of reason and as the errant attempt at creating a space where ‘error’ would be reduced, truth enhanced, and the enemy disposed of.”⁴⁰ Enlightenment reason inherent in liberatory truth-making reduces and conflates events, processes, and people to their taxonomies trapped in supposedly the dialectics of history. The unliberated, the sycophant, the puppet, the traitor, the untrue would become intelligible as error in a tautology of terror, as we shall see in the cases of the Khmer Rouge mass killings and the North Vietnamese Land Reform. The Khmer Rouge designated those to be eliminated as not being Khmer enough. Appropriating an older Sinic vocabulary of political legitimacy, Vietnamese communist liberators called Vietnamese collaborators *Việt gian*, or untrue and therefore traitorous, and those in the Republic’s society and government *ngụy* for fake and illegitimate, marking falsehood as aberration within the body of the nation unified by striking down colonial masters old, new, and to be determined. In other words, the liberation of the human subject continued to require the existence of those who needed to be killed or sent to hard labor camps because they embodied error.

The Khmer Rouge’s reign in Cambodia from 1975 to 1978 bore out the search for such truth not because it went further than models of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist revolution, as its rhetoric suggests, but because it subscribed to the Enlightenment premise that underlies such a revolutionary project, burdened by legacies

of being colonized in one form or another by Vietnam, France, and the United States. Yet, it was because of this history of being colonized that the Khmer Rouge chose to found a new juridical order from “a *tabula rasa*” that Cathy Schlund-Vials describes as a “state-produced metaphor configured along a paradoxical, ahistorical axis of ‘progress.’”⁴¹ The revolution sought to end the prehistory of humans to deliver them into their history proper where they would be masters of their own fate. The Khmer Rouge characterized their revolution as unprecedented because it “surpasses Lenin and goes further than Mao,” as “this revolution is the most beautiful and most pure.”⁴² Such purity, from which life, imagined to be self-determined and unhindered by social contradiction, could flourish if it opposed the falsehood of its past and the residual corruption. Plaguing their brief rule was the persistent doubt in the truth of the revolution when their social experimentation in agrarian utopia failed to produce the projected plentiful harvest, or when they failed to repel the first Vietnamese invasion in 1977. The quelling of doubt and reassertion of truth in socialist futurity took the form of terror. If what the ruling organization Angka promised failed to materialize, then there had to be sabotage and those responsible for it. Marxist historiographic truth as interpreted by Angka would guarantee the success of the revolution. The revolution simply could not fail short of sinister corruption by those marked as aberrant within the body politic. Truth needed to prove error to be external to itself. From 1975 to 1978 under the Khmer Rouge, an estimated two million people out of a population of seven “perished from hard labor, disease, starvation, execution, and ‘disappearances,’” with another six hundred thousand fleeing the newly independent country.⁴³

The Khmer Rouge’s preoccupation with truth was also evident in the metrics of truth and error. They were notorious for their record-keeping practices when it came to their victims processed through Toul Sleng, a former high school turned into a central detention center called S-21. It is because of this meticulousness that we can count the number of detainees held there to be 10,499 in the years of the center’s operation from 1975 to 1978.⁴⁴ For those three years, error was read onto the bodies of detainees whose faces were captured in file photos.⁴⁵ These ghostly mug shots served the governmental purpose of individualized documentation, and the regime’s search for the error that threatened its truth, especially when accompanied by detailed biographies extracted from each subject. Once the truth about the subject had been established by way of torture—that the person was involved in some form of foreign-instigated sabotage against the revolution—then the person was taken to Choeung Ek field to be killed. Often, the truth was racial if the person was found to be ethnically non-Khmer. Cambodians who either resided in or were assigned by the Angka leadership to the Eastern Zone bordering Vietnam were condemned to extermination because Angka determined them to be tainted, the often-cited “Vietnamese minds in Khmer bodies.”⁴⁶ The death of those who embodied error was the guarantor of the truth of the revolution.

A second Vietnamese invasion unseated the Khmer Rouge from power in December of 1978. The Vietnamese occupation forces installed some former Khmer Rouge leaders, including Hun Sen in the new People's Republic of Kampuchea. The Vietnamese began to excavate bones and skulls from the mass graves that dotted the Cambodian landscape. At first, the skulls were stacked in makeshift displays as testimony of the Khmer Rouge atrocities to legitimize the Vietnamese invasion as saving the remaining Cambodian people from death at the hands of their leaders. Later institutionalized in the manner of post-World War II memorials of genocide, this mode of exhibition memorialized the killings in places like the one at Choeung Ek. If the colony is the integral site to modern European and American necropolitics, which in turn gives form to anticolonial and postcolonial nationalist-revolutionary violence, how do the people in the colony give testimony to it? And if the Enlightenment formulation of life as truth and death as error encourages certain visual forms of memorialization that then travel back to the postcolony in these necropolitical loops, what are the ethical and political implications of these modes of mediation? I want to look at the display at Choeung Ek to think through some ethical issues raised by this form of mediation of the necropolitical catastrophe.

THE VISUAL MEDIATION OF POLITICAL MURDER

Working towards a feminist aesthetics, Griselda Pollock uses the myth of Orpheus to critique a certain way of looking. Orpheus fails to lead his beloved from the realm of death and darkness because he defies Hades's interdiction and looks back at her from the realm of life and light, locking her into the conceptual difference between the two realms. Pollock argues that when we look at images that capture traumatic events in history, we may very well be engaging in "a genocidal gaze that Orphically kills again as it looks back."⁴⁷ The distance in time and space between the moments of catastrophe and viewing can render the event ahistorical for the viewer as the composition of the visual image draws on some iconic or mythical structure rather than the historical conditions giving rise to it. Although Pollock points to photography as a form of framed documentation that seems to most easily fall into this Orphic composition, I would suggest that despite its immediate materiality, the visual display of remains at Choeung Ek also distances the spectator in the same way even while the skeletal remains appear at close proximity, and on the site where the killings took place.

Choeung Ek deploys a certain way of viewing and responding to terror. Yet, it does so by relying on rather than disrupting the formulation of truth and life that underwrites such terror, because it tries to explain away mass death as error committed by an autarkic regime mad with paranoia and "xenophobia" (code-word for racial killings) without any reference to either the legacy of French racial governance in the colony or the historical involvement of the United States, China,

and Vietnam in very racialized wars. Inside a vertical structure at Choeung Ek, visitors would find skulls stacked on some shelves, torso and limb bones on others, and pieces of rotted clothing articles on yet another. The shelves are arranged one on top of the other in the shape of a pagoda. The display of bodily remains carries with it an uneasy sense of what Khatharya Um reminds us constitutes disrespect in Khmer Buddhist and regional sensibility,⁴⁸ even as visitors are asked to remove their shoes or encouraged to burn incense. The skeletal remains dug up on site render corporeal the ghostly file photos displayed at the S-21 center, now the site of the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum. There is neither distance nor a barrier between visitors and the stacked skulls. One could reach in and touch. The bones lie exposed, naked, their corporeal materiality irrefutable. Their immediacy serves as palpable evidence of the genocidal policies of the Khmer Rouge revolution.

Photography mediates by way of its double function as scientific documentation and artistic representation. The photograph taken of a catastrophe may index its documentary claim by way of the science and technology of the light image, but at the same time, it does so through its composition—a disavowed artifice. The intersection of the two functions of documentation and representation gives rise to the possibility of its enactment of the Orphic gaze as Pollock warns. The Choeung Ek display achieves a similar effect. It documents by way of the material proof of the past act of killing, and positions us in the thereafter by way of its cultural reference similar to the composition of the photograph. Perhaps the eye sockets in the skulls look like they peer into us, as Boreth Ly suggests, because of the way light reflects in photographs.⁴⁹ But when viewed up close and on site, they can appear quite empty. They are subjected to our gaze without encouraging us to really see or feel that web of relations that connects us to those bones. The immediacy of the bones ironically confirms that a person had been killed and turned into skeletal remains at some moment past a time we could do anything about. Death becomes a temporally accomplished moment made material and concrete, hence arrested in the eternity of its posthumous state. Those bones index the Khmer Rouge act of killing in a past moment dividing up time into a before and an after. This temporal division runs the risk of rendering death as the “finished product,” while trauma, as Boreth Ly insists, demands to be told in the present tense.⁵⁰

If the S-21 file photos capture the detainees in still-life fashion, then these bodily remains prove beyond doubt that their lives had been stilled. Choeung Ek forces us into a knowledge of murder in a remote past, as it firmly places viewers on the side of life, looking back at death. The distance that allows the Orphic gaze in this case is the opposition in the binary of life and death. It vacates both the historical conditions of the catastrophe and our location of viewing. These remains serve as irrefutable material evidence that the truth enacted in that revolution was error after all. It is we, those who come after genocide, who stand on the side of truth and of life to condemn the error that murdered. Such form of memorialization perfectly reproduces the life/death, truth/error binary that led us to mass murder in the

first place. Because of their co-optation into political agendas reproducing death as error, we are robbed of ways to relate to these human remains that would call into question the remote viewing structured by such memorialization. We need a form of witnessing that would remain open to the enigmas of life and death, at the threshold of life and death, and at the expense of our own integrity in humanist sovereignty. To this I will return at the end of this chapter.

Even as the bones at Cheung Ek tell us that the locus of foundational revolutionary violence is the body, this positioning of life/death to truth/error isolates the Khmer Rouge as radical error, absolves us of any accountability, and allows us to forget complex colonial and geopolitical histories to which we were party. Um quotes Avery Gordon that “a bag of bones is knowledge without acknowledgement”⁵¹ to remind us that we must “locate the extremism of Democratic Kampuchea within this larger and longer historical frame.”⁵² Without this historical relationality, we, those of us who counted ourselves American, might comfortably forget that the United States from March 1969 to July 1973 spent seven billion dollars dropping 539,129 tons of bombs on Cambodia in operations named Freedom Deal, Arclight, and Menu, complete with Breakfast, Lunch, Snack, and Dinner; and that in the five months from February to July 1973, the U.S. government dropped 267,465 tons of bombs on the Cambodian countryside, radicalizing the Khmer Rouge and helping them to recruit.⁵³ American troops invaded Cambodia and fought alongside the Lon Nol regime and the South Vietnamese against the North Vietnamese and the Khmer Rouge on Cambodian soil between 1970 and 1973. And even while Americans shook their heads at the stacked skulls or images thereof after 1978, the U.S. government was sending lethal aid to the anti-Vietnam resistance, the strongest faction of which was the Khmer Rouge.

Or those of us who counted ourselves Vietnamese might comfortably forget that Vietnam was far from being Cambodia’s savior. Imperial Vietnam under the Nguyễn lords and later the Nguyễn dynasty had taken what is now southern Vietnam from Cambodia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, subjected its Khmer inhabitants to conditions closer to death than life, intervened in Cambodian politics at every opportunity, and directly colonized the rest of that empire twice in the nineteenth century.⁵⁴ North and South Vietnam violated Cambodian neutrality during the war with 45,000 and 25,000 troops respectively.⁵⁵ And post-war Socialist Vietnam fought two wars with the Khmer Rouge over border disputes and in efforts to force Cambodia into an Indochinese bloc led by Hanoi in the late 1970s. This history with Vietnam accounted for the greatest number of murders under the Khmer Rouge as the latter tried to eradicate pro-Vietnamese elements in its midst, those “Vietnamese minds in Khmer bodies,” as though the delirium of race in the colony had reincarnated.

We could of course mention the French colonial legacy that helped to produce such racial xenophobia in Khmer Rouge ideology in a way that Fanon has pre-saged yet not fully grasped. And then there are those of us who counted ourselves

Chinese when China became an ally and supporter of the Khmer Rouge during their killing campaigns in the late 1970s, because Vietnam was China's greater enemy at the time, even while Chinese Cambodians were among the first to be killed by the Khmer Rouge.

Um observes that "politics dictate" commemoration of the dead from the Khmer Rouge era, that such exhibition was designed for international consumption, and that Cambodians themselves were not permitted access until 1980.⁵⁶ Schlund-Vials writes of how Toul Sleng served a "politicized curatorial agenda" as part of the strategic exhibition of Khmer Rouge-era atrocities.⁵⁷ The message put forth by the Vietnamese and the new post-Khmer Rouge state aimed to show the West how they stood on the side of life against the irrational death-dealing politics of their revolutionary predecessor. Rachel Hughes traces this form of memorialization in Cambodia to those in postwar Europe. The Vietnamese government sent curators, most of whom were Vietnamese, to East Germany, among other places where victims of death camps were memorialized as monuments to Soviet liberation.⁵⁸ Those curators returned to stage the memorialization at Choeung Ek and Toul Sleng. Such mode of memorialization calls on the universality of human values firmly rooted in life as opposed to death, and on such values being held by the liberators. It aligns Khmer Rouge necropolitics with the Holocaust for political reasons, but it also places Khmer Rouge revolutionary terror within the European Enlightenment formulation and its necropolitical underside, something that modern governments share, including the Vietnamese government, which was eager to denounce such mass killing as an aberration to human history. The Khmer Rouge killed to eliminate error from their vision of life worth living, and the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia to eliminate the Khmer Rouge's error in a war occupation that would last for more than a decade. The tautology of terror was complete.

Are there other ways of addressing such traumatic necropolitical events that do not so firmly reproduce the binary formulation of life and death, truth and error complicit in the legitimation of terror? I now turn to a mode of mediation in the work of painter Nguyễn Thái Tuấn in relation to the photographs taken by Dmitri Baltermants of the North Vietnamese Land Reform Campaign as a way to think through witnessing at the nexus of ethics and aesthetics in the necropolitical context.

ITERANT REMAINS

While the anticolonial war was still raging, the Vietnamese Communist Party already began training its cadres for the Land Reform Campaign at six experimental sites in Viet Minh-occupied territory in North Vietnam.⁵⁹ Land reform, declared Hồ Chí Minh in March of 1953, was necessary because "the war of resistance is the revolution,"⁶⁰ in a logic echoed by Fanon and Sartre. It should be mentioned that the First and Second Republic in South Vietnam also carried out land

reform campaigns with significant successes from the 1950s through the 1970s. The South's campaigns, though not free from violence, shied from killing as a public demonstration of the righteousness of the political regime.⁶¹ The Viet Minh Land Reform Campaign, on the other hand, was to serve as a foundational act establishing the socialist revolutionary character of the regime in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam soon to defeat French forces in 1954. This foundational act signaled the start of class struggle in Marxist historiography as it aimed to eliminate the "feudal and colonial" landowning class in preparation for collectivization of land in the countryside. It became an instance of spectacular revolutionary terror with its assignment of truth through torture and killing. Party authorities categorized the rural population into distinct categories based on landownership, and the identification of persons who would embody these categories. Later Communist Party documents show it had calculated that landowners made up 5 percent of the general population, to be broken down into categories of gradation of guilt. Cadres sent by the party used these percentages to determine the quotas of people to be executed or imprisoned for each village. Where the acreage ownership failed to yield enough landowners in particular categories of big, medium, and small, those in the category below had to be reclassified upward to fulfill the quotas as an index of truth issued by the party.⁶² The *đấu tố* or "struggle denunciation" sessions served the purpose of proving that the accused truly belonged to their category designated by party cadres. Farmers in the village played the role of the accusers in these sessions, narrating how their lives had been exploited by the landowners in ways ranging from forced labor to the infliction of bodily harm, including rape. This practice was called *tố khổ* or speaking bitterness. The campaign made clear that the recuperation of life for these victims meant the necessary death of the accused in conflating both senses of justice, retributive and social.

Sixty years later, Trần Đình, a party-designated writer of Hồ Chí Minh's memoirs, recounts in his own memoir the two trials he reported for the official newspaper *Nhân Dân* as part of his assignment to mobilize popular support for the campaign. Both trials resulted in the execution of the accused.⁶³ The first trial, in 1953, kickstarted the violent stage of the campaign with the accused Nguyễn Thị Năm, a successful capitalist but also a supporter of the Viet Minh cause, earning her the affectionate moniker of "mother of the Resistance."⁶⁴ She was a leader of the Women's Union and a member of the Central Committee of the United Viet Front (Mặt Trận Liên Việt), organizations connected to both the Viet Minh anti-colonial front and the Communist Party, which facilitated her frequent meetings with Hồ Chí Minh and other Communist leaders. Her son served as the Communist Party's chief political cadre in Artillery Regiment 105 of the People's Army. Yet, she was now formally designated as a "reactionary landowner."⁶⁵ Her conviction in a people's court and later execution showed the party's resolve in its class struggle, not sparing even its own rank and file or allies in the anticolonial armed Resistance. The leader of the cadre unit that accompanied the soldiers who marched

Nguyễn Thị Năm to her death recounted to Trần Đình that they shot her in the back as she turned, and that when her body did not fit the coffin they brought, the soldiers jumped on her body to stuff it into the box, yelling: “Dead and you’re still obstinate.”⁶⁶ The cadre said he heard her bones break and wanted to run away, but was afraid that he would be accused of “landowner-loving,” and that in the end, she lay in the coffin “twisted like a broken puppet.”⁶⁷ Whatever she was in life, the socialist authorities made truth of her unhuman status of puppet. Nguyễn Thị Năm concretely became that “reactionary landowner” in her death, her body shot and mutilated to fit the box containing the truth of who she was to the revolution.

The second trial Trần Đình covered firsthand. A judge and crowd constituted the court. Two accused were brought out. Cù Cáp owned land but was also a leader of the Liên Việt front in the Resistance. The other was a secretary of the local Communist Party cell who now faced charges of joining the Quốc Dân Đảng, a nationalist party rival to the Communist Party. The secretary was hopeful to the last minute that he would be spared, but the court rejected pleas of clemency, and both were shot by soldiers with rifles. Đình notes the two “pliable” bodies on the ground and the white of the clothes on Cù Cáp and of his beard as the only point of “purity” at the scene.⁶⁸ The accused were apparently dressed up in the attire thought befitting of landowners for their trials, which usually took place after a period of imprisonment.

Until December 1954, Hồ Chí Minh was still unsatisfied with the speed and intensity of the campaign when he denounced his cadres for worrying about “treaty violations” and being reluctant to “aptly punish landowners who were saboteurs.”⁶⁹ Trần Đình recounts that it was Hồ himself who had penned a vitriolic article full of absurd charges against Nguyễn Thị Năm in the *Nhân Dân* to raise “intense hatred” against “cruel and evil” landowners.⁷⁰ It was not until there was a “correction” of party policy in 1956 that Hồ Chí Minh denounced “torture” and spectacular killing as “barbaric,” belonging with “feudal and imperialist thinking.”⁷¹ Some party leaders and cadres were then sacked and punished for “their” feudal and imperialist barbarity in their implementation of party dictates. The excessive terror in the form of torture and killing had resulted in social upheavals in the countryside, necessitating that Rectification Campaign on the part of the party, illustrating the terroristic tautology of error. Hanoi historian Đặng Phong quotes party decisions in 1956 that narrate death as a function of error—zealotry and voluntarist leftism deviating from the true path of scientific Marxism-Leninism.⁷² In other words, the Enlightenment formulation underwriting the new juridical order would be upheld in these foundational killings and later in their correction. Nevertheless, the entire episode was tallied up in party documents in metrics of revolutionary success and rationalist redemption that hid the broken bodies at its founding: “In North Vietnam, 810,000 hectares of farm land, 74,000 buffaloes and cows were distributed to 2.1 million households of more than 10 million farmers.”⁷³ These numbers were comparable to the land reform successes in South Vietnam in campaigns like Land

for the Tillers (Người Cày Có Ruộng). By 1975, land reform in South Vietnam had resulted in the distribution of nearly half its rice land or 1,136,705 hectares, and 77 percent of tenants became landowners without the same level of terror employed in North Vietnam.⁷⁴ If we were to pursue metrics to measure human benefit, we might need to weigh them at the very least against estimates that ranged from a few thousand to six hundred thousand people executed in the North's Land Reform Campaign.⁷⁵ In addition to whatever uncountable human misery was caused by this campaign, roughly one million refugees from North Vietnam before, during, and after the country's 1954 partition left for fear of such revolutionary violence.

Whatever our ideological conviction, there is no escape from the moral implications raised by revolutionary atrocity. But its acknowledgment must do more than just scaring us away from revolutions and making us despair in the promise of progressive time. Neferti Tadiar, for one, goes back to the site of revolutionary destruction to recuperate Benjamin's distinction between mythical and divine violence and its accompanying sorrow.⁷⁶ If the former is associated with its founding of a juridical order, then the latter holds the potential to destroy the law and its boundary-making. Tadiar puts stock in the uncontainable sorrow that accompanies the boundary-demolishing divine violence. "Immanent in the cult politics of revolution," writes Tadiar, "is another affective economy where the dividing line between life and death and its gendered regulation are trespassed or rendered mutable."⁷⁷ This recuperation of divine destruction from the repression of the mythical will not console those subjected to revolutionary violence. But we might consider the mutability of the truth upon which revolutionary violence is predicated. If the photographs at hand seem to index the practice of political killing for the purpose of maintaining the independence of the postcolonial nation, then perhaps we can look at these images as mediating rather than indexing the real to produce a truth about history and people. Viewed as forms of mediation, photographs perhaps can give us access to errantry from bio/necropolitical truth.

Nguyễn Thái Tuấn was a reclusive painter who in recent years attracted some attention in Vietnam and abroad with his enigmatic series of paintings dating back to the late 1990s. His series, titled *Black Paintings*, from the globalized decades of the 2000s and 2010s in Vietnam, contains numbered works that depict people in different walks of life and situations, people who seem to simultaneously inhabit and vacate the outer appearance marked by their clothing. About the anonymous faces that are woven into, and therefore disrupt, iconic Hollywood images of the Vietnam War in the works of Vietnamese American artist Dinh Q. Le, Viet Thanh Nguyen writes that Le "refuses the urge to represent those who cannot be represented because—dead, missing, lost, or forgotten—they have passed beneath history's wake."⁷⁸ The *Black Paintings* also refuse to give either the dead or the living figurative representation, but here as though the opposition between death and life cannot be maintained. All are missing and unrepresentable, dead or alive. And yet they are there. Unlike the life/death, truth/error, past/present binary reproduced



FIGURE 4. Nguyễn Thái Tuấn, *Tranh Đen số 40* (*Black Painting No. 40*), 2008. Oil on canvas, 130 × 90 cm. Photo courtesy Võ Quốc Linh.



FIGURE 5. *Trial of a Bourgeois Landowner*, North Vietnam, 1955. Photo by Dmitri Baltermants. Serge Plantureux/The Dmitri Baltermants Collection/CORBIS/Corbis via Getty Images.

by the Choeung Ek display, the *Black Paintings* pose an ontological doubling of absence and presence in a circuit of time and memory that makes it difficult for its viewers to stay on the safe side of life before death.

Black Painting No. 40 shows a figure bound and dressed in a formal black tunic outfit (figure 4). Or rather, it shows the tunic outfit filled by an absent person. The event it references is not immediately clear unless the viewer has seen online photos of the Land Reform Campaign in North Vietnam. More accurately, the painting references a particular photograph taken by Soviet photojournalist Dmitri Baltermants (1912–90) famous for his image *Grief* taken after a 1942 Nazi massacre at the Crimean village of Kerch. The Baltermants photograph at hand captures a moment in the trial of a landowner by a people's court in 1955 North Vietnam (figure 5). I saw the photograph untitled on various websites and social media accounts devoted to Vietnamese literature, history, and politics. Sometimes, it would appear in a sequence of images, some of unclear origin, that indexes moments in this trial when the man apparently underwent first “struggle denunciations” by another man and then a woman, then judgment by the people's court, then the pre-execution moment, and finally the postexecution when he has been reduced to a crumpled corpse on the ground. Together, the sequence narrates moments in time, ending in the scene after the killing of the accused and a small child is seen holding the flag of the new nation.⁷⁹ I can imagine Baltermants was allowed access to these proceedings as a famed Soviet photojournalist documenting the unfolding Vietnamese revolution for the socialist world. Baltermants chose a documentary style in these photographs in contrast to his more composed and choreographed European images from World War II. Even though the sequence detailed here employs a documentary style, these images were not included in a 2014 exhibition on the Land Reform Campaign in Hanoi. Instead, other documentary images were used to narrate the achievements of land redistribution under the leadership of the Communist Party. It should be mentioned that the security police closed down the 2014 exhibition shortly after it opened because many of the *dân oan* farmers who had recently been dispossessed of their land showed up to draw a direct connection between past socialist dispossession and the current capitalist one.⁸⁰ It seems even the documentary mode of visual capture is not beyond dispute.

The details captured in this Baltermants photograph were historically specific, from the portrait of Hồ Chí Minh flanked by world communist leaders, to the banners that proclaim “Long Live Chairman Hồ,” the “Special People's Court,” or the collective determination to “defeat the great evil landowners.” The photograph indexes a moment with highly identifiable historical details. Would this historical reference place today's viewer firmly in the present looking back at the moment of death in the past? Damian Sutton argues that the photograph can act transhistorically.⁸¹ First, the photographic image suspends time in its duration and compels interpretation and reinterpretation, thereby looping past, present, and future. And

second, the image can be viewed endlessly, across time and space, especially when it is now reproducible online. Such transhistoricity implicates the viewer in its temporal loop, not because the photograph recollects past moments, but because it works through an underlying process of everyday becoming in a dialectics of remembering and forgetting.⁸² I would argue that this thesis is upheld better when we look at Nguyễn Thái Tuấn's painting, first as an iteration in the reproduction and circulation of the photograph it references and vice versa, and second as an instance of mediation that deploys a particular aesthetics of the interplay between presence and absence in its artifice.

The gap between the viewer and the image in photographic composition plays out in this Baltermants photograph in a complex way. The image is tightly composed to focus viewer attention on the tension in the act of confrontation by a person whose lower social status is marked by his stained and rumpled peasant clothes against someone whose social privilege is marked by the formal tunic put on him by his captors for the occasion. The accuser leans in, his body drawing a diagonal line reminiscent of "struggle" poses such as those found in socialist realist mobilization posters. The reversal of social injustice is framed by this special people's court, whose ideology is clearly signaled by the banners and the leaders' portraits. However, the iconic moment referencing notions of revolutionary justice in socialist iconography seems to be emphasized by the point of view that causes discomfort for the viewer. Even while the landowner looks downward, the camera angle compels the viewer to look from his side at the violence in the accuser's denunciatory expression in excess of the rationality proclaimed in revolutionary historiography associated with Marxist scientific socialism. Yet, such excess of violence is presented as necessary for the oppressed to regain their human subjectivity in a redistribution of wealth. The viewer is pushed in for a closer look, placed in proximity to the center of the action. The viewer is not entirely acquitted of his or her complicity in the act of looking backward, as Pollock might fear. Even so, neither is that viewer entirely caught in the temporality of the moment. Both the historical markings and the socialist iconography date the event in relation to the contemporary viewer, especially when such viewer can easily find out that the excesses of the Land Reform Campaign in North Vietnam in the metrics of death registered at fifty thousand to five hundred thousand, depending on estimates, an excess the party called error in the following Rectification Campaign of 1956–58.⁸³ This rectification was an attempt by the Communist Party itself to put those atrocities in the past. This photograph on its own, for all its immediacy and engagement with the viewer, still cannot quite transcend its effect of recollection after the fact in later viewings.

Black Painting No. 40, when viewed as an iteration of the photographic image, triggers the looping effect that Sutton points out. The original photograph comes in a sequence that mimics the movement-image in its telling of the key moments in the trial and execution of the landowner. Seen against this

narrative and its chronological movement in the sequence, the image in the painting becomes like a film still, suspending time in the image's duration. What is held in duration is Nguyễn Thái Tuấn's extraction of the body of the subject of the photographic image—the landowner. This figure is not just abstracted from the background historical markings that frame the event, he is removed from the scene of the confrontation with his supposed victim and accuser. He is alone, taken out of the mythical dimension of revolution. He appears in a space filled by a sickly and defused light coming from where the viewer would be placed. The extraction of the figure from the rest of the photographic image does not remove him from the relationality in history *per se*. Rather, it creates a point of indiscernibility greater than in Baltermants's photographic capture. This visual fragment compels narrative interpretation and reinterpretation in the circuit of viewing in a way that the photograph by itself may not.

As a viewer of such a looping sequence, one is compelled to go from the photographic image that documents within the humanist revolutionary story, to one that compels multiple interpretation and reinterpretation, including the temporal and historical position of the viewer in relation to the man about to be executed in the founding of a juridical order within this progressive historiography. The viewer is looped into the sequence and may even feel compelled to momentarily occupy the space of the landowner's absent body. The historical event in the photograph, seen together with the image in the painting, refuses to stay firmly in the past: it now moves through time and can double as one of our possible futures. This circuit of the photographic and painted image renders the event transhistorical rather than historical or ahistorical. The event, in its duration, suspended from historical time yet a part of it, refuses to stay in the accomplished moment where our ethical stance becomes useless or merely comforting, when we think such event was a past mistake rather than a function of ongoing modern politics. The interpretive indistinctness of the image in the painting, when seen as an iteration of the photographic image, makes distinct a certain logic that runs through our past, present, and future, implicating us in its murderous compulsion.

While the photograph indexes a historically placed event, the image in *Black Painting No. 40* reveals the scopic regime of Foucauldian modern governmental subject-making. The missing body of the landowner does not seem to interfere with the recognition by the authority that binds his arms. The clothes do not crumble without a body in it. It is not only that the clothes do make the person after all, but that the truth of such external assignation depends on the death of the person it contains. Governmental scopic truth is revealed to be guaranteed by death. Because *Black Painting No. 40* is part of a series that depicts different kinds of bodiless persons identifiable only in this scopic regime of recognition, it draws the connection between a discrete event in the past in the photograph and a practice that is ongoing in present-day Vietnam and elsewhere.

Such commentary on scopic regimes of recognition compels the viewer to think about how it might be relevant to wherever modern governmentality exists. Through the artifice of the artist, the viewer sees the subject's absence in such a scopic regime. Nguyễn Thái Tuấn rends a body from the photographic image that professes documentary identification and governmental truth. On one level, this painting shows that what remains is the official category itself, the truth about subjects who are governed to the point of death, and whose death is the point of excluded inclusion, like the puppet-like body of Nguyễn Thị Năm broken to fit the state-provided coffin. What remains on the painting acts like a coffin, hiding the very body that it contains. The promise of representational politics empties out.

On another level, while the unpainted body eludes its capture in the photographic image, the space it occupies refuses to leave its officially recognized shell of clothing. The shell is haunted by the body inside, made absent by way of murder. The painted void left by the destroyed body is the space of the unthought in the everyday, from and to which the iterant image returns. In looking at Leonardo Cremonini's paintings where human faces and body parts haunt and become part of inanimate objects in modern life, Louis Althusser notes how Cremonini's human faces and body parts are "hardly outlined," "badly represented," in that they cannot be "identified as bearers of the ideological function of the expression of *subjects*."⁸⁴ Humans in their corporeal parts in Cremonini's paintings are "haunted by an absence: a purely negative absence: that of the humanist function which is refused them, and which they refuse."⁸⁵

Beyond the antihumanist refusal to represent the subject at the groundbreaking murder, Nguyễn Thái Tuấn's missing body compels us to come closer, to look in, to listen to what it may tell us. Camp notes that images can register at a "lower frequency," specifically "the lowest sonic frequency of all," which demands we listen with attentiveness.⁸⁶ Camp is referring to the embodied quiet of the quotidian that "registers at the multiple levels of the human sensorium."⁸⁷ The ill-lit image of the absent body in Nguyễn Thái Tuấn's painting quiets down the sounds evoked by Baltermants's photograph: vocalized denunciations drawn out of the bodies representative of the "masses" by a people's court. With the painting, we are pulled in to listen to the sound that has receded with the disappeared body. In this intimacy, we sense that body the way we feel gravity. We are pulled towards it because we too are bodies in orbits around one another, held in relation to one another. The destroyed body does not ask to be reconciled to the truth of its premortem private life or to its state murder. Nor does it demand a recuperation into a teleological temporality of humanist redemption. This voided person comes back in haunting iterations looping past and future into the present. Because it shows us that the founding of the law has now been embedded in the unthought of everyday life, every iteration returns us to the foundational moment with an altered alertness to the haunting, the raised hairs on the backs of our necks. In errantry, the iterant image takes us to others, the others of history, the others upon whose

deaths a nation, a regime, may be built and kept standing. And with every return of the loop, pulled by these others, we run astray of the foundational kill.

Through the memorialization of the Khmer Rouge mass killing, Cambodia becomes the geographical site where the West and Vietnam can disavow the violence integral to their politics, claiming for themselves the space of reason, in other words, the space of life and truth in opposition to death and error particularized to a place narrated as belonging to autogenocidal madness. State memorialization at Choeung Ek detains the bones of those killed to disavow involvement by former Khmer Rouge members in the post-Khmer Rouge government and engage with an economy of truth production that relies on the Enlightenment formulation of truth as life, death as error. This is why, when dealing with memory of American bombings and the Khmer Rouge killings, Lina Chhun commits to a feminist approach that attends to silence and memory that minimizes harm, “a giving form that does not speak for or seek to assume a subjectivity that ultimately reinscribes the Enlightenment will to ‘truth.’”⁸⁸ And Um places importance on silence as a “defiant political stance” in Cambodian memory to refuse perpetuating terror.⁸⁹

The ability of *Black Painting No. 40* to open up the image to the possibility of its errantry comes from the double take of viewing the Baltermants photograph and itself as iterations of one another. But it also comes from an avowed artifice that makes visible the death and absence integral to our modern construction of political truth. This aesthetic mode does so by way of tracing remains, albeit in eluding the capture in the display of material remains at Choeung Ek. The iterated image in the photograph and painting together suggests a way to remember, to witness the reproduction of the life/death, truth/error, presence/absence, present/past binaries. The aesthetics refuses the epistemology of life that treats death as an object of knowledge indexable in authoritative visual proof. Yet, it also refuses to release us from the eerie recognition that the dead and their haunting are central to knowledge. And our viewing of their deaths, or what remains, is a form of witnessing.

TOWARDS AN ETHICS OF WITNESSING AT THE THRESHOLD OF LIFE AND DEATH

On the first anniversary of George Floyd’s public murder, Darnella Frazier, the young woman who filmed this deadly encounter, posted a message on Instagram. Floyd’s murder itself can be viewed as an instance of the enforcement of law as an everyday refounding of a racist juridical order that can no longer hide behind the state’s promise of the protection of life. To police officer Derek Chauvin, Floyd must have appeared as an outlaw to be recaptured, even or especially in his death. To witnesses, Floyd must have appeared familiar even if they did not know him. Frazier in her post looks back on Floyd as just a man whom she did not know “from a can of paint” at the beginning of this encounter.⁹⁰ The not knowing gives rise to other forms of knowing as Frazier moves further into her witnessing.

Frazier's video image of Chauvin pressing down his knees on Floyd's neck for nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds, long past the latter's last breath, sparked a new phase of the Black Lives Matter movement for racial justice around the world even while the world was on pandemic lockdown.

In her message, Frazier names the multiple forms of her witnessing. The police killed a Black man "in front of my eyes," she writes.⁹¹ Witnessing a man in pain took away a part of her childhood as it brought home to her the racist brutality to which Black people were subjected in America. Frazier makes the connection between the state violence that always awaits her to her anxiety mirrored in how her family now must move from hotel to hotel like fugitives, and a sleeplessness that her mother attempts to sooth by rocking her to sleep. It was, is, impossible for her to be the witness, and she is the witness. She writes, "I'm a girl trying to heal from something I am reminded of every day."⁹² Her witnessing was a wounding and it placed her in a temporality of trauma. She is proud of the police accountability her video helped secure, but she knows her "video didn't save George Floyd."⁹³ Frazier's witnessing in video form does not contribute to an authoritative visualization of history and its salvation. She makes no gesture towards a future except one for Floyd. Frazier wishes him rest "in the most beautiful of roses."⁹⁴ While she states matter-of-factly that "we are all human," the future she now witnesses is not one of historiographic salvation but one nested in beauty. Her witnessing of the future recalls Saidiya Hartman's question of "Can beauty provide an antidote to dishonor, and love a way to 'exhume buried cries' and reanimate the dead?"⁹⁵ Frazier bids us, "You can view George Floyd anyway you choose to view him, despite his past, because don't we all have one? He was a loved one, someone's son, someone's father, someone's brother, and someone's friend."⁹⁶ She now knows Floyd through remembering him in his kinship.

What Frazier witnessed then brought her to webs of relation and memory. Her witnessing in video form further extended such relation as it shocked so many into a recognition of American systemic racism. Polls taken among white Americans one year after Floyd's murder found a majority agreeing that there is systemic racism, a change one white woman attributes to how "graphic" the video image was that she could not get it out of her mind.⁹⁷ The image appears graphic because we are brought into proximity of the violent act. Both the graphic character of the image and the iterant character of modern digital technology came into play as the video was posted and reposted on traditional and social media. This circuit invites a mode of viewing that remains open to the contingently fugitive, that inability to intend or transgress the law in the image of Floyd's dying in its brutality and horror, and Frazier's act of witnessing. Frazier seems to have modeled for us a mode of witnessing. It now demands an ethics of being haunted not just by the brutality of violent acts of sovereignty but also by that web of relationality and memory that moves and lives on beyond those acts.

When I viewed Frazier's video, I became a witness, gripped by tremors. I imagine other viewers going through similar physical convulsions. If we assume that

witnessing means to testify to being present with our sensory perception, we live in an era now where witnessing and the responsibilities thereof extend to viewers of these videos. Recording and dissemination technology brought Floyd's murder closer to us than perhaps we would like. We did not know Floyd. We can never really know the dead. But his imagistic dying can register in our bodies, if not in the same ways as it might have registered in Frazier's. After Floyd, I found I could not view other videos of police beatings and killings of Black and Brown people, like the subsequently released video of police beating of Ronald Greene. Just hearing about what is on that video from a friend brought back sights and sounds I witnessed at maybe four years old in the beating death of a young police cadet by South Vietnamese soldiers. The young man had run into our home trying to flee his pursuers one afternoon on the eve of Tết. Already bloodied, he cowered in an uncovered corner behind our front rooms, where we kept jars of rainwater for washing. He was on his knees begging the soldiers for his life when one kicked him in the face and the force of it popped his eye out of its socket. I can still hear, feel, the thudding of combat boots on his body a few feet away. My father was carrying me while he pleaded for the man's life. The soldiers refused to stop. They pursued the man again as he ran out of our house and met his death on the street as they jumped on him and crushed his chest cavity.

How do you bear witness to what you see against what cannot be known? I did not know the man and cannot speak for him. I did not know the reason for his brutal killing. I could not feel his pain. Those things remained secrets to me. But so did what I felt in my own body, because I could not name it. In this book, I include numbers of bomb tonnage, of those who died in war, or those who perished in war's aftermath. I do that because to actually bear witness to the destruction is too much. Sometimes, we rely on Enlightenment metrics of objective knowledge because otherwise we perish with those who die in front of our eyes. Neither the metrics nor the indexical value in the visual can really tell what we feel in our bodies because we ourselves are not certain. It escapes our ability to name it in some language of fact and evidence. Testimony, writes Derrida, cannot, must not be "absolutely sure and certain in the order of knowing as such."⁹⁸ Rather, what we know is the "possibility of annihilation" as the condition of witnessing.⁹⁹ Derrida asks if our testaments are about "surviving in dying" "before and beyond the opposition between living and dying?"¹⁰⁰ To be that close to the dead in their dying is never an easy thing to do. That is because "the dead," writes Pollock, "falls into the realm of the abject against which we have defences against contamination."¹⁰¹ In that Orphic backward gaze, the other is captured in their untraversable distance from the living and therefore lost to the living forever. To look with the promise of justice or equality, both the witness and the other would have to be in the space of protected life. That of course is not often a possibility given the sovereign violence operating on racialized or aberrant bodies in the modern world. What is left for us to do might be an engagement: one has to stand at the temporal and bodily threshold of the dead,

to be in intimate but uncollapsible distance from the dead. Pollock hopes to work towards a feminist ethics that “creates a threshold, a border-space that never collapses, never closes.”¹⁰² Frazier, in her witnessing, stood at the threshold of vulnerability, knowing she could be Floyd. That knowledge brought her life closer to its truth, not of biopolitical protection or the future’s promise, but to the condition of being unprotected and possibly brutalized in a racist America. That knowledge annihilated a part of her life. That was the price of her witnessing, at the site of the body, where refugee writer Ocean Vuong warns, “everything has a price.”¹⁰³

Refugees, by legal procedural requirement, must produce testimonies in the determination of their eligibility for asylum. This imposed narrative extraction often reduces the full experience of refugees to one that serves the political interests of Western nations, or plays into the good refugee narratives in imperial recuperations. But worse, such testimonies may have to conform to an epistemological structure of Enlightenment transparency that thwarts the potentials of witnessing at the threshold of knowability, of death and life, self and other. Paul Celan famously writes, “No one / bears witness for the / witness.”¹⁰⁴ As witnesses of colonial and national or imperial sovereign violence, refugees must self-bear our own history because both Western states and Western critics of imperialism appropriate and erase it for political reasons. The next chapters address at length the discounting of refugee knowledge as well as the ethical implications of refugee exile into self-mourning and self-witnessing. Suffice it to say here that it seems to me the “no one” in Celan’s line may not be an accusation of our unwillingness to witness the suffering of others. I read it to say that, in order to bear witness for the witness, we must undergo the representational, emotional, and sometimes corporeal devastation that annihilates the humanist subject. In witnessing, we become annihilated with the suffering of self and other, rather than attempt to represent either. Such is the practice of, in the words of Phi Hong Su, “radical empathy.”¹⁰⁵ Assuming the responsibility of bearing witness for refugee witnesses, comic author Yvan Alagbé writes, “I live with the dead. With the Moors, the Blacks, the mad. My friends the negroes, at the bottom of the ocean. Deep in the sands and streams of Eldorado. I dwell with the living. Everlasting joy.”¹⁰⁶

If witnessing demands that intimacy with the dead, it does not require we simply side with the victims of a brutal history. It does not mean we obliterate that tension between ourselves and the dead. Today’s perpetrator could be tomorrow’s victim and vice versa. Yesterday’s landlord who might have participated in the everyday violence visited on his tenant farmers could become the victim of today’s necropolitical reckoning. And the cycle continues in a deadly dance of the Hegelian master-bondsman dialectic. To treasure life, we might have to paradoxically reject it as the basis of truth underlying ethico-political decisions. To be in intimacy with the dead might mean to let go of the desire to square away truth, when that truth lies from the space of life. To be in intimacy with the dead might mean to let go of the idea that the truth can be whole so that it can underwrite the

human in its universal intelligibility. I am not proposing a truth in death to oppose that murderous Enlightenment truth in life. The dead may be avenged in retributive justice or deployed in positive law, but what we learn from the dead is that they are irrecoverable just as we are irredeemable in humanist representation.

Pollock observes that we view the recorded image that mediates sovereign violence in two ways: as an index of reality in the particularity of the instance, and as a framed statement about our universal humanity meant to elicit a humanist response. Both are inadequate when we think about an ethics of viewing if viewing means witnessing. What the image gestures towards is that which we cannot reconcile. The gap constitutes a slippage between what the image indexes and the humanist story that gives it meaning. If we listen closely to its whispers or even its silence, an image can refuse to reconcile the violence it records with its incorporation into some universal humanist story that can easily be co-opted to serve the political agenda of nation or empire. The humanist story is the source of sovereign power in modern times. Yet such fiction is circuitously actualized through violence. Power in that way is tautological. Might we need a mode of realization that is also tautological in that it allows us to recognize violence in proximate others and in ourselves, the violence to which we are subjected and complicit? After all, we are history's inheritors and its witnesses.

If the Baltermants photograph was ever intended as a story about the emergence of the young socialist nation—a humanist story imbedded in a narrative about universal history—it has more recently been circulated by groups in Vietnam or the diasporas that reclaim the documentary function of his photographic image in a continuum with other images to reframe the story as one of the atrocities of the Land Reform Campaign and therefore of communism. Vietnamese who post these images intend for them to provoke a response to atrocity as a crime against humanity. Yet, it is this humanist sentiment in both socialist and anticommunist positions and their disavowal of the murderous politics that have accompanied us throughout the modern era as we decide who is worthy of protection and who is not. Such narrative disavowal serves political agendas. Let me explore the political deployments of the humanist narrative in relation to another photographic image that became iconic of the Vietnam War.

We have all seen this photo. Titled *Saigon Execution*, it was taken by photographer Eddie Adams in Saigon on February 1, 1968, during the Tết Offensive. It shows a man in military uniform extending his arm, at the end of which is a gun aimed at the temple of another man in civilian clothes with his hands bound behind his back. The uniformed man must have fired his gun inches away, because we see the grimace on the face of the other. The *New York Times* captioned the uniformed man as South Vietnamese police chief General Nguyễn Ngọc Loan “executing a Vietcong prisoner in Saigon.”¹⁰⁷ This episode of murder was also captured on film by South Vietnamese journalist Võ Sữu. The executed man was National Liberation Front combatant Nguyễn Văn Lém. The image has been cropped several times

in other places to leave out more and more of the context, until the killing act takes place in a tight composition no longer of this Loan and this Lém, but between the shooter and the shot, between killer and killed, between a human rights violator and his victim, between barbarism and civilization, between reactionary violence and universal progressive history. It was this abstract call for justice that reverberated in the United States and other Western countries, igniting an intensified phase of the antiwar movement there.

The documentary value is assumed, so that a more universal story could be told in humanist terms. Bonnie Honig dismisses ethical consideration, centering death and the dead as belonging to a “mortalist humanism” in which our shared human condition of “finitude is said to soften us up for the call of the other, to open us up to the solicitations of ethics and bypass the intractable divisions of politics.”¹⁰⁸ Honig advocates instead an agonist aesthetics opposing universal humanism. I am sympathetic to Honig’s turn towards politics, but would point out that it is because of where you might put yourself in this story of human progress that the documentary value of a picture becomes intensely contested. Citing Susan Sontag’s 1968 visit to Hanoi that prompted her “misgivings about the political efficacy of images,” Thy Phu sees them as repeatedly mobilized “for the ends of war.”¹⁰⁹ Adams later wrote in his eulogy of Nguyễn Ngọc Loan: “The general killed the Viet Cong; I killed the general with my camera. Still photographs are the most powerful weapon in the world. People believe them, but photographs do lie, even without manipulation.”¹¹⁰ Adams’s postscript to the episode touches on the unknowability in the testimony that makes it vulnerable to the humanist framing of it in the service of our political needs. Under this humanist siege, some South Vietnamese refugee groups tried to fill in more context to defend against cries of South Vietnamese barbarism that ring of racism. According to those sources, South Vietnamese marines had captured NFL fighter Nguyễn Văn Lém after he led the execution of South Vietnamese Lieutenant Colonel Nguyễn Tuấn, his eighty-year-old mother, his wife, and five of their six children, one of whom was Loan’s godchild.¹¹¹ Witnessing in that case involved more than the indexical value of the photograph. There was no possible way to resolve the contest over the story of the image. In it, Loan forever appears to have just pulled the trigger, and the bullet is forever seen piercing the skull of the contorted body of the NLF fighter. The horror of Nguyễn Văn Lém’s murder remains even if we were to believe he had massacred others off frame, away from our witnessing. I am not arguing to rehabilitate the murderer. What I suggest is that witnessing demands more than deciding who was barbarous and who upheld the standards of humanist civilization. Nguyễn Ngọc Loan was repeatedly condemned and refused medical treatment in the West for this crime against civilized humanity. Condemnations of that kind issued from America, Europe, and Australia, or distant in time, conveniently separating those protected spaces from places where people breathed in the face of death on a daily basis. This was remote viewing rather than witnessing.

If it is from privileged locations that our progressive humanity guides our ethics in viewing images of historical violence, what faith can we place in the image as testament? Adrienne Rich tells us: “the thing I came for: / the wreck and not the story of the wreck.”¹¹² Perhaps we can enter Choeung Ek memorial, Nguyễn Thái Tuấn’s painting, Baltermants’s and Adams’s photographs, or Frazier’s video with an eye to how the wreck of bodies can never be reconciled to the various stories of order, civilization, and progress. There is something about the image of a wrecked body that is irreducible to its indexical truth or its humanist framing. Perhaps remainders of a body either in front of us or mediated in the image refuse to stay inert but challenge us to engage otherwise. Perhaps it is not easy to contain minute details of pain, the contortion, the grimace, the hardness of metal against human flesh. The dead are just a breath away if we listen to their register in our own bodies. The image of the broken body gives up not the whole truth but a disturbance of an imposed truth. In his witnessing of Nguyễn Thị Năm’s execution, the Land Reform cadre recounted that the woman had asked in vain for time to recite her last Buddhist incantation. And it was this request for something beside revolutionary rhetoric in the presence of her broken body minutes later that made the cadre want to run away in fear.¹¹³ When we are in the presence of the dead, we feel there is an aliveness irreducible to Enlightenment reason that categorizes life in opposition to death.

Beyond its truth-framing, we hold the violent image like an imprint in the retina. What makes the image alive is our contact with it at the threshold of death while life is present precisely because it is no longer. There is only that ceaseless feeling in our bodies that burns the image into its afterlife. We long for the presence of those killed because it is utterly beyond recovery. In this melancholic mode, this absent presence incessantly returns. Such afterlife is what loops through the Baltermants photographs and the Black Painting iterations without any reconciliation with either the index in the metrics of the dead or the matrix of history. Suspended in this afterlife of the image is the taut distance between being and nonbeing, truth and untruth, justice and injustice, life and death, without any possibility for reconciliation. In this way, the image remains but an intimate trace of an irreconcilable past.

Perhaps we can allow the image its refusal to absolve us of our implication in the humanist catastrophes that litter our modern era despite our self-righteous protest. Perhaps it is just whatever it is we feel in our bodies that such images leave behind, beyond, beside, or under our condemnation or celebration. What we witness in the murder of another, their dying, and the images thereof lies uneasily in our bodies. The feelings, the tremors, or convulsions remain unnamable because they exist at the bodily site on the threshold of law and its violence. Our witnessing remains inarticulate. But though this something we feel in its intimate distance from the dead does not possess the force of bombs and bullets, it is not nothing either. We know this.

History Interrupted

The Death of South Vietnam and Refugee Hauntings

In a 1977 poem, Du Tử Lê, a well-known Vietnamese-language poet, writes of the refugee entanglement in the life and death of self and nation: “When I die please take me out to sea / On the way there remember to sing the national anthem / No one sings it any longer / (The song is now like a ghost).”¹ If the Fanonian colonized must win their sovereignty in the anticolonial nation, as discussed in the last chapter, and nation requires the writing of its life history both backward and forward, as Benedict Anderson argues,² then what happens to modes of imagining subjecthood when the postcolonial nation is foreclosed, its life ended? This question becomes more pressing as the nation-state becomes the form of “sovereignty more jealous and absolute than anything known before,” according to Karl Polanyi,³ institutionalized across the globe since World War II. If refugee is assumed to acquire sovereignty in the new nation of settlement, what happens when such form of collective sovereignty forbids entrance through racist exclusion?

The First Indochina War began when France returned after World War II to reclaim its Indochinese colonies. What ensued was a war for independence lasting from 1946 to 1954, fought by nationalist and communist forces, many in a broader front known as the Việt Minh led by the Communist Party. France’s defeat by Việt Minh forces at Điện Biên Phủ led to settlements at the 1954 Geneva Accords, which partitioned Vietnam into North and South, understood to be temporary until general elections could take place to decide the new nation’s fate.⁴ The North retained the name of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam under the leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party (which at the time went by the name of Đảng Lao Động or Workers’ Party). The Republic of Vietnam, situated geographically

south of the 17th parallel, was both a postcolonial state, in its continued economic and military dependence on old and new colonial masters, and one that was also built on the ideology of anticolonial nationalism, a condition less contradictory than it may sound. This phenomenon is only difficult to fathom for us who are Cold War inheritors susceptible to the kind of Manichean imagining that places the Republic of Vietnam and its citizens who have not joined the NLF in the category of *bù nhìn* or puppets to American imperialism and capitalism. American Cold War imperialism seems to permit a convenient acceptance that those existing in its shadow lack the complexity assigned to full humans, however constrained the circumstances.

Duy Lap Nguyen goes so far as to argue that the war between North and South Vietnam was one between two competing versions of anticolonial communism, quoting Ngô Đình Nhu, President Ngô Đình Diệm's brother and chief strategist, as stating that the Republic was about fighting both "the guerillas and imperialism," and "combatting communism in order to put an end to materialistic capitalism."⁵ This ideological vision was carried by the state-sponsored Cần Lao Nhân Vị Cách Mạng Đảng (Personalist Labor Revolutionary Party) under Diệm's First Republic, seen by its many domestic critics as brutally repressive in its leaning towards the state socialist model in fascism. After tumultuous coups by South Vietnamese forces with American support that unseated the Ngô brothers, followed by other less enduring governing coalitions, President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's Second Republic retreated from such grand visions but retained a more pragmatic pursuit of wealth redistribution, especially in the extensive land reform campaigns mentioned in the last chapter. At the very least, South Vietnam flourished and floundered in the conflicts and complexities presented by diverse groups and factions that operated politically from that location. The South's early refusal to hold general elections in 1956 to decide the fate of the entire country and American involvement resulted in the North's decision to pursue a war of national liberation and unification. The eventual victory by the North over the South in 1975 ended the latter's history, depriving its citizens, including those who would become refugees, of access to sovereignty through a nation of their own, the implications of which are addressed in this chapter and the next. And as the United States fought these hot wars in the name of promoting the principle of national self-determination, its engagement delivered racialized allies abroad and later racialized refugees at home faced with racist exclusions from the domain of the human.

I am interested in refugees' self-bearing of history to write themselves into futures across this violent end of nation and sovereignty by reading for how Vietnamese-language refugee writers address modes of being in the American context. Not enough attention has been paid to refugee Vietnamese-language writing under the assumption that it would correspond to exilic literature in the first years of settlement, and that this literature would be too nostalgic and

parochial to contend with fundamental formations in the ethics and politics of race and time in the country of settlement or the world at large. Such assumption corresponds with the expectation that refugee is a transitory state of being that would give way to either assimilation into the dominant society and language, or true contestation from a second generation cognizant of their stake in the new country. Yet, Vietnamese-language refugee literature is not so easily dismissed in volume, reach, scope, or thematic content. In the 1980s and '90s, at least two dozen publishing houses and roughly six hundred Vietnamese-language periodicals with a few dozen specializing in literature served the refugee diasporas worldwide. By the 1990s, these vibrant refugee literary activities had generated a Vietnamese-language forum in which critics and writers in Vietnam could participate, constituting an intellectual and artistic public sphere that encompassed Vietnam and the global diaspora.⁶ Not confined within the borders and concerns of one nation-state, this body of writing in Vietnamese spans at least four decades, and confronts some of the most fundamental questions of politics and ethics across an end of the world for these refugees, a condition that in this moment afflicts us all. Such refugee fiction explores an ethics that guards against the assimilation of others into the self, which undergoes the decimation of its world.

I begin with a reading of a South Vietnamese story that portends the death of South Vietnam to pose questions of genealogy and explore how we might be able to read across that historical rupture through a discussion of ghostly elements anchored in material objects. In the decades since the 1980s, writing that reinvested the material with the ghostly, resulting in a destabilized ontological status of the human self, became a major mode of literary expression in Vietnamese refugee communities. I suggest that such refugee mode of writing, which includes spectral and occult elements, can be read in continuity with South Vietnamese works that intimate the fall of the Republic. Refugees had to live on without recourse to humanist recuperation through the sovereign anticolonial nation because of the American military occupation of the South and later its defeat by the North. Nor would they have recourse to American sovereignty, due to racist exclusion. The last chapter begs us to look not at but from the threshold of the catastrophe. This chapter asks us to read stories by authors who write across the catastrophe that ended their nation and their world. A reading attentive to the feminine and queer as haunted sites of chrono-normativity allows us to see the alternative anchoring of the violently fractured self in refugee time. This body of fiction shows how the feminine and the queer have been subsumed and suppressed under imaginings of the hetero-masculinist anticolonial nation that, for its humanist deliverance, engaged in organized violence against not just colonial masters but its own subjects. The apparitions at the site of the feminine and the queer gesture to temporal modes of being and becoming alternative to national liberation and racism dominant in expressions of humanist sovereignty. If the previous chapters propose epistemologies that are open to the poetic, the allegorical, the iterant as responses

to humanist interdiction in economy and politics, this chapter explores ontologies of the human that would be open to haunted futures.

GENEALOGY ACROSS HISTORICAL RUPTURE

At the end of Nguyễn Mạnh Côn's story "Lời Nguyễn Trọng Không" (Prayers in the Void), the narrator's sister informs him: "My husband thinks the scenario willed by one essence spirit can be communicated to the void which then manufactures that scenario in reality."⁷ The sister has obeyed her brother's instructions for rituals involving her handkerchief and some old coins that would allow her to enter her own dream about her paratrooper husband's death in order to alter the outcome. The story was published in the literary magazine *Văn Chính* in Saigon 1972 and selected in 1973 for inclusion in a collection of *Our Country's Best Short Stories* in the period from 1954–73, basically the duration of the Republic of Vietnam before its defeat by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam two years later. Considered serious literature, this story untypically engages with the occult. At the time in South Vietnam, works on the occult and ghostly were often relegated to the domain of the genre of the ghost story—revenge by the wrongfully dead—and other fantasies of popular reading, most of which came in the form of the illustrated story sold to children, young women, and members of the working class. As an avid reader of this genre, my intention here is not to celebrate canonized works over "low-brow" literature. My purpose, rather, is to think through the appearance of the occult and ghostly where South Vietnamese readers might not expect to find them.

In contrast, various specters haunt a large portion of nongenre refugee works in Vietnamese that garnered attention from readers and critics alike, particularly from the late 1980s through at least the first decade of this century. Writing from France, Trần Vũ is the most insistent and celebrated practitioner of what has been popularly called magical realism. The very long list of refugee writers contributing to Vietnamese-language fiction who have made use of some alternative realist elements in their writing includes Mai Ninh, Lê thị Thẩm Vân, Hồ Minh Dũng, Thận Nhiên, Nam Dao, Đặng Thơ Thơ, Nguyễn Danh Bằng, among others.⁸ While contending with this flourishing, literary critic Thụy Khuê for one complains that too many refugee writers wrongheadedly try to break with the past through the use of such modes as magical realism, which she hastily credits to pure imitation of the Latin American genre.⁹ This seems to contradict the commonsensical assumption that much of refugee literature in Vietnamese is an extension of South Vietnamese literature because most writers from the Republic of Vietnam simply continued to write as they resettled in the United States and elsewhere. Refugee writers making use of these alternative realist modes mostly come from the 1.5 generation in the United States, those who left Vietnam when they were children, but we can also find these elements among some older refugee writers who had begun their writing careers in South Vietnam. If the prevalence of such alternative realist

modes of writing does not present an obvious and straightforward borrowing from a large body of similar literature in the Republic of Vietnam, is there a lineage to be drawn? If so, in what way? How should we read such elements—the occult, magic, ghosts, apparitions, and dreams existing side by side with material depictions—in South Vietnamese and refugee literature? What relationship could we draw when we juxtapose such nongenre works containing spectral elements from South Vietnam and the refugee diaspora?

MATERIALISM AND ITS GHOSTS

To explore these questions, I propose we pursue an updated materialist and historical reading of these texts. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff note the spectral, even occult, nature of post-Fordist global capitalism in heightened speculative practices accompanied by instantaneous transfer of intangible finance and currency markets, among other imagined commodities that require no material production, phenomena that took off since the 1970s.¹⁰ At the height of this kind of magical realist fiction in the refugee diaspora some years before the financial collapse of 2007, the volume of finance capital exchange had already reached \$1.5 trillion per day, equivalent to the total world trade in four months; and in just the year 1997, derivatives were traded at a value of \$360 trillion, a dozen times the size of the entire global economy at the time.¹¹ Yet, Comaroff and Comaroff have also pointed out that the “(post)modern person is a subject made with objects.”¹² The objects, tangible enough to be consumed, must be consumed through a magic-like process to attach imagined meanings to them. Production itself becomes increasingly spatially scattered, detached, and hidden in the magical part of marketing and consumption. The unfathomable discrepancy in how much Nike pays its offshore workers in Vietnam and how much it pays its athlete celebrity endorsers in the United States goes to illustrate the monumental efforts by capital to obscure the materiality of production and ascribe to its products a phantom corporeality of, in this case, vicarious athleticism. Seeking an understanding of the connection between political economy and cultural forms, I am interested in the interplay between the presence and absence, the materiality and ghostliness of objects that constitute the modern subject in these modes of expression.

Haunting is not new to capitalism. Writing in 1867, Marx explains this spectral effect of the commodity fetish in his *Capital*. He observes a “mystical character of commodities” that “does not originate . . . in their use value.”¹³ Instead, “the relation between men assumes” the “fantastical forms of a relation between things.”¹⁴ Exchange had even then eclipsed the process of production hinged on labor. Marx writes, “The whole mystery of commodities, all the magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labour as long as they take the form of commodities, vanishes therefore, as soon as we come to other forms of production.”¹⁵ While taking on the mantle of science with its rationality to organize the observable,

Marx's necromantic language betrays the uneasiness in his insistence on the truth of materiality and an ontology of presence in order to resurrect the "real" of labor relations. The ghost was already in the machine at the time of Marx's writing of *Capital*, as commodity exchange already occulted labor relations. The degree to which capitalist production and exchange have undergone two more levels of transcendence away from the "real" of labor relations, first Fordist and now post-Fordist, makes a materialist ontology even less adequate. First, Fordism had upped the stakes with unprecedented mass consumption, requiring the expansion of the commodity exchange relations that so haunted Marx. Then post-Fordism untethered currency from the gold standard, untied the growth of financial and currency markets from the now geographically scattered production process. South Vietnamese and refugee writings about hauntings can be situated in the traces of the material and immaterial in that moment. Reworking the material in the ghostly also enables an ethics that perhaps can circumvent an ontology that, because of its insistence on exorcising the traces of aberration within itself to reassert materialist presence as a mode of knowing, has either been translated into violent suppression of unorthodox thinking and being in actual socialist revolutions, or has had a hard time keeping its epistemological foothold in our world of postness. A historical reading of haunted writing reconsiders the rational epistemology underlying materialism, yet does not dismiss its concerns. Let me now historically situate the magical realism that refugee writers have been accused of imitating.

Perhaps the first round of explicit theorization of magical realist aesthetics was Franz Roh's 1925 call for a return to tangible objects in an altered realism away from Expressionism in painting.¹⁶ It should make us take notice that this call happened during the Fordist moment, exemplified by the mass-production and consumption under the reign of the Model-T. Attention to the current deployment of magical realism at our post-Fordist moment refocuses our attention on modes of imagining and representing materially tangible objects that anchor subjectivity in new elements of the ghostly, magical, and occult, as economy and history entwine. This approach breaks down the Marxist, albeit dialectical, dichotomy of base and superstructure, focusing instead on the material as both present and absent. This allows us to read these texts in a new light, one that takes into account not only political economy as context, but also heightens our sensitivity to the haunting of history where past events and people exist in the present as traces, and cannot be fully assimilated into the present any more than they can be materially resurrected or understood in empiricist terms.

Although attention to objects irreducible to their materiality coincided with the historical rise and expansion of the commodity and speculative economy, a focus on objects also has the ability to decenter the humanist subject as master of knowledge. Advocating an alternative realism based on the relative autonomy of objects where "the relation between these is on the same ontological footing as any human-world relation," Graham Harman argues against making "human

experience the homeland of all relations.”¹⁷ This centering of objects runs counter to Marx’s attempt to drag their commodity value back to materialist relations between men. Treated in this way, objects give off a magical realist effect, which in turn pushes our understanding of reality into the aporetic, recreating the real at “the limit events that resist representation” as “an immediate, felt reality,” as Eugene Arva argues.¹⁸ This has two interrelated implications here. First, the irreducibility of objects to humanist relations allows me to entertain the potentiality of the unhuman when paths to becoming human are foreclosed. Writing about Yann Martel’s *The Life of Pi*, Eva Aldea contemplates how becoming “non-human in magical realism thus implies a becoming-imperceptible not only between the human and non-human, but between the real and the magic, the true and the false.”¹⁹ And second, if as Sylvia Wynter tells us, the master code of the human since the Enlightenment has been cast in terms of rationality in colonial racialization, refusal of a rational empiricist epistemology also refuses the criterion used to render racial others subject to chattel slavery and colonization. It is perhaps because of its ability to disrupt the rational epistemology accompanying Western hegemony by affirming the simultaneity of mutually exclusive realities and histories that magical realism as a mode of visual and literary expression has often been celebrated in postcolonial studies, and its authors often situate themselves in relation to the postcolonial Third World.

The challenge to rational epistemology from the postcolony and racialized others seems relevant today as reason continues to mark whiteness. In a 2019 speech at the National Conservatism Conference in Washington, DC, Amy Wax, a law professor and intellectual voice of the affluent variety of anti-immigrant white supremacy behind Trump, proclaimed, “We are better off if our country is dominated” by “people from the first world, from the West, than by people from countries that had failed to advance.”²⁰ By the former, Wax means people who “hang out” in “nice, quasi-European, decorous, neat, clean, quiet, litter-free, beautifully maintained, orderly places.”²¹ And by the latter, she means those from “shithole countries,”²² her example being Malaysia, where supposedly there is “no science, no technology,” a condition Wax considers “very closely related to the lack of commitment to empiricism, the lack of a cultural practice of attention to evidence, rigor, analysis, facts.”²³ Never mind the farce as white nationalists sink ever deeper into QAnon conspiracies and spurn science as a model of rational thinking during a pandemic.

Given such a white supremacist claim to empiricist reason, it should be noted that magical realist and similar modes of haunted writing do not turn away from observable conditions. They just manifest these conditions differently. In addition to dealing with the onslaught of spectral capitalism, the writing of ghostly things offers a decentralization of the master code of the human connected to the fetishization of reason as the domain of whiteness, in relation to which refugees have been racialized in the United States and elsewhere in the West. It is for these

potential counter-knowledges that Yến Lê Espiritu calls refugees “tellers of ghost stories,” and for us to “follow these ghosts.”²⁴

That the academy pays attention to these ghostly matters, of course, is indebted to Avery Gordon, who opened a new path of sociological inquiry with “a method of knowledge production and a way of writing that could represent the damage and the haunting of the historical alternatives and thus richly conjure, describe, narrate, and explain the liens, the costs, the forfeits, and the losses of modern systems of abusive power in their immediacy and world significance.”²⁵ Lawrence-Minh Bùi Davis cautions against this turn to haunting in critical theory as suppressing alternative knowledges in literal depictions of the supernatural in favor of metaphorical constructions in literary and sociological hauntings.²⁶ Similar warnings have been sounded before in Vietnamese writings in contexts of colonialism and modernity. Hồ Hữu Tường, an eclectic and irreverent thinker in that peculiar tradition of intellectuals from twentieth-century southern Vietnam, also worried about how to read stories that do not conform to a rational intelligibility. Introducing a collection of tales gathered from 1948 to 1955 during the Vietnamese anticolonial war, he writes: “My goal is to give thanks to my teachers who taught me to write in a country bumkin, superstitious, witty, humorous, satirical way—a specialty of peasants from the Mekong delta at the beginning of this 20th century.”²⁷ Tường, who began his search in Marxism for a viable social theory that would deliver Vietnam from colonialism and poverty, dismisses rationalist objections to the occult story in a dialogue he sets up about a prisoner telling a tale of ghosts and demonic tigers to his fellow inmates. One listener objects: “You are a materialist and you believe in such a superstitious tale?” Another responds: “There ain’t no idealism or materialism in the fabulous tale.”²⁸ In the South Vietnamese story I read in this chapter, its author does make a competing claim to Western epistemology at a time when the Republic of Vietnam verged on defeat, its modernist hopes dashed. I do worry that by reading that story as a manifestation of its historical context, I might have subjected it to a Western rational epistemology. But does a ghost really stop being literal when we read for its social connections, a move that might feel metaphorical? As a reader, I cannot help reading for both the literal and the metaphorical. Perhaps ghosts are instantiations of something we must hold simultaneously in multiple epistemological categories and traditions.

The texts selected here exemplify the ghostly or occult elements in Vietnamese-language refugee writing from the late 1980s on. I trace the contrasts and the echoes of gendered and racialized memory in the treatment of material objects and their specters in stories by South Vietnamese refugees in the United States: Hồ Minh Dũng’s “Người Ăn Mày Trên Phố Bolsa” (The Beggar on Bolsa Street),²⁹ Nguyễn Danh Bằng’s “Phòng Lạ” (Strange Room),³⁰ and Đặng Thơ Thơ’s “Mở Tương Lai” (Open the Future).³¹ I read these in relation to a story by an earlier North Vietnamese refugee to South Vietnam, Nguyễn Mạnh Côn’s “Lời Nguyễn Trong Không” (Prayers in the Void).

I stay with Vietnamese as the language of writing for two main reasons. One reason is to resist the overwhelming primacy of English in national and global contexts. In this national context, what counts as American literature is often limited to English. Vietnamese-language refugee writing too often gets dismissed as the site where the predictable “wrath and anger toward both the old and new lands tear through the literature.”³² Such characterization can feed the assimilationist relegation of Vietnamese-speaking refugees to “fleeting marginalia.”³³ Timothy August places hope in a new generation of Southeast Asian writers/activists who are “producing a body of literature that both invites and critiques dominant culture, elongating the temporality of the refugee condition so that the past is not simply left behind when political designations are removed.”³⁴ From and for communities across geographical distances, Vietnamese-language refugee authors write beyond literary markets that demand they perform identity and authenticity in colonial languages. They write to critique belonging and sovereignty, search for alternative ways of being, and otherwise address many of the things ascribed to the English-language refugee writers. To dismiss this body of literature as ephemeral when all things are ephemeral is to miss what it has to offer. In the global context, Vietnamese-language authors write at the periphery of the English- and French-speaking worlds, in which what they write become accessible to most Western scholars only through translation. I am not making the case for the primacy of the original language of a literary work over its translation. But English has become the primary marker of relevance to the point where writers in Vietnam feel compelled to have their works translated into it. There is now a commercially successful trend in Vietnam to publish and sell English translations of original Vietnamese-language works to a Vietnamese-speaking readership.³⁵

The other reason I want to focus here on Vietnamese-language works is to explore the intense echoes, redeployments, and contestations that bounce off different parts of a literature in one language, more so than across writings by Vietnamese diasporic authors in different languages because of simple linguistic access and/or the varying pressures in national and global literary reception placing different burdens of representation on minoritized or “Third World” writers writing in colonial languages like English or French. Because of the popularity of the concept of bilinguality and hybridity in postcolonial and transnational studies of the 1990s,³⁶ literature in one language has been prematurely dismissed as monolingual.³⁷ While acknowledging the importance of critiques against monolingualism in nationalist projects, Dipesh Chakrabarty reminds us that no language is not already plural by virtue of colonial histories, and that investigations of “deep monolingual traditions” do not “entail any assumption of purity of languages.”³⁸ Indeed, the redeployments, contestations, and commingling of refugee and Vietnamese literature reveal the multilocal and complex relationship across national and historical divides of war and migration between a literature in Vietnam with legacies of Vietnamese settler colonialism followed by Western

imperialism and a refugee literature with its incorporation of English or French modes of expression in settler, colonial, and immigrant linguistic legacies.

The texts examined here contain hauntings anchored in objects. When read simultaneously in rational and alternative epistemologies, these South Vietnamese and refugee works yield ghostly traces of (1) the material in the process of commodity fetishization within history; and (2) people harmed or killed in political and economic violence and elided in symbolization. These two processes are conceptual parallels that inform one another. In the case of the texts examined here, the two processes intersect as their authors reflect, negotiate, or contest both their history and the economic forms of their world. I argue here that these texts do this by drawing on the feminine and queer in occult ways to create alternative relations to economy and history. Narrators and characters seek to circumvent a sovereignty foreclosed by the death of a postcolonial nation. Feminists have drawn our attention to the long history of masculinist deployments of the feminine as a sign of the other to symbolize nations, places, histories, which then can be appropriated in commodity representations of the self.³⁹ For the stories at hand, the feminine other becomes the site of history's haunting, and queer sociality can alter historiographic time in our understanding of events.

If we could connect the literature of South Vietnam to refugee literature, it would not be the resettlement abroad of writers from the South or even stylistic continuity across generations, but the haunted deployments and redeployments of self and history exemplified by these texts. I make the case that the death of the South becomes the catastrophic horizon from which emerge the hauntings in the South Vietnamese and refugee texts examined here. What this haunted writing offers are alternative temporalities and modes of existence therein as South Vietnamese and refugees confront the end of their nation and racist exclusion in their place of refuge.

THE FEMININE OCCULT AND A DEATH FORETOLD

In Nguyễn Mạnh Côn's 1972 story set during the Second Republic in South Vietnam, the unnamed male narrator recounts the story of his beautiful sister, Duyên. Duyên, like her narrator brother, was a fighter in the guerrilla base during an unspecified earlier phase of the war, which in this story seems to stretch seamlessly from the anticolonial war of 1946–54, alternatively called the First Indochina War, to the later war that ended in 1975, one variously called a war between the two states of the Democratic Republic in the North and the Republic in the South, a civil war between North and South, a war of unification and liberation from American imperialism by communist forces, a war against communist aggression, the Vietnam War, or the Second Indochina War. The proliferation of names for that war signals the complications of what it meant for those involved. One day, when she was still a Resistance fighter, Duyên captured a Republican paratrooper

and fell in love with her captive. To escape from the Resistance-controlled area to the Republican government-held territory with her lover, she demanded her brother's assistance in the name of love—her brother's familial love for her and her love for her lover, who would become her husband. The brother narrator provided Duyệt's lover with the brother's own papers and his identity as a guerrilla leader. The Republican lover passed through Resistance-held territory disguised as Duyệt's brother. The brother narrates this entire passage using the first-person pronoun to refer to his sister's future husband. The narrator signals this doubling of the self in a rather straightforward way: "She introduces herself [to the guerrillas] as my female secretary—'my' here means her husband's. . . ."40 This doubling of the self acts as a bifurcation of the subject position of the narrator, to which we shall return.

His sister's history as a guerrilla fighter, the narrator tells us, goes to show that she "is not the type of person who would shrink from the sight of a gun."⁴¹ And her modern (Western) education has made her skeptical of the occult world. Yet, Duyệt again goes to her brother for help to save her husband's life, years after the successful passage out of the guerrilla base, a stunt that got the brother arrested by his comrades-in-arms and necessitated his rescue by Republican government forces. Now that they have made their lives on the Republican side, Duyệt brings a dilemma that acts as a ghostly reiteration of the original rescue of her husband, in that she again asks her brother to intervene to change the course of events, only this time in her dream. She tells her brother that she has had a recurrent nightmare in which her husband jumps out of a plane, has his parachute ripped, and falls too fast towards the wrong landing site, where a broken tree branch impales his body. With each recurrence, the dream becomes more vivid in its visual and aural details. But her presence at the scene of her husband's death feels too immaterial for her to enact an intervention.

Duyệt's brother, similarly skeptical of the occult, interprets the dream to be the symptomatic anxieties of a soldier's wife, and decides to help his sister by tricking her into calmed nerves. He makes up a story about a black magician who sees all and works through amulets. The brother explains to Duyệt that the dreaming person differs from the dead in the duality of her spirit: *giác hồn* or conscious spirit, and *anh hồn*, or essential spirit. The former grounds her spirit in the sensate body, while the essential spirit travels and can communicate with other essential spirits in a space called the Void. Such communication is responsible for this kind of prescient dreaming. The brother then passes to Duyệt instructions by the black magician to find among things left by their parents three objects: Duyệt's own maiden handkerchief and two silver coins issued in colonial times. At 4:00 in the afternoon, a mute beggar will meet her to collect the objects and in exchange will give her two lead coins issued in 1960 imprinted with the head of deposed and assassinated president Ngô Đình Diệm of the First Republic.

What follows is narrated by Duyệt in a letter to her brother. Duyệt's voice takes over the narration of the climax in the story. After performing the above rituals to endow the objects with her desire to save her husband out of love, Duyệt sits down in prayer. She becomes her essential spirit and achieves a state of communion with other spirits in the Void. She feels at peace and is able to reenter her dream, in which she does save her husband by conjuring enough of a presence on site to alert him of impending danger. He hears her call and steers to avoid the awaiting fate. In his stead, his friend in the same unit meets his death, impaled through the neck. Others in his unit drown in the river. When the husband comes home and finds out about her dream intervention, he suggests the explanation that an alternative reality can be conjured up in the communion with other spirits in the Void. At the end of Duyệt's letter describing the reunion with her husband, we find the old silver colonial coins in her husband's combat boots and her maiden handkerchief in his breast pocket. To her brother's astonishment, the occult he has deployed as a fiction to calm her anxieties turns out to be much more potent, even if it does not change the impending fate of the South.

Duyệt is the only character fully named besides two military figures who had been historical contemporaries: Mã Chiếm Sơn, the first Chinese general to lead a resistance against the Japanese in 1938; and Charles de Gaulle, the nationalist liberator of France from Nazi Germany. The brother has made up the black magician's story as the son of General Mã, evoking nationalism in the Vietnamese cultural lineage in the East. Juxtaposed to Mã, de Gaulle from the West appears in the brother's story as the beneficiary of Madame de Gaulle's premonition about her husband's death, from which he is spared to tell the tale that at the fateful moment, he hears his wife's voice in a manner rehearsing Duyệt's enactment. These two historical liberators of their respective nations orient the subject location of the Republican Vietnamese narrator along an East-West cultural axis.

Nguyễn Mạnh Côn was born in 1920, in what was then colonial Tonkin. Like the narrator, the author joined the anticolonial Resistance. He was stationed in the northern bases (Việt Bắc) until 1952, when he returned to French-controlled Hanoi to live as a writer and school teacher. He came south as a refugee in 1955 after the partitioning of the country. The narrator's crossing from the Resistance base to government-controlled territory parallels that of the author. Neither crossing is explained in political terms. In the case of the narrator, the explanation given is the persecution he experiences after allowing his sister to use his identity to get her future husband out of Resistance-controlled territory. The explanation of his acquiescence for love of his sister and her crossing for love of her husband acts as both a placeholder and the sign that obscures the politics of the decision to defect the cause of national liberation in revolution. In English, the exact definition of the concept of the occult is twofold: as a noun, it refers to supernatural phenomena; and as a verb, it is to conceal or cause to disappear from view. The Vietnamese

equivalent, *huyền bí*, similarly contains the supernatural as hidden from view. In contrast to his sister's experience with the supernatural, here we see the narrator's move, out of love for his sister, as an ideological act in that it conceals political relations. In a magical sleight of hand, a sign of cultural femininity—that is, the sister's love for her husband—comes into the placeholder that occults the political conflict from view.

This is why Duyên remains pivotal and the only named character. The narrator can only construct a position for himself as a masculine subject in the Republic of Vietnam through bifurcated subject positions based on sets of binaries embodied by a woman character because of the South's loss of access to the mantle of national liberation. The Democratic Republic in the North, as the inheritor of the Viet Minh victory over French forces at Điện Biên Phủ, doubled the stakes of liberation by starting a war of unification on southern soil. With the American-supported assassination of Ngô Đình Diệm in 1963 that opened the way for massive American military presence in South Vietnam, the young republic was pushed into the American camp given its warfooting with the North in a Cold War geopolitical chessboard. Liberatory credibility could only remain in the southern past, a source the First Republic could not tap because of its persecution of a wide range of formerly southern anticolonial forces in order to centralize control through a significant reliance on anticommunists from northern Vietnam who came south during the partition. Leftists like the Trotskyists and anarchists, nationalists like the Đại Việt, militarized rebels like the Bình Xuyên, and armed politico-religious sects like the Hoà Hảo and Cao Đài had constituted the most important forces in the southern anti-French Resistance, a situation that prompted the Vietnamese Communist Party to pursue its systematic slaughter in a struggle for power.⁴² Co-opting this past and depicting Americans and South Vietnamese under the Republic as foreign invaders and their puppets allowed the North to monopolize national liberation as the source of legitimacy in the anti-American war.

The narrator remains unnamed throughout the story. He is addressed by Duyên in her pivotal letter as "my dear brother."⁴³ In the long passage describing Duyên's and her future husband's escape from Resistance territory, the narrator, still a guerrilla leader in the resistance, is merged with Duyên's future Republican husband through the curious use of the pronoun "I" by the brother narrator to refer to the husband. This passage is the process of the narrator's coming into the new subject position within the Republican South, one struggling with the question of nationalist and therefore the humanist formulation of sovereignty. The narrator's sovereignty is ambivalent during the passage of this bifurcated subject from his Resistance past to his Republican future.

Since the husband's masculine position of Republican soldier can no longer draw on its usual construction of proprietary nationalism for its expression of sovereignty, it must again occupy another bifurcation, that between the masculine

narrator and his sister as the embodiment of feminine love. The narrator is careful to signal how they overlap: the sister also starts out as a guerrilla fighter partaking in the masculine activity of claiming the nation for Vietnamese sovereignty; and the brother also acts out of love, love for his sister that renders his doubling as her husband in an almost incestuous union with the self. Her love for her husband in the end astonishes the brother in its power to exceed his rationalist way of being in the world. Duyệt is his double, but with excess.

This excess of the feminine, like the excess in objects of the commodity fetish, is the site of the occult grounded in tangible objects. The handkerchief and the coins ground this excess and allow the occult elements to come forth. While the handkerchief grounds her spectral girlhood, the coins ground a whole economy of exchange between the past colony with its anticolonial legacy and the present violence of a civil war. In exchange for the silver coins of 1927 and 1931, the mute beggar gives Duyệt the 1960 lead coins with the disembodied head of the soon-to-be dead and deposed president Diệm. For North Vietnam, 1960 marked the official start of the war against South Vietnam with the election of Lê Duẩn, who championed that war, to the position of first secretary of the Communist Party, even though there had been no real cessation of activities in the southern bases between the First and Second Indochina Wars. The currency devalues from silver to lead, corresponding to the devaluation of the political currency of nationalist legitimacy. During the Vietnam War at the time of the setting and writing of the story, the United States issued the military “red dollar” for its soldiers to spend in South Vietnam, avoiding the circulation of that cash back into the dollar economy proper with potential inflationary effects. This government-issued currency became the cheaper red double of the green dollar, itself on the verge of going off the gold standard in 1973. The currency in the South during the war was undergoing economic devaluation at the same time as the South was undergoing devaluation of the symbolic political currency, accompanied by the escalation of devastating violence perpetrated by all sides on the bodies of civilians and soldiers. In all this devaluation, the feminine excess is carried by the ritual objects and ultimately anchored by Duyệt. She herself becomes the material object to anchor the feminine occult. Through an occultist ritual, Duyệt as the occulted woman is able to save the husband whom she loves by adding value to his symbolic devaluation through turning the protective currency from lead back to silver. But she merely shifts the imminent loss. Another soldier must die in his place. By 1972, the salvation of South Vietnamese sovereignty was largely lost. As a girl growing up in South Vietnam, I still remember 1972 as the Summer of Fire with the returning coffins, sometimes carrying only bits of Republican soldiers attended to by wailing mothers in my neighborhood. My eldest sister’s paratrooper fiancé returned to her that summer in this way after he was blown up by North Vietnamese artillery fire during the battle for La Vang Cathedral in Quảng Trị.

The feminine occult embodied by Duyệt as the narrator's double allows yet another binary the narrator-subject can reach for to bolster his voided nationalist sovereignty: the East-West binary. Short of recourse to national liberation, the narrator makes a move to draw on Orientalism in a way that allows for a differentiated subject position within the West. The North and its National Liberation Front allies in the South negated Republican sovereignty under American occupation and subsumed the Republican subject under the sign of the West in their reference to Southern authorities as American puppets and fakes—*bù nhìn* and *nguy*. The narrator's Orientalist move allows for an imagined Republican rejection of the West, which during the Cold War meant the Western Bloc led by the United States. Resisting subsumption under the sign of the West, yet having no recourse to a position outside the West, the Republican narrator must carve out a differentiated position for himself under the opposing sign of the East in Vietnamese cultural lineage. Duyệt enacts this positioning for him when she rejects the brother's suggestion of a Western psychoanalytic treatment even as she demonstrates her Western-educated knowledge:

I know of this dream analyst who cured the psychotic or that dream analyst who thirty years ago found the source of one woman's disorder of frigidity. But they will not understand my dream, first because the field of psychoanalysis is still only researched by western doctors, when my soul, I know it differs from those of western women as sky from the abyss. Why? Because the western woman craves pleasures to be had from the husband, she therefore harbors a complex of dependency on the husband. She compensates for this dependence by demanding equal rights and fights for every advantage. The Vietnamese woman of course knows how to enjoy pleasures, but does not view such enjoyment as indispensable in life. So on the outside, the Vietnamese woman is dependent on the husband materially for daily living, but on the inside, she does not need the man so much. That's why I don't think the psychiatrist could treat me using psychological principles from Europe and America.⁴⁴

This binary situates the Vietnamese character in the East as an opposing category to the West. The move allows for a distancing of the Republican subject from the America of the West, whose military presence in South Vietnam blocks the narrator's access to a masculinist position of nationalist sovereignty. In the story, the mortal dangers posed to the husband's unit of paratroopers come as a result of an American pilot's error of space-time calculation using American war technology. In Duyệt's recurring dream, she sees an American soldier standing aside at the plane's opening, ushering her husband and his soldiers to jump to their impending deaths. In contrast, the force that enables her to save her husband's life comes from a magician imagined as the progeny of Mã, the Chinese general with liberatory nationalist credentials. The discontinuity with its own liberatory nationalist past necessitates the circuitous repositioning of the Republican subject through bifurcation and binary displacement. The narrator performs this move

through the fetishization of the feminine, coded as the sister's love for her husband, the occultation of which prolongs the life of the masculine subject of the Republican South.

If the first reading reveals an ideological move to elide the underlying political conflict and the deployment of the feminine occult in the formation of the Republican masculine subject, a second reading reveals the Republican masculine subject cannot be saved after all. Commenting on this story at the occasion of its selection for the Best Stories collection, Nguyễn Mạnh Côn talks about spirituality and the unknowable. He points out that the story is about the surprising materialization and actualization of the narrator's original deception, a phenomenon both the narrator and the author attribute to a "woman's love for her soldier husband."⁴⁵ The brother-narrator relies on his sister's feminine occult in order to conjure a Republican subject position. Yet, it is this occult feminine as alternative to the rational epistemology of the West that also renders him superfluous. The sister saves her husband through the occult practices that deliver real effects beyond the fictional placebo the brother feeds her within rationalist thinking. The author's juxtapositioning of the occult as supernatural, inexplicable in a rationalist epistemology, and the occult as a sign necessary for the constitution of the masculine Republican subject places us in a position where we must read the occult both literally and metaphorically in the colonial history leading up to the approaching fall of the South.

As the occult Void in the title upends the brother-narrator's rationalist deployment of metaphor in binaries of East and West, femininity and masculinity, his salvaged presence is fragile in its refusal to be appropriated wholesale in political projects by either the American war effort or the government in the South. Nguyễn Mạnh Côn does not choose to have the soldier die by enemy hands, which might symbolically denounce the violence initiated by the North. Instead, the death of the Republican soldier results from the failings of the American war-making machine in the face of natural elements. The violation of the body, the very violence of war, happens as a piercing by a broken tree branch. That nationalist violence taken by the North to unify the nation is here naturalized and made impersonal by terrain itself with its tree branches that can impale and rivers that can drown. It is the Americans who mistake that space and time, going against the natural order of the terrestrial nation. The alignment of freedom and tyranny issued from American Cold War rhetoric is here rendered inaudible, invisible, and illegible in the unaltered symbolic economy of the nation. The husband's death is foretold by many dream iterations, and is aft-told by the death of his fellow soldier. It is as if the war, as the narrator sees it under the sign of the nation, has already been lost.⁴⁶ The Republican soldier is impaled through the neck, suspended between the dream rehearsals of his death and the collective death of his nation that appears already as an accomplished event. Unable to feel his bodily pain from the piercing, the dying soldier calls out the

name of every fellow soldier in his unit. Those present in the roll call have begun their absence. And it is only 1972.

THE FEMININE SUBLIME AND THE INTERDICTION OF HISTORY

If the occult in Nguyễn Mạnh Côn's story anticipates the voiding of the Republican masculine subject unsalvageable in the impending doom of South Vietnam, twenty-four years later, Hồ Minh Dũng in "The Beggar of Bolsa Street" conjures his posthumous presence sustained by hope in an American Dream. Bolsa is the main thoroughfare of a vanquished city's double in America—Little Saigon in California. Hồ Minh Dũng was born in Huế, the former imperial capital of pre-colonial Vietnam. He was a Republican soldier-writer until the defeat of South Vietnam in 1975. He, like the narrator in his story, was incarcerated in a reeducation camp under the label of *ngụy quân* (fake and illegitimate soldiers) by the victorious government of a now unified Vietnam. The narrator describes the hope that America held for inmates: "When we were still in the prison camp, in the later years, we lived by that hope, when our bodies gave out, our strength expired, we had been saved by that medicinal dose, faint though it might be."⁴⁷ America, no longer the occupying force, is projected as a merciful place and alternative reality anchored by objects of enlightened technology and prosperity: a "hallway in a free hospital packed with advanced computers that can cure all ills;" and "a supermarket, where we can eat anything for free as long as we do not pocket them."⁴⁸ These are object-enabled visions that promise to revive a dying body as the narrator asks, "A Vietnamese from years of destitute, with a hundred diseases in his internal organs like me, what more can I ask for?"⁴⁹

The promise of material plenitude is imagined as part and parcel of the promise of freedom in America. And freedom, the narrator informs us, is the right of the sovereign individual. He explains his prison-induced vision of America: "Long ago, under monarchic rule, the right to inviolability belonged solely to the monarchs and the aristocracy. Now, that right belongs to you."⁵⁰ The America he ends up in, however, necessitates a split vision and a disavowal of the realities encountered: "If some native throws in your face the insult that you are a good-for-nothing parasite, then that is just a malicious rumor, or it's not aimed at you. Perhaps it's aimed at another minority, or because we encounter hardship to the point of hallucination?"⁵¹ If it is not a hallucination, then the shameful status of a racial minority must have originated with another group, and now being used to malign Vietnamese refugees in America. Vinh Nguyen names "refugeetude" the state of coming-into-consciousness whereby refugees realize they "share in the common but incommensurate situations of socioeconomic marginalization that many racialized, (im)migrant, and undocumented individuals face in the United States."⁵² Yet, the racial ideological occultation in America generates disavowal

in this refugee. Refugee socioeconomic marginalization does not appear to him intrinsic to America, so the reflection of him cannot be of him but of some other. The racist reflection is displaced onto another “minority” group. The former soldier fails to recognize a now racialized self in the mirror that is America. In this racial mirror house of America, the Republican soldier does not come back to life, he merely exists in an afterlife, like the undead.

The failure to see oneself in the American mirror house with all of its consumerist plenitude turns into pains of recognition when the narrator meets the beggar of the title. Shamed as a recipient of social welfare, that mechanism of governmental subject-making as Ong argues,⁵³ the narrator sees the beggar as a noble person who refuses government assistance and embraces his beggar status. The beggar places the worn conical hat in front of him and repeats the request for one dollar, unmistakably presenting himself as a beggar, but he does not try to extract pity. He embraces his lowly status, mingling among the poor as if they are his true home, refusing to play into the larger regime of model-minority recognition. He refuses to enter the spiral of anxieties of his fellow immigrants who counter the official shame by overachieving as a way to beg for recognition that they are not like others in their own or other minoritized communities, thereby rescuing a difference, the mark of good-refugee pride. When they spot him, the beggar’s fellow refugees report him to the police to avoid shaming their Vietnamese heritage. Unlike them, the beggar hears something other than shame when news of robbery and murder committed by his expatriates reaches him: “he does not listen to such news, but he hears in the air strange sounds tearing at his insides, the sounds of the wings of flies struggling in a spider’s web.”⁵⁴ It is in this beggar that the narrator sees himself finally, as someone caught in that noted marginalia, and a ghost who hears sounds others cannot. The beggar, like a body that channels a spirit, allows the narrator to hear and see himself and his fellow refugees as they might be heard and seen by a white America.

It is then that the narrator fully realizes the warnings his close friend had issued about America back when the narrator was still awaiting entry into it. His letter to the narrator tells of beggars and those who cannot afford to bury their dead, all in a “rich country with advanced food processing technology offering food without taste.”⁵⁵ In America, plenitude is revealed to be without sensuous presence. America is a place devoid of life beyond the biopolitical. The ideological projection of America as the land of freedom and plenitude itself is a mere chimera with its monstrous state between life and death. America cannot be home. The assimilationist spell is broken.

Before the narrator meets his beggar, the friend has left Little Saigon to find work in the meat packing industry in a cold-weather state, taking with him the memory of his weeping children when he left them in Vietnam to find a future in America. Among the objects that carry his memory of Vietnam is an urn of his wife’s ashes, “grey and fine.”⁵⁶ The friend travels to Iowa for work in meat

processing, one of those industries relying on immigrants racialized into cheap, hard-working labor. Then another job takes him to sea on a fishing vessel operating out of Hawaii. He writes new letters to the narrator in which he describes yet a different America, one glimpsed at sea, imagined to be away from the bloody history of American land grab. For him, the sea opens up a sublime space that transcends their homelessness in a racist and brutal America. The narrator recounts his friend's experience at sea with thousand-year-old corals and phosphorous sea stars. The sea is "always crystal clear, its depth does not haunt,"⁵⁷ where the friend can "point to white clouds and say: my home is down there."⁵⁸

The tangible objects of a consumerist America are revealed to be devoid of magic, the magic that would have given life to resuscitate the Republican soldier-narrator. Yet, the splitting of America's image is itself a result of the occultation of American plenitude—the ideological investment of consumers' objects with the power to revive the decayed body of the defeated soldier. The divestment of such commodity magic turns the narrator (doubling as his letter-writing friend) into a site of haunting, where he fails to recognize himself in the racializing mirror of America. Unable to preserve the fetishized America, the narrator looks to transcendence into the sublime. In the sublime space of the sea, the haunting stops.

As the commodity occultation stops at sea, another mode of the occult takes its place. At the point of resolution, the narrator turns our attention from consumers' objects to another object. His friend, the fellow traveler and guide of his passage into and out of a mythical America, sends him unsent letters to the friend's children and the urn with the friend's wife's ashes to keep. The narrator tells us: "In the days she spends with her husband out at sea, that woman's ashes turn blue, sparkle, and sprout crystal clear veins, like new hair."⁵⁹ It is as if the masculine refugee-immigrant subject has transposed the haunting from himself to his wife's ashes, and from there it sprouts new life. Her ashes hold the memory of home and become the receptacle of the occult, thereby allowing her husband's transcendence to the sublime as resolution to refugee homelessness in a racist America. The South Vietnamese man in America can no longer enact sovereignty in the masculine proprietorship of the nation—Vietnamese or American. Barred from masculinist possessive nationalism, the Republican man displaces the occult onto the site of the feminine. The woman figure is reduced from the fully corporeal Duyen in the previous story, when there was still a public story of a nation for the soldier to defend, to the wife's ashes in this story. The woman, here in her ashes, becomes the fetishized vessel of a history that must now turn private if it is to be told at all. The narration of defeat, imprisonment, loss, disappointment becomes a familial story about children left behind and the absent presence of a dead wife that would allow the defeated soldier to exist in the time of story-telling itself, because America has barred him from its public history and turned him into a ghost. His now private history becomes a source of new life for him in the space

of the sublime, beyond conflict. The magic in the maternal woman's ashes allows material life to grow anew.

The commodity occult presents itself as a realist order of things in America. In other words, it disavows its occult status through the tangible presence of products on the shelves. This material display of American plenitude occludes the poverty and racism encountered by the narrator. The whole story up to the ending is written in a mimetic realist mode. The spectral phenomenon of the ashes sprouting new life at the very end stands out as the only readily recognizable occult element in the story. All the haunting swirls unacknowledged throughout the story, but comes to rest here in the sublime of maternal sea and ash. If, in Nguyễn Mạnh Côn's story, Duyên's engagement with the occult nullifies the Republican narrator's occultation of the loss of his nationalist legitimacy, Hồ Minh Dũng's supernatural development nullifies the occultation of the commodity in the American dream of consumers' plenitude. This singular appearance of the magical reveals the hollowness at the heart of the realism projected by the commodity occult in the American dream. Much more so than Nguyễn Mạnh Côn's anticipation of death written in a matter-of-fact mimetic language, Hồ Minh Dũng's lyrical prose projects a melancholic knowledge after the Fall: after the end of South Vietnam and after the fall from innocence about America. Espiritu has pointed to the narrative of the good refugee as part of a recuperation of an American narrative about itself as the savior of other nations in the face of defeat in the Vietnam War, a self-narration she calls "We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose."⁶⁰ This story denies America its title as the savior in a hot Cold War or in the life of a refugee in war's aftermath.

THE FEMININE APORETIC AND THE TRACE OF HISTORY

Refugee haunting continues as a new generation of refugee writers come on the scene. If Hồ Minh Dũng writes as an exile from a lost South Vietnam struggling in the promise of a linear assimilationist time—that is, foreign past to American present, marginal present to future center—of the American refugee and immigrant story, Nguyễn Danh Bằng writes from a nomadic refugee position that slides back and forth along the length of an imagined history staged across a global landscape of commodity phantasmagoria. Perhaps among writers in Vietnamese, Nguyễn Danh Bằng is the most insistent and certainly among the most successful in his consistent deployment of a language of haunted objects. His objects appear in the ghostly light that accompanies the commodity, which requires, as Marx conceded, necromancy to decipher. Neither the Marxian strategy of dragging the commodity back to a materialist theory of value nor, it seems, a purely metaphorical reading would be sufficient here. The reader must bring a method of divination to enter the phantasmagoria of dead things. Nguyễn Danh Bằng left

Vietnam for California in 1992, having been born in 1967 to Northern parents who came south to Gia Định during the 1954 partition. Saigon had emerged as the capital of French Cochinchina and later as the capital of the Republic of Vietnam, which includes the site of the old citadel at Gia Định that was vanquished by French troops in the 1860s. And, of course, the Vietnamese citadel itself was built on the site of the history of Vietnamese dispossession of Khmers and Indigenous people from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century.

While the author wrote the story from locations in the diaspora, "Strange Room" was published in Vietnam. In the story, the obscure history of places and of self is buried within objects that carry a ghostly presence. Deprived of sovereignty by way of national history, the third-person refugee protagonist pursues the past in the acquisition of objects across temporal and spatial borders. The story opens in a boarding room in Taijiang-Kaili, in Guizhou province, China, as the narrator chases after a "mythical silver headpiece rumored to have been made in Kaili" and searches for its handicraft techniques in the "indigenous items and silvery trinkets" of a tourist market.⁶¹ The futile hunt for this object takes us to a room in the Vagabond Hotel in California's state capital Sacramento, and ends in a cabin in the Sierras twenty-five miles from Yosemite National Park. The story is structured as a journey through the phantasmagoric landscape of touristic consumption, to the heart of the consumer's empty room in an American middle-class hotel, and finally out to an alternative space of nature.

In Kaili, the rumored origin of the desired headpiece, the protagonist male traveler—an antihero—arrives at his destination already defeated, "soft," and "feeble."⁶² His emasculated state is explained in terms of the failure to attain possession of the past in the sought-for object. To "find the past," he realizes, is "as difficult as to discover something new."⁶³ He instead finds himself aimlessly wandering around an increasingly feverish geographical space marked by a touristic catalogue of cultural and climatic sights, sounds, tastes, and sensations that endlessly repeat themselves: corn strung roof-high; pig legs marinated and hung out to dry; boats gathering for market; communal meals of small river fish that he partakes with friendly locals; the sudden grip of winter, the howling wind through swollen wooden doors that will not close. This touristic consumption of locality, marked by Indigenous Miao culture, slips into a cultural penetration and a self-conscious realization of his status as an intruder. He hears the murmuring of whole villages plotting to set his room on fire, as he imagines they see him as a "malicious intruder, a stranger who has come to steal something from them."⁶⁴

The masculinist mode of cultural intrusion and appropriation leads to a hallucinatory coupling ceremony between the protagonist and an Indigenous young woman. Here as in the previous stories, the feminine spectrally channels, receives, or anchors the masculine subject. In this story, the young woman carries the commodity phantasm; only this time, she turns to face the tourist and presents him with an impasse. In his consumerist delirium, he sees the silver headpiece on the

woman, pursues her through a forbidding landscape. But now that she faces and speaks to him, he realizes he cannot without shame ask to purchase from her the longed-for object:

The gigantic silver block vibrates each skillfully crafted detail, clanging, tinkling. She tells him: "Go home." He asks: "Why?" She does not answer, but looks at him sternly. "Festival?" "Yes." He feels shame and mumbles: "Then you should go." Even before reaching the bend in the road, she disappears into the white of air. The white approaches him. He turns.⁶⁵

The face of the other, writes Emmanuel Levinas, "is present in its refusal to be contained,"⁶⁶ and the "facing position, opposition par excellence, can only be as a moral summons."⁶⁷ The narrator has reached an aporia, an impasse in facing the other: the penetration and extraction of the object needed for the constitution of the modern consumer subject means the loss of humanity for that same subject. Shamed by the woman whose face and speech issue a moral summons, the man fails to consummate his hallucinatory relationship with his desired object via consumption. Although she begins as an embodiment of culture and history in the commodity phantasmagoria, once she turns to face him and speaks to him, she becomes the other, whose historical and cultural alterity is ultimately irreducible to the commodity sign. Her existence as such cannot remain stable. She turns into insubstantial white, unyielding to the capitalist capture. The road, disappearing after her, does not offer passage to the consumer. An impasse.

As the Indigenous culture is placed on a teleological temporality, the refugee tourist deliriously tries to possess the past via an acquisitive grasp of objects in their sight, sound, and touch. Failing to acquire history in the pursued object on the head of the young woman, he beholds a horse dragging the tatters of a war chariot from the ancient battle that defeated the Hsia and established the Shang dynasty. He cuts loose the horse from the remains of its history and sees it home, just as the young woman has bid him home. The hallucinatory tone gives way in the story to detached observations of the landscape of current commodity capitalism with its postmodern temporal and spatial juxtapositioning. He sees the capitalistic annihilation of history: towns that spring up hurriedly, luridly, with tofu vendors loitering near fountains illuminated by city lights; and a girl wearing a red bow and blue jeans, carrying a Gucci bag with a rooster inside. The traveler retreats wistfully into a classical painterly landscape that he imagines could remain outside postmodern commodification: "a village beautiful like ruins. Bamboo still thickly fringing it, mountains still standing amongst clouds, a river still flowing like velvet from on high. Out on the river, a fisherman with a thatched cloak gliding on a boat made from three bamboo planks."⁶⁸ The hallucination in the phantasmagoric space of the commodity fetish with its whole-body sensuousness gives way to the distancing of pure sight. The man is quite aware of his retreat from the swirling phantasmagoric effect of commodities to the safe observations of their

veneer. The author writes of his narrator's presently detached sight: "He feels like he's observing an old coin in an antique shop, trying hard to judge if it's real or fake."⁶⁹ The authenticity of the coin in this case is not its value as currency but its very patina of antiqueness. He can no more acquire the phantasmic commodity object than he can escape the commodity world. Another impasse.

If the commodity phantasmagoria in the exoticized tourist space of Kaili resembles the Platonic phantasm, its reality distorted by sensory perception, then the next space of the Vagabond Hotel room in Sacramento takes us to the metropolitan heart of modern consumption itself. What Nguyễn Danh Bằng reveals there is neither the Marxist material nor the Platonic ideal, but lifeless projections in a void. The male traveler finds not a speck of dust there. The alienating sterility of the First World hotel room takes him "far away from the world of relations."⁷⁰ It is an eventless world of mere projections in which what remains absolute is light: a singular lamp in the room and the glow of multicolor fish swimming on the screen-saver of a computer monitor. A voice tells him that "we are here alone in a *void* without dimensions."⁷¹ He seems to have reached the heart of an absence in the metropolis from which spawns the commodity phantasmagoric symbolization in the object world of consumption elsewhere, in distantly othered places like Kaili. The sterility in that absence, of history and of self, is what spurs our voracious wanderings into the sensuous phantasmagoria of the commodity signs across vast distances. The tourist of our age, that consumer vagabond, is spawned from the void of middle-class spaces like the Vagabond Hotels of the First World.

The commodity world necessarily makes absent—murders—life forms in history in order that they can be symbolized and contained in the commodity object. At the end of his feverish wanderings in the touristic Chinese hinterlands, the male traveler turns south and crosses the border for Vietnam. The refugee becomes aware that it is not history as commodified antiqueness he is after but his own history, his past, his memory. All murders leave traces, as the detective story tirelessly instructs us. In the void, that sterilizing scrubbing after the kill in the space of the Vagabond Hotel, the refugee traveler finds traces, specters of his own memory. And as expected, it is a memory of death. What is unexpected is the recovery of his memory of the first time he encounters the object that launched his wanderings to its imagined place of origin:

"What about the headpiece?" he remembers suddenly and asks.

He remembers a time from before it turned cold, he met the silver headpiece in the Asian Art Museum. It was placed in a glass case, lit by a small light. The air in the room was dry and cold. He looked at it for a long time, a very long time, but started to see the shape of a tiny chick. When he was little, he had stood and looked into the bedroom of an abandoned house. Grass grew from the cracks in the floor of that bedroom. He saw the carcass of a chick with still a bit of yellow down. The sun scorched. In several days, the chick turned black and flat.⁷²

The space of the Vagabond Hotel room evokes the space of the museum, the site for the appropriation of a life form for purposes of representing history. The headpiece's transformation into the sign of exotic antiquity as it enters into the making of a commodity object. There, history is made absent for its symbolization. There, the refugee sees the whole process of death and absence itself. But what he sees murdered is not just history in the headpiece but his own history and a sense of self constituted in that history. The memory, the chick's death and decay in the procreative space of the bedroom, is backlit by an off-center Vietnam, his destination after the hallucinatory Kaili. It is the trace of his own history that has spurred him on his consumerist quest in the first place. But that memory as the ghostly trace also allows him to realize its ultimate irreducibility to the commodity object and can never be fully captured through consumption.

Like death, an aporia is a coming without passing. The refugee's aporetic journey through the commodity phantasmagoria, and then through the heart of the empty American middle-class space that spawns it, pushes him to withdraw from partaking in an identity based on the acquisition of commodity objects. He now longs for a nature beyond commodity and begins to sense animals lurking in musty shadows: "And like that, he walks naked through strange creatures hiding in grey and winding hallways."⁷³ Rather than the traveler's last retreat into nature found in the Chinese landscape painting at the end of his journey to Kaili, the author takes us to his traveler's disappearance in the last space of the story, the cabin in the Sierras. When we arrive at the cabin, the traveler, whom for the first time the author describes in racial terms as a "yellow-skinned person," has fled, perhaps chased away by the return of nature in the smell of rotting leaves, moss, and new grass "blooming in verdant green."⁷⁴ We read the words of his realization left behind in a notebook:

"The Merced River will be wrapped in a box. Like many things that happened in the past neatly tucked away in sealed packages with labels. Some items have clear date inscriptions, others remain crude objects that no one recognizes. And there are things of the past that stay entirely outside! An antique ceramic vase flies in a boundless dark space"⁷⁵

Because the aporia is the experience of limits in relation to another, it becomes an experience of ethics. The impasse, in this case the encounter with a human face in the phantasmagoria of commodities, is what allows the tension between possibility and impossibility necessary for such decision and responsibility. Speaking of his writing, Nguyễn Danh Bằng draws attention to a person's "impasse [tiến thoái lưỡng nan] when witnessing the corrosion of culture on a global scale by the conquest of values in a consumerist society. The individual is drowned in [. . .] a world teeming with objects, when that individual, whether wanting to or not, must still carry a past, a history, and disparate life beliefs."⁷⁶ For the refugee traveler seeking a consumerist reconstitution of self and sovereignty, he encounters

only the aporetic in the apparitional face of the young Miao bride in the hallucinatory male traveler's journey through the commodity phantasmagoria. If her femininity as indigeneity carries culture and history symbolized in the commodity for the desire of the masculine consumer subject, the trace of her irreducible historical alterity in the face encounter poses an impasse to his consumerist pursuit, and provokes in him an ethical response of shame for his violation of people and history. The face of the other issues an interdiction to her annihilation for the use of her and her "culture" for the constitution of the consumerist self in the commodity phantasmagoria.

The refugee traveler is returned to his conscience. His subsequent insight into the heart of commodification as symbolization allows him to return to his own private memory that could not be incorporated into a public history of America. The refugee narrator fails to gain sovereignty through the purchasing power bestowed on those who make it into the American middle class. History can no more be purchased through commodified objects or touristic wanderlust than resurrected in his memory of a Vietnam as the source of a sovereign self. Instead, the story ends with the refugee's absence in the cabin and his presence in words he leaves in a notebook, marveling at things past, forever flying in the boundless dark. The subject carrying the memory of history can only be itself a trace, in an aporetic in-between of subject and object, self and other, present and past.

TRANS TIME AND THE CLOSURE OF HISTORY

If Nguyễn Danh Bằng makes visible the ethics in impasse encountered by a marginalized subject trying to pursue his history through commodity consumption, Đặng Thơ Thơ confronts us with the possibilities opened by the very experience of physical and historical finitude in the fateful moment of the death of the South. Đặng Thơ Thơ was born in 1962 in Saigon to a family famously connected to Tự Lực Văn Đoàn, an influential literary collective formed in Hanoi in the 1930s. One of the few transgender writers of her generation, Đặng Thơ Thơ lived through the Fall of Saigon as a young teen and experienced life in what had become Ho Chi Minh City for almost two decades before leaving to settle in the refugee community of Southern California. Her story "Open the Future" was written for a special issue of the refugee literary journal *Hợp Lưu* commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the end of the war in 2005.

At first glance, "Open the Future" resembles Nguyễn Mạnh Côn's anxious return to the dream in order to alter the course of historical events. But what eventuality Nguyễn Mạnh Côn could only displace in 1972 had long become accomplished fate for those with a South Vietnamese history thirty years after the end of the war. Đặng Thơ Thơ tells her memory of the Fall of Saigon, or rather its unfolding over and over again. The story opens with two young friends, both prepubescent girls, standing at the moment of 1975, their "life consisting solely of the future."⁷⁷ Thơ,

the narrator, reads the future in her dreams and tells her friend Hương that there is going to be a separation. When the friend asks its duration, Thơ thinks of the “time of dream” that blooms and contracts. The organismic time of the dream will not coincide with chronological time, which serves historical determinism. Believing in the multi-direction of dream time, Thơ thinks she can influence future events by dreaming about them. When Hương leaves the country as it convulses, Thơ promises she will ensure her friend’s safe passage out. The rest of the story unfolds as Thơ and her family desperately search for a way out as the death of the South closes in. Rather than ensuring her friend’s passage by dreaming it, Thơ, from a place about to be foreclosed, is haunted in her own desire for her friend as an apparition of an impossible future elsewhere. Thơ’s failure to leave eventually traps another ghostly presence in her dreams, her mother’s friend, Hồng Trang. Hồng Trang is supposed to provide Thơ’s family with safe passage out of the country through her connection with an American organization. But all of Hồng Trang’s attempts fail and she commits suicide. Her return in Thơ’s dreams opens them to a dimension of the accomplished past doubling as a possible future. The convergence and communion of the three characters, their living-on across time and space, disrupt both progressive history and the gender binary in heteronormative national time as the South undergoes its death.

The story offers nodes of meaning in sexual orientation as temporal orientation. It addresses the transformation out of the structuring of reproductive genders that doubles as a structuring of time in a nation across its death. The story demands a reading for a move from a feminist critique to a trans treatment of the closure of historical time when such violence was enacted in the name of revolutionary progress. Julia Kristeva suggests that the gender binary organizes meaning in the modern state’s politics of time as this binary links the nation as a unity in space and time to “reproduction, survival of the species, life and death, the body, sex, and symbol.”⁷⁸ The collapse of a nation’s future is a moment that exposes the fragility of binaries in this temporal-sexual linkage. Moments like the AIDS crisis, when the future diminished for so many in queer communities, expose the perilous imposition of what Lee Edelman calls “reproductive futurism.”⁷⁹ In response, J. Jack Halberstam stresses how “queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death.”⁸⁰ These alternative temporalities offer possible futures for us moderns whose time keeps running out and must be imagined anew.

The death of South Vietnam is one such moment of modernist temporal ruptures. Revolution and its modernist fulfillment of history play across a temporal surface of endings and beginnings as though these are successive events that sweep history forward, when all that those caught in the rupture can feel is the prison house of the frozen moment. The frozen moment is one of death or fate,

beyond an Enlightenment humanist historiography that stays vital only through dialectical progressive movement narrated with vital events as convulsions in the birth of new eras. Against this temporal structure of nation and revolution, the defeat of the South in the story bankrupts its heterosexual and capitalist reproductive nexus, while another heterosexual socialist nexus takes its place to produce and reproduce the New Socialist Man as the next stage in the evolution of man as master of his fate through mastery over others.

The death of the South in the story plays out simultaneously as a devolution of the commodity world and a queering of the vital nation in the death of the grandmother. The matriarch sits dying, with one amputated arm bottled in formaldehyde near her bed. Behind her hangs a painting by a famous painter that her daughter will have to sell for one-twentieth of a tael of gold, enough to eat for one month. The painting passes through many hands in Vietnam's postwar socialist economy. Finally, as Vietnam marketizes in the late 1980s, it goes to a foreigner who purchases it for 30 taels of gold and takes it out of the country. The painting is a commodity whose value depends on capitalist exchange relations. The dissolution of a market at the moment of the South's defeat turns the fetishized value of the painting into use value in a barter economy before the Vietnamese Communist Party undergoes its own capitalist conversion in the postsocialist economy. But rather than returning people to the mentioned "relations between men," as Marx dreamt, the dissolution of the commodity market at the end of the war in socialist triumph leaves men imprisoned by needs so base that, when unfulfilled, they foreclose their humanity in the eyes of the narrator. In other words, they have arrived at the end of human history only to reach the end of their humanity imagined as (masculinist) mastery over their material world.

On the day the socialist authorities confiscate the family home in an apartment complex, Thở sees people lining up for pork at a state distribution center:

It was towards the end of the month, and hungry people desperately craved pork. They lined up from the side of the Thanh Đa market, rounding Lot E, running along Lot A, all the way out to the boulevard. Each held in hand a meat coupon book. They were tired and patient, resigned and hopeful, waiting under the scorching sun to purchase their monthly quota of half a kilo of fatty meat. I looked at the mound of bones and gristles. I looked at the jet-black flies circling the piles of entrails. I looked at the human creatures that were just like me, and I felt indescribably sad. Suddenly I understood I was different now: I no longer craved meat.⁸¹

At the end of the commodity process, the socialist masses cease to be human because this arrival at the telos in a devolution of everything into the concrete marks not humanist redemption but the utter loss of their mastery over their own hunger. These supposedly liberated humans have fallen from their apex of the predator chain that had always marked that taxonomic distinction from animals. Thở undertands this fall in the revulsion she feels for animal meat. It would be

cannibalism. Yet, there is something that can halt the devaluation of both goods and human dignity. On the fateful thirtieth of April, the dying grandmother passes to each one in the family a vial “containing a clear liquid, its weight sloshing about,” of which she tells them: “Not even with gold can you purchase it.”⁸² The liquid is cyanide. In death, the poison lies outside the commodity world and its devolution. It lies outside of the dialectical movement towards Marxist mastery at the end of history. The assurance of the poison lies in the possibility of meeting one’s fate not in mastery in life but in sterility, the end of lineage and thus of procreative national time. Meeting fate in queer integrity, the grandmother offers the poison to all her progeny before taking her own life. Not in procreative life but in death will the matriarch’s wholeness as a body and a person be restored to her, as her long-amputated arm is buried with her. Thơ sees maternal history severed in national partition and masculinist war restored only in death.

In his turn-of-nineteenth-century canonized work, Vietnamese poet Nguyễn Du spun a feminine tragic *Kiều* out of the meeting between human quality and fate, elevating this encounter to a common condition of misfortune for women: “Lời rằng bạc mệnh cũng là lời chung.”⁸³ Fate in this way lies beyond mastery in sovereignty within dialectical history. The matriarch and her women meet the chronological date of the thirtieth of April as fate. Such reenactment of fate lies beyond negotiation or resistance as those are acts in the realm of sovereignty. They instead encounter fate as the event that cuts off the flow of living history for those in the South. Thơ, Hương, and Hồng Trang dream of surviving the already-foreclosed human sovereignty as it is conceived in both Western and anticolonial humanism. This moment of fate offers a future other than the nationalist reproductive one. The thirtieth of April for Thơ, as for many of us who are surviving it, does not end at the death of the procreative southern nation: “The world after the 30th of April no longer contains dates. The 30th of April will last a long time afterward, across decades. If we live to be a hundred, it will last a century.”⁸⁴ The date has become mythical in its refusal of both the biopolitical and the historical dialectic. From her moment of the everlasting rushing forth of finitude, Thơ pulls in all of time, in all its ghostly manifestations. And all of time meets in trans time in that it is “asynchronous and nonnormative.”⁸⁵ Her dreams of her friend Hương as an apparition of the future become increasingly sexual in her pubescent thirst to go on living, which would mean living in a temporal and spatial elsewhere. But Hồng Trang’s ghost fights to keep her from a full union with the future that must demand to forget its past: “Hồng Trang begins to weep, her hair wet with rain and mud. But my death is not without meaning, she looks up and tells Hương. The future has no right to alter a death from its past. All values may change. But the value of death does not.”⁸⁶ In the allegorical space of the dream, the women must contemplate murdering themselves to claim a presence in a history that murders them. In the end, Hương resigns herself to the absolute demand of the past for recognition in an alternate future: “Suicide,

like dreaming, is a gesture of hope, in the things that cannot be known. It is also a saintly mark of the permanently immaculate.”⁸⁷

Failing to forestall history through a return to the dream, as Nguyễn Mạnh Côn’s *Duyên* has done, Thơ’s dream in the end brings together the three women as apparitions of past, present, and future, whose chronological order will coincide with neither the time of the procreative nation nor that of progressive history. Their queer relationality to one another stands in place of the gender binary of the South’s social world that ends with the victory of the revolutionary yet no less nationalist North. If education is reproduction of the labor force, of imagining community up and down linear time, then the South’s hetero-ideological reproductive matrix of sovereignty is rendered bankrupt as its offspring seem to the new regime fit only for reeducation in socialist labor camps that would revise their own personal biography as well as that of their defunct nation.⁸⁸ The Republic of Vietnam would be cut off from not only its future but its own past. That date in April is a radical finitude at both ends of the linear time that links the reproductive nation to progressive historiography. Southern men in the subject population were emasculated. Roughly a million men who either were designated as *ngụy* because of their association with the “puppet regime,” or who could pose any potential challenge to the new regime, were sent to reeducation camps where the death rate is estimated at 16.5 percent.⁸⁹ Other Southerners without revolutionary credentials were deemed suspect and deprived of a social and economic existence.

Growing up in the refugee community, I was familiar with stories of women heading households in cities and in the remote New Economic Zones where the socialist state sent many urban families as part of the new regime’s strategic and developmental goals to break up potential resistance among the southern urban population as well as to facilitate economic collectivization. Women learned to clear land, often of jungle vegetation, thereby displacing Indigenous communities, and cultivate what little edible crop they could for their families.⁹⁰ While the new socialist state tried to socialize the southern economy into the Leninist central command economy that set production and distribution goals, southern women anchored family livelihood. To incorporate the conquered South into a new socialist heteronormative and historically progressive time, the new state still had to rely on southern women. Yet, these women had become more than women within the gender binary at the foundation of the reproductive nation. Discussing her story, Đặng Thơ Thơ elaborates on the devaluation of Republican men: “Those who bore arms on the defeated side became a kind of refuse under the gaze of the victors. The women had to take their lives into their own hands, to make up for the sovereignty the men had lost. The women became both men and women at the same time.”⁹¹ In the story, time’s depletion in the moment of the southern nation’s death becomes the horizon of time’s plenitude through queer regeneration.

It feels as if all of the modern era has been about the wounds of time and the promise of redemption for the humanist subject. Revolution is a form of wounding

to correct past injury so that history can move forth towards a redemptive future. The temporal rupture reorganizes new life, which is no less based on the gender binary's centrality in state heteronormativity. Elizabeth Freeman observes that modernity peddles in "signs of fractured time" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and that sexual dissidents emerged as "figures *for* history" in its narrativity of movement and counterpoints.⁹² Socialist revolutionary time emerged precisely at this juncture in European history, and anticolonials outside of Europe deployed such movement and counterpoints in anticolonial revolutions stretching through the twentieth century. If the sexual dissident is produced by, for, or in tandem with historical time's rupture, then temporal dissonance and sexual dissidence are intertwined. These connections play out in varied and complex ways at moments of rupture for postcolonial nations. In the case of the historical rupture of the postcolonial Republic of Vietnam, these sexual dissident refugees became "bearers of new corporeal sensations,"⁹³ signaling the possibility of time's plenitude rather than its exhaustion from not just within the dead southern nation-state, but also from before that, in temporal convulsions of colonialism, the anticolonial struggle, and the Cold War that delivered the warring states of North and South. Đặng Thơ Thơ explains the history from which she writes: "Such history includes the dead in a past littered with events. It isn't just the history of the South but also the history leading up to the formation of the South."⁹⁴ The short story offers generative time in a queering of self and history for those caught in the moment of rupture. Its author thinks "trans is a state of movement," "in search of space that has yet to be occupied" by defined gender and sexuality.⁹⁵ The three women's union in life and death creates a temporal mobility against history's hard closure. Their existence of being in nonbeing, presence in absence, and vice versa in each other allows their willful entrances and exits through the end of their history, queering the binary between life and death that upholds the time of nations.

THE ETHICS OF INTERRUPTION AND RELATION

If the American turn of phrase—the Fall of Saigon—to signal military defeat sounds like masculinist imperial melancholia, we must nevertheless be attentive to the ways that event foreclosed history for South Vietnamese refugees whose lives were ruptured, and the ways they lived on through it. If the postcolonial nation became the primary grantor of humanist sovereignty for formerly colonized peoples, then the foreclosure of the temporal horizon of the Republic spelled the end of human status for its erstwhile citizens. The arrival of the revolution did not allow most South Vietnamese a path to human status in self-mastery when the new regime treated them as a potential threat to be reeducated, marginalized, or eradicated. And as refugees, they would encounter other racial taxonomies within nations whose organization of time was also hetero-redemptive in ways that excluded them. Even as Halberstam and others offer us queer possibilities

in failure when queer lives are pitted against social structuring that reproduces at their expense, Ly Thuy Nguyen reminds us yet again of the stakes of such failure: "For racialized refugees, 'failure' is never symbolic: it means to die in war, go missing in the refugee passage, or to succumb under racist violence after resettlement. There will literally be no future. How does one 'carry on' such historical traumas, and still dream of radical queer politics that divest from upholding hegemonic futures?"⁹⁶ For those whom Viet Thanh Nguyen calls the "dead, missing, lost, or forgotten people who have passed beneath history's wake,"⁹⁷ time had run out. We who survive carry them and make time in whatever ways we can.

I began this chapter with the question of lineage. It is commonly assumed that there is continuity between refugee writing and writing from the Republic of Vietnam when most refugee writers in the decade after 1975 came from there. But from the late 1980s on, as refugee writers from the 1.5 generation began to come on the scene, such assumption of continuity came under scrutiny. Yet, I see refugee writing in continuity across historical rupture with South Vietnamese writing in its last years because both bodies of literature are haunted by the death of the South, which is impending in the former and accomplished in the latter. In the slippage between the impending and the accomplished, I ask with Saidiya Hartman, "how does one rewrite the chronicle of a death foretold and anticipated, as a collective biography of dead subjects, as a counter-history of the human, as the practice of freedom?"⁹⁸

We could say that these works from South Vietnam and its refugee communities are haunted attempts at retelling their place in contexts of economy and history. As possibilities of postcolonial sovereignty die with the Republic of Vietnam, racialization in white supremacist countries of settlement like the United States bars admittance into its biopolitical and symbolic procreation on the basis of race. America includes refugees in its sovereignty by excluding them from seeing themselves in the mirror house of whiteness. The loss of sovereignty doubles as loss of masculinity in both possessive nationalism and within the gender binary reproduction of the nation in both Vietnam and the country of settlement. Deprived of access to masculinist sovereignty as the mark of the human, some writers find recourse in the feminine as the site of a haunted search for a way to be in the world. These South Vietnamese and refugee authors anchor their narrators' elided presence in material objects already apparitional in the commodity process. Nguyễn Mạnh Côn's feminine occult momentarily forestalls the nationalist contradiction of the postcolonial sovereign subject in the Republic of Vietnam caught in American capitalist dominance within Cold War geopolitics. Hồ Minh Dũng's feminine sublime sidesteps the absorption of what was left of South Vietnamese history into an American assimilationist ideology of commodity plenitude as a recuperation of imperial magnanimity after American defeat in the Vietnam War. Nguyễn Danh Bằng's feminine aporetic in the face of the irreducible other poses ethical limits to the symbolization of self and history in the commodity fetish. Departing

from these responses to failed masculinist sovereignty, Đặng Thơ Thơ's queer fateful offers a trans vision of time that can traverse history's closure accompanying the dissolution of the commodity economy at the moment of triumphant socialism and national liberation. Lost to sovereignty, the writers of these tales seek the occult, the sublime, the aporetic, and queer sociality that will allow life, albeit haunted life, to continue on beyond the end of their time, and alternative to the bankruptcy of the reproductive nation. Writing to live in loss, Dante Alighieri begins, "In that part of the book of my memory, before which little can be read, there is a heading, which says: *Incipit vita nova*: Here begins the new life."⁹⁹ For South Vietnamese and refugee writers, it is through haunting memory that life can be read and yearned anew, so that branches do not impale, ashes sprout new hair, the face of the other brings conscience, and queer refusal gives time when there is no more time.

In the lineage I draw between South Vietnamese and refugee writing through the death of South Vietnam, I hope to attempt two ethico-political moves. The first reaches across historical rupture to trace not the sovereign subject but the apparition of the elided other. This other's haunting of its sovereign double provides the basis for a kind of Levinasian ethics. It interrupts the sovereign's "eternal return to self,"¹⁰⁰ because this apparition poses an interdiction to being fully known, spoken for, or killed by the sovereign without consequence. This historical other presents us with a moral summons. The stories demand that those of us who are living with varying access to forms of sovereignty face those we have to overcome. By gathering the ghosts in these texts, I hope to draw attention to the traces of those occluded in the commodity process and in the writing of official history. For many in the West, it is too easy to regard South Vietnam as a French or American creation, enunciated with a racist appropriation of the epithet of "puppet" in a satisfying return to self via a critique of empire that only highlights their place in it. I remember the use of the dehumanizing term "Saigon puppets" in some protests in the West against the acceptance of South Vietnamese refugees after the war. Such epithet echoes the national liberators' naming of these historical others, who could be rubbed out in an equally narcissistic return to the historiography of Vietnamese sovereignty. I am guilty of drawing on such historiography as well, as I too often retrace a genealogy of the present-day Socialist Republic of Vietnam to the government and culture of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the North. Of course, all official historiographies appropriate the dead in a symbolization process that runs the dangers of an eternal return to self. A South Vietnamese official historiography did the same during its lifetime and would have continued had that nation-state survived. Nevertheless, the violence that we inherit demands limits in an ethical stance towards those who have been maimed, imprisoned, killed, raped, left to die, and erased by war victors and racist states.

With the second ethico-political move, I hope to follow other critical refugee scholars in using these ways of writing and being when we are deprived

of sovereignty to reach across incommensurate histories to other communities whose sovereignty has also been foreclosed in historiographic time. Vinh Nguyen's *refugeetude* calls for "the relationalities that extend beyond the parameters of refugeeness, generating connections to past, present, and future forms of displacement."¹⁰¹ This time, the call is not for solidarity of the oppressed in a liberation that replicates the violent structure of sovereignty and historiography. It is instead a call for ways to live on surrounded by the dead, to go on past the time of the human.

Untimely Habitation

Irreconcilability and Refugee Memory

Off to the right of the stage during the Thirtieth Commemoration ceremony at the Vietnam War Monument in Westminster in 2005, two older men stood by two grainy, black-and-white enlarged photographs propped up on stands. These images, ghostly in the dissipating light past dusk, were of two officers from the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), or South Vietnam as it was often called. One image was taken by a Western journalist at noon on April 30, 1975, the day the victorious armies from the North entered Saigon, the South's capital soon to be renamed Ho Chi Minh City. In this still photograph, Lieutenant Colonel Nguyễn Văn Long has just shot himself. His blood, hueless, runs down the steps of the soldiers' monument in front of the Parliament Building at the center of the city. The other image shows Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn, whose captors have bound and stood him on a chair with a banner behind him that speaks their "resolve to punish" those like him who served the defeated state. The story is that they shot him after this public denunciation session.¹

At this Vietnamese American commemoration under a Vietnamese American-built monument, the dead were present because they were mourned. Not particularly the women and the children and the men without ranks or guns. Not particularly those from the National Liberation Front in the South, or the North Vietnamese. We will address these absences. But here, these men had their Vietnamese names uttered, their Vietnamese deaths imaged.

We would not hear such Vietnamese sounds pronounced, see such Vietnamese images remembered by American statesmen and politicians in all their talk about the Vietnam War in the past forty-odd years, when both the political Left and Right found it expedient to mention the war. The United States tallied Vietnamese

dead with McNamara's "enemy body count" to anticipate an American victory, but it did not count civilian dead or even its allied dead. Known as the memorial to the Vietnam War, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, inscribes only the names of American servicemen, effectively making the war into an American war and effacing the millions of Southeast Asian lives lost in this calamity.² It is against the metrics of death within a biopolitical discourse of life that YẾN Lê Espiritu addresses when she writes, "Vietnamese bodies should count," but it is the recounting of the "wounds of social life cause by the violence both before and after the Vietnam War" that "moves decisively away from 'damage-centered' approach" to focus on "alternative memories and epistemologies that unsettle but at times also confirm the established public narratives of the Vietnam War and Vietnamese people."³ The connections between the Vietnam War and Vietnamese Americans would also surface in mainstream media stories in the decades following the war that explain gang violence in terms of the persistence of Vietnamese habits of slaughter.⁴ To most in mainstream America who pay any attention at all to this community, the Vietnamese American community comprises war losers and ragtag refugees whose reactionary anticommunism is but a bitter atavism to a lost hot war within the Cold War. Such pathetic location surely cannot produce anything of import for our human present and future, except as an illiberal or reactionary foil for progressive claims. Given this expulsion from humanist progressive time, a meditation on how Vietnamese refugees might remember the war would allow us to explore the politics and ethics of our sense of past, present, and future in a moment when the world seems caught up in an intense politics of time. Do we place our faith in the long arc of progressive history to counter the racist return in MAGA and other white supremacist movements? I do not seek to insert Vietnamese refugee memory into progressive politics, but rather, to question the exclusionist premise of such humanist project issued from both the Left and the Right joined in their racial privilege at the center of empire.

At different moments in the decades since the end of the war, American politicians would recall Vietnam in order to forget history as it pertains to the people who participated or were brutalized in that history—Laotians, Cambodians, Vietnamese, Indigenous peoples, and the refugees who might now on occasions be courted as voters at the local level. John Kerry's performance to mimic a speedboat arrival at the 2004 Democratic National Convention was an act of forgetting his own ambivalence in that war. Such forgetting allowed him to reinscribe it resolutely as a war in American nationalist history. Before Kerry, Ronald Reagan in 1983 had tried to expunge the gloom of Vietnam by intervening in another socialist revolution closer to home in Grenada. The senior George Bush's triumphant references to the purging of the Vietnam syndrome by way of the American victory in the 1991 Gulf War and his son's renewed calls at the doorstep to a new century on the spread of American (read market) freedoms abroad were acts

we undertook in order to forget, or to conjure triumph from defeat. The War on Terror, declared by George W. Bush's administration, renewed American imperialism abroad with major wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and created even more categories of people with differential levels of the deprivation of universalist human rights. This was a move that required the appropriation of markings of particularistic race and histories of persons of color, including a Vietnamese American's story about his rise from Boat Person to very high-profile American official in order to universalize power relations within the American empire. Despite the gentler rhetoric of the Obama administration, the United States did not move away from empire. It continued to use Vietnamese refugee achievements in the United States to further pull Vietnam into an American promise of global capitalist prosperity and defense cooperation. Trumpian rhetoric of America First continued to minimize the legacy of the Vietnam War in favor of more profitable business deals with Vietnam at the moment of a fascistic return to white supremacy against an uneasy *de facto* alliance of progressive causes espoused by progressive whites, communities of color, and forces of neoliberal and capitalist globalization in America. Against this divisive backdrop, America again revisited the Vietnam War in the form of the Ken Burns and Lynn Novick series aired on PBS in 2017. And as the American withdrawal from Afghanistan produced scenes of chaos, fear, and despair on the various media platforms, Vietnam returned in both images of Afghan suffering and the racist ways in which the Biden administration blamed the Afghan people for failing to fight for their own human destiny. These American references to the Vietnam War sought to organize an amnesiac memory to either return to a more glorious time before it, to salvage the precious story about the American nation, or to overcome it in pragmatic economic and strategic considerations, all the while discounting the memory of people who must bear witness to their own history as a source of knowledge about our world. This rinse-and-repeat process remains available as needed in other American military adventures.

The victors in the Vietnam War did the same. On certain round numbers of years, the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam would stage a big celebration in front of the old South Vietnamese seat of government at the Independence Palace, now renamed Unification Palace, to commemorate the anniversary of its victory over the Republic of Vietnam. The commemorative festivities would include some kind of reenactment of the 1975 storming of the palace gates by tanks carrying North Vietnamese troops but flying the flags of the southern-based National Liberation Front. All over the city including in front of glitzy malls advertising global brands, banners would mark the day as one of liberation, of a nation coming into its full sovereignty, eliding the memory of complex alignment of forces with varying senses of gains and losses in local contexts operating in relation to the Cold War.

It seems forces in both the American state and the Vietnamese one continually write and rewrite the past by organizing memory through the enforcement of

forgetting so that only some could occupy the position of subjects of knowledge. It should not surprise anyone that Vietnamese refugees would want to remember from under all that forgetting if knowledge is requisite to the telos of human mastery. One does not become recognizably human until one knows and acts in one's history, as Edward Said reminds us of this unfortunate humanist formula for our modern era: "the secular world is the world of history as made by human beings."⁵ For these refugees, remembering in mourning and symbolic local politics is not a symptom of an incessant, pathological return to be cured with assimilationist remedies imagined in linear progressive time, but a way in which we can exist at all in time and history, which intersects with American nationalist and imperial history. Those of us with family history going back to Vietnam also try to remember against the ordering forgetfulness of the Vietnamese state, triumphantly erected on the ruins of a regional war, some would say civil war, that doubled as a proxy war in the global Cold War.

Yet, should this refugee community have continued to sit down with placards of Cold War-inflected "Freedom for Vietnam" on the sidewalks of Little Saigon while America reorganized its history to institutionalize white supremacy against its uncertain future? Bodies of literature in critical refugee studies attest to the significance of this question in rich discussions of war, economics, racism, aesthetic representations, and community practices within transnational and now imperial circuits of forgetting and remembering, of erasure and recognition. The centrality and complexity of questions of memory raised by these scholars show how memory becomes a site of critical refugee knowledge. Fiona Ngô, Mimi Thi Nguyen, and Mariam B. Lam concur with Khatharya Um's insistence that refugees' "burdensome memory must place itself in the path of the arrow of linear time, to block history's tendency to relegate to the past the sensate knowledges accrued from pain and injury."⁶ Writing of Cambodian American memory work, Schlund-Vials reminds us that "to forgive is not to forget."⁷ While humanist history demands modes of expression that erase its others, it is important for refugees to play witness against the reorganization of memory through enforced forgetting for political exigencies by states and dominant groups with means. But it is also an occasion to reimagine the broader politics, ethics, and indeed pathos of remembering and forgetting war as a catastrophic event that organized time itself into past, present, and future.

David Scott, writing about the aftermath of the Grenada Revolution, registers the end of promissory time as history. Scott senses our "stalled present" in its "arrested movement" when we live "*on* in the wake of past political time, amid the ruins, specifically, of postsocialist and postcolonial futures past."⁸ That may be true for those like us who *live on* after the wars in Vietnam, fought in the name of socialist revolution and national liberation, asperations akin to those of the Grenada Revolution. But this sense of ruined time may also be true for the world at large. Socialist revolutions and national liberations depend on their

teleological emplotment of historical time. This progressive historical time went through successive overlapping waves of collapse and dispersal. The violence of the French Revolution dramatically launched the idea of human history as ours to make only to actualize such mastery over the people in the colonies that took the lives of millions. For millions more, the tide of progressive history shipwrecked their dreams on expressions of sovereignty that gave us the Soviet gulag, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the Cambodian killing fields. For inheritors of other global expressions of sovereign power, a catastrophe like Auschwitz or Hiroshima becomes unthinkable because such future is manifest, escaping the realm of the symbolic and the imagination, a Lacanian real at the limit of which “all words cease.”⁹ Or as Theodor Adorno puts it, “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” as thought itself becomes reified and “even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter.”¹⁰ All these catastrophic events—direct mass violence or eco-destruction in the name of a sovereign future—have made the future unthinkable and trivial at the same time. Linear progressive history has borne us here, where the end of the world seems more likely than the humanist telos. Without this acknowledgement, our hopes in the future merely imprison us in a presentism where we are unable to see past time’s end. Afterall, Paul Celan wrote poetry after Auschwitz, from the condition of the aporetic. And Vietnamese refugee writers conjured timelines into pasts and futures after the thirtieth of April, from and across a similar impasse at the end of their world.

Initially when I first started to work on Vietnamese refugee commemoration, I thought that bringing all stories into memory could save us from the enforced forgetting by the powers that be, and thus we could retain our various possible futures.¹¹ Up to this point, our uses of past catastrophes in our effort to reorganize progressive time deploy the dead to redeem our place in humanist history. The dead become a political battleground for sovereign human life in nation, empire, community, and for the discipline of our wayward senses of time into progressive history. If such witless move has given us nothing but more of the same destructive impulse for more mastery, how then shall we remember the dead? In remembering our own dead, do we, refugees or Vietnamese Americans, the excluded, also appropriate the dead in order to prove our political existence? In our refugee community, the many stories are forced to fit the contours of singular anticommunist nationalism in response to enforced forgetting. Have we, the excluded, the exploited, the refugees, the immigrants, chosen to practice exclusionist politics, simply replacing one repressive memory matrix with another? Yet, we can no more recuperate or give testimony to all facets of our calamitous event than we can reprise the stories of all those buried under its ruins. As such, remembering and forgetting become a political, ethical, and necessarily epistemological project for those who self-bear their history. What we need is not an epistemology capable of knowing all stories, approaching some kind of totality. The question

becomes: how shall we relate to those who live on, sometimes with the dead, who now remember various pasts and hence offer us various futures?

Towards the end of her life, my mother lived with the aphasia and dementia brought on by Alzheimer's. Her English faded, and her memory of her life in America dimmed. She constantly left our family home in search of familiar surroundings, only to get lost on the streets of Garden Grove, the same city where she lived, worked, and raised her family for more than thirty years. My siblings and I relocated her to Vietnam, where the remaining fragments of her distant memory gave her some solace in what must have been a frighteningly unrecognizable world. But the familiarity of climate, terrain, language, and the recollections of her elderly relatives who survived the tumultuous decades of war and displacement also called forth in her these shards of memory about lost home and dead loved ones that disordered her sense of historical-chronological time. Many of her dead loved ones died to liberate and deliver Vietnamese into a sovereign future. Her memory of them did not stay memory, and her dead did not stay dead. Going to Vietnam to care for my mother in her last years while she lived with a memory deranged by loss made me realize there might be ways of being beyond Vietnamese refugee commemorative anamnesis against state and empire that itself becomes repressive. Nor should we strive for a totalizing project to willfully incorporate into our narrative events, things, and people that we cannot fully know. As witnesses, even self-witnesses, we carry that space of annihilation and the unknowable in our hearts. As her aphasia advanced and she lost more and more language, my mother's ruined or perhaps disobedient memory, in which she refused to recognize the chronology of events that had taken her loved ones away from her, prompted me to ask if we should move beyond anamnesis to look at conditions like aphasia and dementia to avoid singularizing or totalizing modes of organizing our understanding of life, death, and time. If we do not succumb to the damnation of chronology, then we cannot be sure that the dead are in fact gone, their dying accomplished. At the very least, my mother's condition reveals the fragmented character of memory, the doubtful meanings of words in narrative projects, and the persistence of a temporal looping in a dyschronometria that escapes if only momentarily the ordering of progressive historical time for nationalist, imperialist, humanist, and racist politics.

Taking our cues from critiques against ableist knowledge, could we look to those of us whom we think of as disabled to teach us how to think otherwise? Patrick Durgin notes "the tension between Enlightenment individuality and social minority-identity is frequently harnessed" in disability studies.¹² Thinking through blackness and disability as markers of difference, Michael Gill and Nirmala Erevelles point out intersectional disability is suppressed as the source of knowledge, to the point where it becomes a source of haunting in ableist humanist accounts.¹³ Could persons with certain intersectional conditions of lack in ableist accounts be the source of another way of knowing than Enlightenment reason? Blogging her

daily encounters with her mother's Alzheimer's condition, Susan Schultz tells us to "compare and contrast the acquisition of a language to its loss. Avoid the trap of merely saying that the latter happens in reverse order of the former."¹⁴ If aphasia and dementia as disabilities mark historical otherness, could we imagine personhood based not on humanist mastery of self through recall disciplined into coherent biography and knowledge within systemic repression? Could aphasia and dementia haunt the humanist mastery of autobiographical and historical knowledge? I have touched elsewhere on the use of the elliptical in biographical writing, or elision within the text that relies on social-structural formations for its narrative coherence.¹⁵ Could a way of being now constitute itself in relation to fragments of, and gaps in, memory which retain the continued presence of the dead, and in relation to community with those dead and alive without fundamental distinction?

By way of contemplating my own refugee family's experience in the convulsions of one of the catastrophes that precipitated our global ruined time, I want to argue against national reconciliation associated with the various Hegelian dialectical resolutions, with their violent posing of the question of who might need to be overcome in imperialist wars, revolution, or liberation, and whose knowledge might need repression thereafter so that humanist history could advance to an order of greater universality. Reconciliation sounds like such a reasonable demand that we forget we must speak over the silenced, the dead, the different, in order to reconcile ourselves to the violence that transpired for the sake of those who have the most to gain from it. If the Vietnamese state, the American political Left and Right, all discount refugee memory as legitimate knowledge in order to promote respectively Vietnamese national sovereignty and the American imperial mastery in a historiography of humanist telos, then refugees must refuse reconciliation to a knowledge that perpetrates physical and epistemological violence against their very being. Reconciliation paradoxically becomes antipolitical for refugees in that it freezes them out of political exchange in a presentism that relegates them to an accomplished past.

As mentioned, explanations for why some Vietnamese refugees joined the January 6th white supremacist takeover of the U.S. Capitol link refugee loss of South Vietnam to the Confederate Lost Cause. Such line of exposition as well as the actions of those refugee participants do not prompt readers to remember the intense history of southern anticolonial war against French colonialism and southern resistance against American imperialism in and out of the National Liberation Front. And though no one is saying South Vietnam was defending some equivalence of chattel slavery that could link it to the Confederacy, I hear calls urging refugees to move forward by accepting their historical loss. We are told that South Vietnamese refugees share with white supremacists in the United States this anachronistic condition of the refusal to reconcile with those who acted with history. I am desolate from the Trumpian turn among refugees and Vietnamese, as it tore through some of my own closest relationships and decimated webs of

relations in my communities in the United States and Vietnam. But how I feel about it will not change the fact that many working-class refugees do not have access to cultural capital as tender for shared sovereignty in this country. And when has reconciliation served the forgotten unless their champions have seized power? The government in Vietnam has never stopped fighting that war in its repression of its citizens and controlling the story for its ongoing consolidation of power. Neither have the U.S. government and powerful groups therein.

Reconciling with present political exigencies of states and powerful groups represses the contingent and imprisons us in a linear time that demands sacrifice of the past for the sake of the present and the present for the sake of a future that has already been exhaustively imagined. The demolition of the contingent in each timeframe comes with human costs—homes, memories, lives. As Vietnamese refugees, we came from liberation and revolution, all the things that should have delivered the promised humanist future. Do not ask us to reconcile ourselves to progress, nation, or empire. From our past, we can only haunt your future with something akin to the tragic. By the tragic, I do not mean you should feel sorry for refugees. Nor do I mean you should celebrate the futile yet heroic acts of individuals railing against overwhelming forces of fate or despotism. Rather, I argue against a Hegelian reading of *Antigone* to rethink the tragic sense of time that may help us refuse resolution of conflict in the form of the dialectical progression in universal history. I want to bring attention to how Antigone's utter refusal of reconciliation to a higher order of universality in the state of Thebes rests on her alignment with the dead. Her refusal makes visible the statist act of entombing her in its substrate. I want to raise the ethical stakes in refusing reconciliation, so that historical time does not close one loop in its progressing spirals towards the humanist telos that forecloses the very existence of those it must overcome. Reading for "the unmanageability of Greek tragedy," Page Dubois points out the "ubiquity of slaves in the city, some captured in war," that "made them an inevitable and haunting presence and reminder of the possibilities of disaster in the present."¹⁶ Embracing the "manyness of tragedy," Kathleen Sands writes that "tragedies shatter worldviews" because "they tell of worlds and times that are broken such that no coherent view of them can be had."¹⁷

Yes, within this refusal to reconcile lurk the dangers of another "coherent world view," another potential ordering of identity with its repressive matrix of memory, history, and self. The result can be an enforced identification with the refugee community's own standard of the good refugee who heeds a reordered past that leaves others as bad refugees for not being anticommunist enough. To prevent refugee refusal of mainstream memory from congealing into some countervailing truth of the dead that will only mimic the larger structural repressions, I propose we hold refugee memory as untimely, even as each of us must at the same time pursue whatever politics that we find conscionable. In the moment my mother presented me with her divergent time in which her dead still lived, I was plunged into the

temporal rupture of the radically untimely that refuses closure. Because closure may mean some of us move on while others perish. Sibylle Fischer suggests that the freedom in human history is not the fulfillment of a determined trajectory of liberatory progress, but something “accessible only at moments of rupture, radically out of order.”¹⁸ In modern times, revolutions had provided these moments of radical temporal rupture, only to restart the brutal count at Year Zero from the French Revolution to the Cambodian one. But in the ruins of these teleological catastrophes, our Year Zero can no longer credibly offer us a future without hauntings of suffering and mass death, and we are left to find other means to access such rupture to disarrange sovereign nationalist and imperialist time. Such derangement of time and world begins with momentary inhabitation of the untimely as a defense against the calamitous closure of historical time for savages, natives, reactionaries, puppets, losers, refugees, and assorted others in the name of the future. The untimely offers no program. In such moments, we are adrift, unmoored from our bloody historiography. As we should be.

LIBERATORY MEMORY AND TRAITOROUS REFUGEES

For Vietnamese refugees, most of whom came from South Vietnam, the sources of forgetting are many. For almost half a century since it won the war for socialist revolution and national liberation, the current Vietnamese government has in various ways constrained opportunities for a critical reevaluation of the war and postwar policies, particularly regarding the violence inflicted on the people of South Vietnam.¹⁹ At expedient times, the government has encouraged the airing of war atrocities committed by American or South Vietnamese military forces, such as the horrific Mỹ Lai massacre at the hands of American soldiers.²⁰ Other critical reevaluations of the costs of the North’s war efforts for northerners have been sporadically tolerated with some periodic imprisonment or harassment of their authors.²¹ But atrocities committed by northern troops or their allied forces in the South during the war, such as the 1968 Tết massacre in Huế, continue to be suppressed in Vietnam.²²

The government has also categorically prevented public discussion about the violence inflicted by itself after the war against those in the South it considered reactionary and traitorous. As previously touched upon, the socialist government relocated large segments of the southern urban population to New Economic Zones in order to minimize potential resistance as well as to facilitate economic development and collectivization. It resettled the dominant ethnic Vietnamese largely from northern provinces in traditionally Indigenous land, dispossessing these communities to this day, especially in the Central Highlands. It systematically marginalized southerners without revolutionary credentials in policies of *chủ nghĩa lý lịch* or backgroundism in educational and employment opportunities. Beyond these multiple layers of social dislocation and dispossession, postwar policies

also included the imprisonment in conditions of terror, starvation, and hard labor that lasted from a few months up to two decades of an estimated million people that included those associated with, as well as those opposed to, the southern regime, as the Vietnamese Communist Party consolidated its monopoly of political power. The Vietnamese government explains this policy in munificent terms: "Thanks to the policy of humanity, clemency and national reconciliation of the State of Vietnam, these people were not punished. Some of them were admitted to re-education facilities in order to enable them to repent their mistakes and reintegrate themselves into the community."²³ The war that the newly unified Vietnam fought with North Vietnam's old Khmer Rouge allies in Cambodia from 1977 through the 1980s, and the resulting war with China in 1979, set the stage for a mass exodus from Vietnam initiated by the government's expulsion of potentially problematic elements, which now included Vietnamese of Chinese origin. Government operatives would extract gold from potential escapees and set them on rickety boats, a money-making operation that has been dubbed "rust bucket, inc."²⁴ Escapees then would still be subjected to arrests and incarceration for their illegal flight, and the cycle of extraction and imprisonment would start over and over for many refugees. This was the context that created the disaster of the so-named Boat People, up to half of whom either perished at sea or encountered pirates who robbed, raped, and killed them.²⁵

Whatever the political reasons for these acts of violence against populations in the South after the war, they have not been allowed to be publicly debated in meaningful ways. The effects of such policies remain unacknowledged to this day. The socialist authorities carried acts of forgetting into the symbolic, reinscribing their history onto the physical geography of the South, school curriculum, and a new standardized language. Streets in the South were renamed with a new pantheon of communist leaders, party-approved nationalist martyrs, or events from revolutionary historiography. The former capital of the old Republic of Vietnam bore so many new names after the war that local residents mocked this reinscription of their city with accusatory ditties as mnemonics for remembering street name replacements, as in "Southern Revolt Destroys Justice / General Uprising Forfeits Freedom."²⁶ Sài Gòn itself, a word transliterated from the local place-name that predated Vietnamese settlement there, was renamed Hồ Chí Minh City. Some names of southern localities were changed or given northern spellings in official maps: Thăng Nhứt became Thăng Nhất, An Ngãi became An Nghĩa, etc. With the dissolution of the southern National Liberation Front and the unification of the country under Hanoi, the new government made efforts to unify and standardize language and instructional curriculum after national unification. Resolution 219/CP, issued in December 1975, ordered the preparation of new textbooks and instructional curriculum for the whole country in which only the approved version of history would be taught.²⁷ By 1984, Minister of Education Nguyễn thị Bình had adopted guidelines issued by the Committee for the Standardization

of Spelling and the Committee for Standardization of Terminology for nationwide usage.²⁸ Trịnh Thanh Thủy, a refugee writer, laments how the language of old Saigon “departed as silently as other cultural traces from the First and Second Republic of Vietnam.”²⁹ These were governmental acts of erasure of recent and traumatic history for large segments of the population many of whom either had ties to, or had eventually joined, the Vietnamese refugee communities in the United States. In 2005, on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the 1975 victory, former prime minister Võ Văn Kiệt, who was a southerner by birth and who fought against the United States during the war, futilely asked his government to tone down the triumphant declarations and called for more recognition of the diversity of South Vietnamese groups and their contribution to the nation, rather than counting them all as traitors who served American imperialism.³⁰ Short of opening a venue for debate about history, the retired leader merely warned the government away from an incessant return to the glory of victory.

The southern dead, both military and civilian, were erased and often vilified in public narratives. Their bodies were dug up, often discarded. The South Vietnamese national cemetery, Mạc Đĩnh Chi, was grazed and turned into a public park named for Lê Văn Tám, a martyr alien to the local population at the time and who later was revealed to be fictive.³¹ Monuments dedicated to the South’s military dead were removed. For instance, the statue of the South Vietnamese soldier at the military cemetery in Biên Hòa on the outskirts of Saigon was demolished, the name of the cemetery erased. Graves were smashed and headstones ravaged by time. For decades, family members were prevented from entering this cemetery to tend the graves of their loved ones. All public forms of mourning for those who fought on the wrong side of history were banished as South Vietnamese soldiers were criminalized as mercenaries to American imperialism in Vietnam. Some family members would sneak visits, sometimes by bribing the guards. After almost two decades of appeal by family members in the Vietnamese refugee communities on humanitarian grounds that tending to the dead is crucial to a Vietnamese family’s sense of continuity, limited access to local residents was granted in the early 2010s, at a time when the government appealed to refugee communities abroad to improve Vietnam’s political image in and economic trade with the United States and Europe. Active erasure was replaced with the privatization of mourning. In 2006, Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng approved civilian use of the land on which sat the cemetery, opening the way to privatization of the graveyard.³² A few years later, the cemetery was given a new name by the local authorities, who sought to develop the land in a privatization of grief: Nghĩa trang nhân dân phường Bình An or Cemetery of the People of Bình An District. To prevent the genealogical tracing of refugee communities back to South Vietnamese national memory, only individual family members were allowed to petition the restoration of the graves of their dead, and not refugee organizations.³³ Those who in 1975 were erased because they were deemed mercenaries in the service of American



FIGURE 6. Headstone with Buddhist swastika in former Republic of Vietnam Military Cemetery, Biên Hoà, Vietnam. Photo by author, August 7, 2012.

imperialism were now paroled into private persons who died incidental deaths. When I finally gained admittance in 2012, the paths inside the cemetery were covered with layers of dead leaves that rustled with small gusts of wind. Sculptural monuments and temples had become ruins. From the chipped headstones newly propped up by family, likenesses of dead soldiers in their youth stared out from under Catholic crosses or Buddhist swastikas with eyes made vacant by time (figure 6).

The state of this cemetery contrasts with the building of cemeteries marked by huge monuments in every district, city, province in the entire country to martyrs of the nation who fought on the side of the Việt Minh during the anticolonial war of 1946–54, the southern National Liberation Front, and of course the northern People's Army of Vietnam during the anti-imperial war from 1950s to 1975. My uncles from both sides of the family who fought against the French in the anticolonial

war were buried in these elaborate national cemeteries, rendering my family's mourning public every time we made gravesite visits. The commemoration would extend from monuments into annual rituals that require the participation of representatives from all local government offices. The mourning of the martyrs to the anticolonial and anti-imperial nation is a very public affair. On one such occasion, on the Day of Wounded Soldiers and Martyrs on July 27, 2012, in the city of Vũng Tàu, I saw how mothers of the fallen soldiers were told to vacate the temple hall, where they were weeping over images of their sons, to make room for the public incense lighting ceremony attended by local dignitaries and government employees. The elderly women were led to the back patio of the temple away from the public eye. Their private grief was deemed unsightly and disruptive to public commemoration.

The socialist government's control over memorialization reached beyond the nation's borders. The images of the Boat People disseminated worldwide and the memory of refugees who nearly died, survived rape and other forms of violence, or lost loved ones on their journey became a thorny issue for the Vietnamese government. In 2005, groups of refugees revisited the sites of refugee camps in Bidong, Malaysia, and Galang, Indonesia, to build two memorials to those lost at sea. Within months, as Quan Tue Tran writes, "the government of Vietnam had complained to both the Malaysian and Indonesian central governments that the memorials 'denigrated the dignity of Vietnam' and demanded that these objects be destroyed."³⁴ The Malaysian and Indonesian governments complied and demolished the memorials to maintain good relations with the Vietnamese government. Yet, hardly a decade later, as the negotiations for the ill-fated Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal shaped up during the second Obama administration, the government in Vietnam allowed for a kind of privatization of grief for those it considered either enemy or suspect populations in the South. Both the United States and Vietnamese governments issued calls to those in the Vietnamese refugee communities for leaving the past behind so that business could prosper on both sides of the Pacific in this partnership between Vietnam and the United States among a community of regional countries. In 2014, Vietnamese Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Nguyễn Thanh Sơn announced that the state of Vietnam would no longer hold as criminal the departure of Vietnamese Boat People who perished at sea, because they were merely victims of anti-Vietnamese propaganda. The Vietnamese state, in other words, was forgiving those who had suffered or died partly or primarily at its own hands through postwar policies of arrests, imprisonment, and ethnic expulsion, to name a few. The deputy minister now invoked Buddhist rituals of praying for the transcendence of all souls without differentiation, to say the government would like to show its humanitarian recognition of refugee deaths as incidental, like all civilian deaths at sea, rather than an act of treason to the nation.³⁵ Spiritual transcendence was invoked in place of difficult political reconciliation. As part of this governmental gesture of decriminalization of the refugee dead, the deputy minister also visited that newly privatized cemetery in

Biên Hòa.³⁶ By governmental resolution, refugee grief was subsumed into the dark waters of transcended refugee memory that would allow for the organization of new national memory.

AMERICAN MEMORY AND BACKWARD REFUGEES

Nor have those who shape political discourses in the United States and other countries in the West been more mindful of those from South Vietnam. Growing up in this country, I found it so difficult to speak of our history. As an academic with refugee family background, I could not find a way to speak that would be intelligible to a scholarly community without it becoming an act of betrayal to my own. My uneasy usage of the pronoun *we* in this chapter shows the disjuncture between the refugee “we” and the “we” as human subjects of universal knowledge. Americans from the Left to the Right, in and out of academia, have often constructed Vietnamese refugees as needing tutelage in this country in a manner corresponding to racist structures of subjectivity and knowledge connected to the old colonial and imperial historiography of progress. These narratives were entangled in an affective mixture of empire and nation complicit with global capitalism until it landed us in the Trump era of white supremacy. All the while, refugees with a South Vietnamese history were earnestly discounted as yet to emerge into the realm of the human.

Caught up in the unfolding drama of revolution and national liberation from afar, many who might identify their politics as progressive simply branded all those who were not fighting with North Vietnam or the National Liberation Front as puppets of U.S. imperialism. In doing so, they dehumanized those from the South acting in complex and deadly local realities of the global Cold War in the aftermath of European colonialism. Revisiting American treatment of the communist massacre of civilians in Huế during the Tết Offensive of 1968, Olga Dror writes of this political positioning in knowledge production long after Tết: “American scholarship has focused largely on either the American side of the war or the North Vietnamese perspective; either way, America’s erstwhile ally has been largely ignored. South Vietnam, whose many citizens fled Vietnam and found a new home in the United States, was pushed to the margins, if not completely off the pages, of postwar narratives, and meanwhile the former enemy was romanticized.”³⁷ Displays of “anticommunism” here in the United States by Vietnamese refugees simply confirm progressives’ dismissal of Vietnamese American politics as reactionary. The politics of Vietnamese refugees who have experienced communist revolution in often brutal and always complex ways in the mind-boggling messiness of Vietnamese anticolonial and nationalist history would be subjected to a supposedly universal register of Left-Right politics in the United States or other Western countries that came out of an entirely different history. Wendy Brown would call this “a failure to understand history in terms other than ‘empty

time' or 'progress.'"³⁸ What appears universally progressive in one context may signify or call for actions completely different in another context. Those in the South after the Cold War partitioning of the country in 1954 by chiefly the United States, China, and the Soviet Union found themselves stripped of the legitimate claim on national sovereignty as the Western Left grossly simplified complexities on the ground into a narrative of the North continuing to carry the mantle of wars of national liberation against American aggressors with their South Vietnamese puppets in tow. Many in the South and North who had participated in the anticolonial war against the French stayed in, or migrated to, the South at the moment of partition for many different reasons germane to the immediately preceding period of anticolonialism. As mentioned, Trotskyists and anarchists, as well as other nationalist and religious groups such as the Hoà Hảo and Cao Đài, had suffered efforts by the Vietnamese Communist Party to eliminate its Vietnamese rivals in the anticolonial war. Would one consider Trotskyists reactionary? Though Leftists in the heart of empires might not, leaders of the Vietnamese Communist Party gave orders to kill their Trotskyist rivals in the 1940s.³⁹ The history of modern Vietnam in the context of decolonization and the Cold War was one of fierce fighting by many groups against each other over the future of their young nation. Many of these groups in South Vietnam at different times embraced forms of redistribution of wealth and opposed the American military presence in their country, only to grudgingly accept American support as the war with the North Vietnamese and their NLF allies intensified. Disregarding the complex realities of twentieth-century Vietnam, progressive narratives reduce Vietnamese to either reactionary puppets of American imperialism or fighters who would liberate their enslaved compatriots.

While exotic liberators were fetishized to advance the power of those in the West to judge who was on the right side of history, puppets were expunged from the domain of the human and its exalted knowledge. Many progressives in the West could not believe postwar refugee stories. In criticizing the promotion of anticommunist propaganda from various quarters in the United States, those on the Left often dismissed the brutality in postwar communist policies of dislocation, imprisonment, and murder. For example, while rightfully placing responsibility for the immediate context of the Cambodian Revolution on the brutal American anticommunist war in Southeast Asia, George Hildebrand and Gareth Porter in a 1976 book failed to address the equally brutal violence by the Khmer Rouge before and after the end of the war in 1975.⁴⁰ Dismissing as mere propaganda reports in the *New York Times* and elsewhere of "grim conditions" in South Vietnam after communist victory, Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman applauded Hildebrand and Porter's scholarship against refugee eyewitness accounts about the killings in Cambodia.⁴¹ Refugees were not to be believed because they were simply losers in the struggle for the advancement of history; and now they had an axe to grind. They were not to be trusted because of their, in the word of a colleague,

“rabid” anticommunism, which in turn was due to their servitude as puppets to American imperialism. In this way of seeing and understanding the world, refugees were barred from being subjects of knowledge.

Soon after these early debates about the conditions brought by revolution in Indochina, the socialist promise became eclipsed by images of death coming out of Cambodia and of the Boat People exodus coming out of Vietnam. The internationalism of the Left hardly had time to celebrate the socialist victory in Vietnam when the 1980s marked the collapse of socialist revolution in Grenada. By 1987, the Vietnamese Communist Party had decided to adopt market incentives, veering away from socialist central planning. And by 1989, Francis Fukuyama had declared that humanity had reached the “end of history” in the form of free market and liberal democracy, giving death notice to socialism as a historiographic telos of humanist future.⁴² Fukuyama’s end-of-history thesis is absurdly problematic in its projection of Hegelian dialectical spirals of progressive history to claim victory for capitalist liberal democracies legitimizing neoliberal acceleration in the United States, the United Kingdom, and other places around the world. Meanwhile, the Left fell headlong into “left melancholy.” Benjamin coined the term in 1931, which Wendy Brown applies to the moment of the “literal disintegration of socialist regimes and the legitimacy of Marxism,” that leaves the Left “awash in the loss of a unified analysis and unified movement, in the loss of labor and class as inviolable predicates of political analysis and mobilization, in the loss of an inexorable and scientific forward movement of history, and in the loss of a viable alternative to the political economy of capitalism.”⁴³ Refugees as subjects of knowledge easily become casualty to this Left “narcissism with regard to one’s past political attachments and identity that exceeds any contemporary investment in political mobilization, alliance, or transformation.”⁴⁴

Most Vietnamese refugees have endured condescension by liberals and progressives reacting to instances of community protests in the name of refugee memory and knowledge about communism. Headlines of columns written by white liberals that decry “sick, stupid nutjobs in Little Saigon”⁴⁵ reflect an often-seen desire in mainstream media to reprimand a community that refuses to progress by learning democratic norms, instead “red-baits” and wreaks “terror in Little Saigon,”⁴⁶ shuts down invited guest lectures at universities and art exhibitions, or demands the use of the South Vietnamese flag rather than the current Vietnamese flag at official functions. The protest that left the deepest impression was the 1999 Videotek incident, during which up to fifty thousand Vietnamese Americans gathered for fifty days to protest owner Trần Trường’s display of a portrait of Hồ Chí Minh and the current Vietnamese flag. Pondering the reaction to this incident and others by liberals and progressives who frequently asked her “Why don’t they just get over it: it’s a matter of freedom of speech,” Mariam B. Lam writes, “It takes a uniquely subtle form of privileged condescension and nuanced racism to be able to make such judgements and valuations of these protesters.”⁴⁷ Lam calls for a

closer examination of this dismissal of refugee memory and knowledge in relation to a “left melancholy,” because “a ‘narcissistic’ political attachment to dehistoricized and decontextualized Western Marxist thought will never unearth satisfying answers to these already ideologically loaded rhetorized inquiries about Vietnamese American anti-communism,” when it “is a means to a nationalist and transnational historiographical recovery and social political legitimacy.”⁴⁸

Narcissistic progressives were not the only ones writing off refugees in the wake of the American defeat in the war. Contestations that played out over how America should commemorate the dead of this war reflected the process of national healing itself. Commonly known as the Vietnam Memorial, Maya Lin’s design of the half-submerged granite wall memorializes American soldiers, and organizes national memory. It is upon the names of these dead soldiers that those in the American public could see themselves reflected back in a national present and future. Reading the 1989 film *In Country*, Laurent Berlant sees the wall as an amnesiac device, sublimating the private emotions the living may feel towards their dead into mature public affect, so that all could move forward in time together. In Berlant’s reading, the film’s main character Samantha imagines her soldier father “engraved in monumental time,” as though “his physical self were only now truly dead,” while “his national self still lives in a state of pure and enduring value.”⁴⁹ In this way, Lisa Yoneyama reminds us that memory becomes “complicitous with history in fashioning an official and authoritative account of the past.”⁵⁰ The Vietnam War would be remembered as an American war, in which American young men and some women sacrificed for the nation. All the while, others who lived and died in or survived that war—North and South Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, Indigenous people, refugees—would be simply written over.

Since 1984, the Vietnam Combat Veterans organization began sponsoring a replica of the memorial wall as a traveling exhibit around the country named “The Moving Wall.”⁵¹ In October 2011, it reached Garden Grove, a city that together with Westminster comprised the area known as “refugee capital.” The mounting at the foot of the Wall was draped in military fatigue. As local American Vietnam War veterans came to find the names of their comrades, their reflections off the Wall at once matched and revealed the militarism of American freedom and national belonging (figure 7). Refugee reflections, however, did not quite inscribe them into the nation. As if to highlight the removal of Vietnamese refugees from the American war for freedom that just happened to take place in Vietnam, South Vietnamese and refugee artifacts were stashed in a room, away from the Wall and its command of the open space in the public park. It was in response to such elision of Southeast Asians at militarized memorializations like this that a group of Southeast Asian artists and academics called for the gathering of a refugee archive in the form of an online gallery of artifacts, artworks, and writings in the Missing Piece Project, which also “envisions a nationwide, coordinated, mass dedication of objects at the



FIGURE 7. Moving Wall Exhibit in Garden Grove, California. Photo by author, October 6, 2011.

Vietnam Memorial on April 30, 2025 by Vietnamese, Lao, Hmong, Cambodian and other communities still affected by the conflict in Southeast Asia.”⁵²

The Cold War narrative coming out of the American Right about the Vietnam War is too familiar to rehearse at length here: America seeks to save the South Vietnamese from communist aggression and tyranny. The Right had its own narcissism to match that of the Left. Once the end of the war brought home the undeniable sense of American defeat in a major war, a malaise set in. According to Bernard von Bothmer, Ronald Reagan undertook the invasion of Grenada in part to expunge that imperialist melancholy in the form of the “Vietnam syndrome.”⁵³ Indeed, it has been argued that the Reagan presidency itself, as well as subsequent presidencies, was about overcoming this American condition of loss.⁵⁴ If melancholia is a condition that perpetuates the sense of loss of the subject itself, the Vietnam syndrome required repeated military adventures abroad to regain the American sense of its destiny in global hegemony. When American forces routed Iraqi forces from Kuwait during the 1991 Gulf War, the elder Bush exclaimed, “By God, we’ve kicked this Vietnam syndrome.”⁵⁵ Yet, soon enough, as it entered and then tried to extricate itself from Iraq and Afghanistan, America would again be haunted by Vietnam in its public debates and opinion columns well into the fifth decade after the end of the Vietnam War.

The America that had to be recuperated in incessant imperial violence abroad did not include Vietnamese refugees beyond those who became soldiers sent to fight in these battlefields. Many Vietnamese refugees had become American citizens, but their history remained divergent within that of the American nation. After the war, when it suited them either ideologically or electorally,⁵⁶ those on the Right nodded their heads in slight recognition of Vietnamese from South Vietnam as lesser allies in the Cold War, thus providing the only readily available language with which Vietnamese refugees could speak our history and be understood from within the space of assimilationist erasure. This pattern takes on a new twist with the new Right, the empire builders in the George W. Bush administration, and later the white supremacists who rose under Trump.

From torture at Abu Graib and other prisons that would have been prohibited by the Geneva Conventions, to the new designation of “enemy combatants” held at Guantanamo Bay as opposed to “prisoners of war” protected by international laws and treaties, to the procedure of “rendering” prisoners to countries unreachable by U.S. legal prohibitions against torture, the Bush administration resolutely moved away from the universalism of rights instituted in the post-World War II era. White House counsel Alberto Gonzalez claimed the United States was not bound by international treaties it had signed against torture and imprisonment, and that the Geneva Conventions were “obsolete” and “quaint.”⁵⁷ The universalism in human rights institutionalized after World War II as the best promise of Enlightenment humanism was belied by the rise of ethno-racial nation-state sovereignty as well as other modes of differentiation. Whatever gains or promise of universalism, the new builders of empire in the Bush administration assaulted them through the creation of different zones of rights based on differential categorizations such as “enemy combatants” and “enemy aliens,” themselves based on categorizations of cultural, religious, national, or ethnic affiliations of citizens and noncitizens. Different treatments and different applicability of laws constituted new zones of rights or the absence of rights: war zones and holding facilities like Abu Graib, allied countries to undertake torture where U.S. laws did not apply in programs of “rendition,” “black sites” and offshore holding facilities like Guantanamo Bay. Enemy combatants as a new category undermined the old universal category of humans who needed to be protected, in this case, as prisoners of war.

As the most important domestic tool for the Bush administration, the Patriot Act (Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act) attacked rights won by the civil rights movement in the 1960s. While it allowed the government to spy on its citizens in unprecedented ways, this Act specifically targeted immigrants and other noncitizens, with very different definitions of terrorism applied to them.⁵⁸ For noncitizens, the definition of terror was expanded to include giving money to charities that the government decided had “connections” to groups it deemed terrorist.

After September 11, Arab or Muslim residents and immigrants were required to register with the government. Immigrants and refugees were detained and deported without the government having to bring charges or to inform anyone in the courts or in the families of those it detained. By May 2003, the government had detained 2,797 persons, mostly Muslims and Arabs, and ordered the deportation of 300,000 noncitizens.⁵⁹ Had it passed, the leaked Domestic Security Enhancement Act (DSEA), dubbed Patriot Act II, would have given the government even greater power to strip someone of citizenship protection if suspected of “involvement” in terrorist activities. Such person would then be treated as an enemy alien, ineligible for due process.⁶⁰ In 1798, the U.S. Congress enacted the Enemy Alien Act and the Alien and Sedition Act authorizing the president in wartime, without any cause, to detain, deport, or restrict the liberties of any citizen of the country at war with the United States. The Bush administration revived these powers, which were upheld in the American courts in 2002.⁶¹ Since the “War on Terror” was fought not against one country but against any person who might be suspected of having any involvement, knowingly or not, this category could be applied to anyone with any nationality.

Why target refugees and immigrants? Then Assistant Attorney General Viet Dinh, a principal author of the Patriot Act, explained in his University of California Irvine Chancellor’s Distinguished Lecture on January 11, 2005, that policies governing refugees and immigrants constitute that border between the outside and the inside of the nation-state.⁶² In other words, such border was to be drawn within the territorial United States, where the government singled out people based on the racial identifications and cultural/religious affiliations of refugee and immigrant groups. In the case of the incarceration of persons of Japanese ancestry in the United States during World War II, such identification served as the basis to imprison both Japanese immigrants and American citizens of Japanese descent. Instead of the universality of human rights and citizenship rights, we had in this case American citizens of Arab or Muslim affiliation having discriminating governmental treatment applied to them that would extend the American carceral state.

On the one hand, we can say that this multiplication of categories outside and inside redrawing the boundaries of American jurisdiction undermined the universal basis of liberal human and civil rights. On the other, we can argue, as much of this book does, that the category of the human is always already a mode of subjectification that requires differentiation and violent repression of those deemed less than human. The Bush era merely further extended the logic of differentiation, mimicking the political economy of neoliberalism in which the modes and relations of production are multiple and flexible, taking advantage of different zones of rights among other differences from which capital can create or recreate for profit, like differences in living standards, labor regulations, and cultural gender norms. Once the new American empire builders undermined the old universalism in the older set of power relations privileging all Western liberal democracies in order to

now privilege just itself as *the* empire, it had to substitute that liberal universalism with something else. I suggest the Bush era empire builders constructed a new universalism by historical amnesia.

The Bush administration's practices of torture and attacks on immigrant and civil rights were fronted by Alberto Gonzales, Condoleezza Rice, John Yoo, and Viet Dinh. Precisely because they represented the differentiated other in relation to the imagined nation, racial and cultural minority faces demonstrated the universal applicability of redeployed ideological concepts like "freedom" (read neoliberal freedom of the market). The University of California, Irvine chancellor introduced Viet Dinh for the Distinguished Lecture by repeating the Bush administration's promotional story of Dinh's escape from Vietnam as a Boat Person in search of freedom, rising to one of the highest positions in the Bush administration. What sounded like a generic American Dream narrative about the journey of a refugee acted to construct a new universalism at that moment of overt reactivation of empire.

And then there is the other half of this formulation. Espiritu draws our attention to the Vietnamese refugee figure, which she argues is rendered un-visible by an Ellison-like hypervisibility, in which "the profusion of text and talk on the Vietnam War actually conceals the war's costs borne by the Vietnamese."⁶³ These refugees, who embody success stories of freedom gained and good work rewarded, must at the same time deny the complex history as well as the collective agency of the group they represent. The highly complex and contingent history of their people must be forgotten in a historical amnesia, in order that *the* success story could be retold. More importantly, the agency of their people as subjects of their own history must be denied. What is retained is the mere symbolic markings of their racialized identities as representatives of particular groups differentiated from the core cultural citizenry of the American nation, so that they could validate the latter's values as universal. Not surprisingly, when Bush nominated John Ashcroft for the post of attorney general, Dinh wrote an opinion piece in which he overlooked the activism of Southeast Asian refugees in refugee aid efforts in order to valorize Ashcroft's rescue of refugees cast as "the most helpless of the downtrodden."⁶⁴

In this perpetual War on Terror, old enemies became potential allies. If the Obama presidency projected a departure from the neoconservatism of the Bush years and renewed hopes for greater racial equality, it did not eschew perpetual war through an escalation of drone assassinations in the Middle East and a strengthening of American defense in the Pacific. The Obama administration signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Vietnam on defense cooperation in 2011. During his visit to Vietnam in 2016 near the end of his presidency, Obama made multiple gestures to Vietnam's young demographics to signal the overcoming of the history of war. In his speech, Obama announced that he came "mindful of the past, mindful of our difficult history, but focused on the future—the prosperity, security and human dignity that we can advance together,"⁶⁵ from which he quickly pivoted to celebrating Vietnam's ancient history and culture by quoting *Kiểu*,

that verse novel canonized into Vietnamese cultural essence. True to American neoliberalism since Reagan, the Obama administration supported Vietnam's capitalist turn that would benefit the American global economic and military order. What accompanied Obama's focus on the future was the pending Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal and the lifting of the long-standing American ban on lethal arms sales to Vietnam, clearing the way for Vietnam to buy American weapons systems and possible joint production of military equipment. Both governments pushed aside Vietnamese American demands that closer ties be contingent on the Vietnamese government's easing up on arrests and imprisonment of democracy, labor, and environmental activists. Obama also escalated deportations of Southeast Asians as part of his tough immigration stance, hoping to convince conservatives in Congress of the need for comprehensive immigration legislation. A 2008 Memorandum of Understanding signed by Bush to consolidate Vietnam's acceptance of pre-1995 refugees paved the way for more deportations under the Obama administration.⁶⁶ Eliding the difficult history of refugee and their vexed relationship to the governments of Vietnam and the United States, Obama and Vietnamese leaders repeatedly referenced the economic and scientific achievements of Vietnamese Americans as connecting the two countries and governments.⁶⁷ Such mode of co-optation relies on erasure of refugee memory at the point of divergence between refugee history and national history in both nations for the sake of aligning their economic and strategic interests.

For all his vitriol against Obama, Trump only redirected neo-imperial perpetual war in his mobilization of white supremacy. Continuing Obama's agenda to turn an old enemy into a partner, Trump announced the transfer in May 2017 of the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter *Morgenthau* "to the people and country of Vietnam."⁶⁸ He went on to explain the significance of this transfer that would transition their past war into deepened defense cooperation in the new era: "Named for U.S. Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau Jr., this vessel once patrolled the coasts of Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Today, the same American vessel, a gift between partners, is sailing the waters of the Pacific on its way to patrol these coasts for the people of Vietnam."⁶⁹ Trump's visit was followed by a March 2018 visit to Đà Nẵng by the aircraft carrier *USS Carl Vinson*, during which an American naval band performed in Vietnamese to cheering Vietnamese crowds "Nối Vòng Tay Lớn" or "The Great Arm Link," a 1970 song by popular South Vietnamese composer Trịnh Công Sơn expressing yearning for national unity at the height of what seemed like fratricidal war.⁷⁰ Vietnamese bloody division disappeared into unified national memory performed in a gesture of friendship by an American military band. If Obama's overcoming of the history of the Vietnam War for the sake of American neo-imperialism and neoliberalism rendered Vietnamese refugees visible only as model-minority Americans, Trump's America First foreign policy "based on common interests" with Vietnam erased Vietnamese refugee history altogether.⁷¹ The kind of white melancholic return in the Trump era would conjure an American

present unencumbered by Vietnamese American presence in the same way it fantasized about a white America uncomplicated by struggles against racism and neoliberalism. It was not until the last months leading up to the 2020 election that we saw a move similar to Bush's appointment of Viet Dinh, when Vietnamese American Tony Pham was appointed to lead U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) during an acceleration of Southeast Asian deportations.

With Trump's rise, the familiar white investment in the human became white investment in the American nation against the deleterious effects of global capital's ability to move across national borders for profit, taking away manufacturing jobs that used to sustain a white working class. During Trump's presidential campaign, some in the Alt-Right and MAGA movement called for taking care of white communities at home as opposed to cultivating relationships with allies abroad. At first, it sounded like the Alt-Right would put forth a coherent set of ideas against what they called globalism. In March 2018, the Trump's administration put high tariffs on imported steel and aluminum to stop or reverse decades of American job loss due to capitalist globalization. White nationalism contained a logic common to nationalisms: the singularization of nationalist subjectivity that would necessarily result in the repression of internal and external others. Steve Miller supported white nationalism from within the Trump administration, through the various iterations of the Muslim travel ban and comprehensive immigration reforms to cut out "chain migration," codeword for Asian and Latino immigration by family reunion, in favor of white cultural and linguistic standards. Steve Bannon, who rose to the position of senior advisor to the president, had in common with other white nationalists like Congressman Steve King bedside reading that included the 1973 novel *The Camp of the Saints* by French author Jean Raspail, who imagines how white Christendom is overtaken by a horde of dark-skinned immigrants plagued by disease and moral decay arriving by boat on the shores of Europe. One of the later English-language editions has on its cover an image of Vietnamese Boat People, illustrating this dark horde bringing about "the end of the white world," in its publisher's blurb.⁷² The repression of internal others required the projection of American power abroad evident in Bush and Obama era neoliberal imperialism, and continued uninterrupted by Trump's white supremacist mobilization.

It was in this context of the divided nation under Trump that the Ken Burns–Lynn Novick documentary series on the Vietnam War debuted. Ken Burns has become such an important voice to tell the American story through the genre of documentary film that in the past few years PBS aired fifty-eight hours of his content.⁷³ Although the stated objective of the series is to feature American as well as Vietnamese combatants and civilians from both North and South, the result is still a peculiar drowning out of the voices of those from South Vietnam, including refugees. While the voices of Americans continue to dominate the narrative, there is an investment in seeking the humanity of their former enemies. However commendable and moving such striving for peace might be, I cannot help sensing

a narcissistic return to the site of the loss of humanity for Americans and America in acts of violence carried out in war. Bestowing humanity on America's former enemies does more to recuperate American humanity across a seemingly unbridgeable gulf than a similar gesture towards their own allies whom American leaders had viewed with disdain for failing to do America's bidding and losing America its war. Martin Loicano points out that few scholars studied South Vietnam even long after the war. The ones who did, like Robert Brigham, would make the typical postwar American assessment that "the government in Saigon was never a viable enterprise" with its "corruption, cronyism, incompetence, and a paralyzing fear of nationalism."⁷⁴

This language about the incapacity of allies to become fully human in modern forms of sovereignty reappeared as soon as another imperial adventure had to come to an end in a place far from Vietnam. Defending his decision to completely withdraw American troops as the world watched Afghans scrambling to hold onto U.S. Air Force cargo planes as they took off from Hamid Karzai International Airport the day after the Taliban entered Kabul, Biden doubled down on the familiar racist gaslighting of failed allies, telling the American people and the world that the humanitarian disaster unfolding in Afghanistan was the Afghans' fault when Americans had given them "every tool they could need," "every chance to determine their own future," but what "we could not provide them was the will to fight for that future."⁷⁵ In this formula, America recovers its position after defeat through its ability to assign degrees of humanity to others according to the matrix of humanist subjectification. Seen in this context, the Burns-Novick series becomes a mop-up operation decades after America's Vietnam War ended to make room for another about to end, and to reassure Americans of their own humanity free of obligations to those who are always already incapable of becoming fully human. Beyond the fact that there are more North Vietnamese voices than non-communist South Vietnamese ones, the North Vietnamese interviewed in the documentary series include writers who can eloquently articulate the common human condition in which they and their American enemies were caught during the war. Such humanizing voices on the whole are not afforded South Vietnamese or refugees. Adjectives that conjure corruption and incompetence are exhaustingly repeated whenever the situation in South Vietnam needs narrating. South Vietnamese leaders come across as belonging to a nation of bickering children whose infantilility and failure of will lost the war for America. Vietnamese American author Lan Cao laments how noncommunist South Vietnamese and refugees become tiresome minor characters in the great American drama of the Burns-Novick series, not a big step up from their roles as extras that smear their faces and speak gibberish nonhuman language in Hollywood films.⁷⁶

Thanh Tan, a Vietnamese American podcast host and daughter, recounts her experience watching the series with her parents, when she realized that "we had to tamp down our expectations as minorities, and understand the film's limitations,"

because, “it’s aimed at American public television viewers who are, well, mostly not Vietnamese.” Her father concluded at the end of their watching experience, misty-eyed, that “America didn’t understand Vietnam. Still doesn’t.”⁷⁷ The conclusions reached by Thanh Tan and her father reveal a divergence of both history and knowledge. What the Ken Burns-Lynn Novick series recuperates is this “not Vietnamese” character of the American nation. As such, Thanh Tan’s parents ended up with a sense of the exclusion of their refugee knowledge of that history.

Like most second-generation Vietnamese Americans, my son did not grow up hearing about our family history from my parents or myself because history for us had become the site of trauma and repression. He came away from the series with anger at the messy, bloody foreign adventure in which American soldiers could shoot in the stomach those small children at Mỹ Lai who resembled his own. Born in America, he understood too well the racial regime ever present in the visual recognition of self and other with devastating consequences. In the morass that was both the American-conducted war itself and the documentary series that search through endless footages for that goodness at the heart of America, my son could sense an occluded alternative history but was as ever in the dark about how people like his refugee family might have experienced that war. My daughter asked to watch the series with me so that she could hear some alternative fragments of history that I either lived through or heard from my family and community. We gave up after seven episodes out of exhaustion, because the same story repeats itself over and over about the good intention of Americans caught up in an unfortunate misadventure with a bunch of nonwhite allies who behaved badly. To me, the series offers no insight into the extreme predicaments of South Vietnam as a postcolonial nation emerging from direct colonization into American imperialism, and whose choices included waging bloody war of liberation or bearing the brunt of such war in an uneasy alliance with the United States in its Cold War. To my daughter, who grew up with the everyday racism that continues to run the gamut from crude to institutional, the series offers little insight into how the Vietnamese as a colonized people impossibly carried the wounding complex of racial backwardness into a combination of belligerence, obedience, and white mimicry. The series, like the span of the American political spectrum, seems more interested in recuperating the American national sense of itself through the ability to pass judgement and bestow humanity on others—a white privilege. The knowledge, perspectives, and feelings of others become casualties in Burns’s epistemological confidence. When asked if nonwhite filmmakers might do a better job telling stories closer to them, Burns responds, “I do not accept that only people of a particular background can tell certain stories about our past, particularly in the United States of America.”⁷⁸ If it has not come from the impulse that brought us Trumpian white nationalism, Burns and Novick’s latest American treatment of the war, while trying to unite Americans across the divide of the Vietnam War, does little to subvert American nationalism, which is at present overtly invested in whiteness.

Across time and the American political spectrum, internationalists, imperialists, and nationalists use the Vietnam War as a marker of recuperation through erasure or assimilation of refugees. Melancholic nationalism now flows into the undercurrent that connects white America to the modern history of American wars, of which Vietnam was the “unspeakable” trauma.⁷⁹ These projects attempt to hold at bay the epistemological disturbance that refugee memory might cause.

REFUGEE ANAMNESIS: THE POLITICS AND ETHICS OF MOURNING

To say the Vietnamese refugee community harbors intense anticommunist politics is old news. In a notable example, a new generation of Vietnamese American and other local officials up for election in 2004 introduced “Communist-Free Zone” resolutions in Garden Grove and Westminster, the two cities encompassing the largest parts of Little Saigon in Orange County, California. The texts of the resolutions express nonwelcome to visiting officials of the Vietnamese government and require the U.S. State Department to notify local authorities in advance of such visits. While major Vietnamese-language newspapers in the community hailed the passing of these resolutions as evidence of newfound Vietnamese American electoral power and validation for the refugee version of history, in an op-ed piece that the *Los Angeles Times* titled “‘No-Communist Zone’ Has No Place in America,” Thuy Reed called for “a civics lesson” that would teach the “hard-core” elements in “Orange County’s Little Saigon” about “tactics that might be considered a violation of civil liberties in the American mainstream.”⁸⁰ Such admonishment may come from the intention to assimilate refugees, many of whom are now citizens, into the political community of the American nation. After all, preoccupation with homeland politics can justify calls for expulsion, as demonstrated in the comment of then Westminster councilman Frank Fry in 1989: “If you want to be South Vietnamese, go back to South Vietnam.”⁸¹ Asians are forever vulnerable as targets of this immigrant nation’s paradoxical compulsion to expel the foreign from its body politic. We see that in myriad forms, from everyday aggression to deportation and all the way to the surge of anti-Asian violence since the pandemic. Andrew Do, a Vietnamese American who served as chair of the Orange County Board of Supervisors during the Delta surge in 2021, was screamed down by white antivax, antimask residents who told him: “You come to my country, and you act like one of these communist parasites. I ask you to go the f—k back to Vietnam!”⁸² Racialized allies in military adventures abroad become racialized refugees whose citizenship disappears along with their humanity in every crisis.

This mainstream relegation to the backward past of the most vocal and visible brand of community politics was further evident when a major local newspaper published an op-ed piece written by Viet Thanh Nguyen and cosigned by a group of Vietnamese American academics concerned about the exclusionist politics in

our community in response to the passing of the above-mentioned “Communist-Free Zone” city resolutions.⁸³ Without consent by those of us who signed the piece, the *Orange County Register* chose to title our op-ed “A Destructive Obsession.” The emphasis on “destructive obsession” calls to mind exiles pathologically mourning the loss of their homeland, caught in endless returns. Such language conjures the South Vietnamese refugee as being unable to act and to move forward in history, a criterion for becoming a sovereign human. Does refugee politics run the risk of melancholic returns in response to nationalist, imperialist, progressive, or white melancholia? Sure. That is if we pose the question in universalist and ahistorical psychoanalytic terms that often go to serve those who control the normative in a particular historical context.

Instead, Lam urges us to consider “writing out of the traumatic mode” that “requires cultural renegotiations of recovery from a repression of latent historical and political memory” in the “multiplicity of historical memories or historical wounds,” or we risk continuing “to only float atop the entombed and memorialized horrors of Vietnam.”⁸⁴ Rather than seeing reiterations of Vietnamese refugee history in war commemorations, in anticommunist demonstrations and local politics as symptoms of melancholic returns because of failed mourning for catastrophic loss, these can be read as political acts of anamnesis against historical and ongoing erasure of a distinct Vietnamese American presence by forced forgetting. Refugees are forced to remember because forced forgetting deprives us of our agency in relation to our history as formulated in humanism. The question that remains is *not* how to assimilate the refugee or cure the pathological. Rather, the question that confronts all of us is an ethico-political one: What would remembering enable us to do for each other, those of us most vulnerable to erasure?

At the height of the Boat People exodus when Vietnamese refugee communities suffered and mourned the loss of loved ones on a massive scale, they mobilized to demand that governments live up to the responsibilities as signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention. Both utilizing and bending narratives of universalist humanism, refugees moved with the recognition of such loss as our own. As early as 1977, refugee women whose family members were imprisoned in the reeducation camps created the Families for Vietnamese Political Prisoners Association (FVPPA), mobilized the community, lobbied elected officials and human rights organizations, and humanized and politicized the conditions of prisoners and their families. Led by Khúc Minh Thờ, whose husband was a reeducation camp prisoner, these women succeeded in winning U.S. commitment to work with the Vietnamese government towards the Special Released Reeducation Center Detainees Resettlement Program in 1989, commonly known as the Humanitarian Operations (HO) Program, allowing former inmates and their families to immigrate to America. The Indochina Refugee Action Center, later the Indochina Resource Action Center (IRAC), was established in 1979; its “early advocacy efforts resulted in the passage of the Refugee Act of 1980.”⁸⁵ Refugee activist Lê Xuân Khoa became director in 1982 and worked

with other refugee organizations to turn IRAC into “watchdog and advocate” for refugee settlement, lobbying for a fourteen-country international convention on the Southeast Asian refugee crisis in 1988 that led to a Geneva convention offering international solutions, increasing resettlement opportunities for refugees in participating countries.⁸⁶ The Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC) took over the work of IRAC in 1991, and began to shift “its focus toward the long-term integration needs and civic engagement of Southeast Asian Americans” when refugee flow from Southeast Asia tapered.⁸⁷ Refugee activism was also spearheaded by youths in the student-initiated Project Ngoc. Created in 1987, these refugee student activists mobilized resources in the refugee communities, volunteered in refugee camps in Asia, lobbied governments in the region not to push out refugees who made it to their shores, and lobbied Western governments to accept asylum seekers. While lamenting the deaths of possibly three hundred thousand refugees at sea by 1989 in its newsletter, Project Ngoc’s chairman at the time called for defining “burden sharing” in practical terms, particularly for the United States to “maintain consistent asylum policies” and refugee assistance rather than “expecting poorer countries” to keep receiving massive numbers of refugee arrivals without clear paths to asylum in third countries.⁸⁸ Decades later, one of the early Project Ngoc cochairs, Mai Phuong Nguyen, recalled her refugee work and remarked on how this work transformed her as she imagined work done in the civil rights movement transformed activists of that era.⁸⁹ Mourning proved to be a dynamic process that spurred transformation. And refugees never ceased to mourn their dead. In March and April of 2017, a group of refugees congregated at the sites of the former Songkhla refugee camp on the Thai island of Koh Kra and the former camp on the Malaysian island of Bidong. They delivered a “late lament” in the voice of those who have survived war, calling on “lost souls and the wrongful dead.”⁹⁰ Neither did refugees cease to build community through such mourning. Quan Tue Tran argues that through refugee mobilization, first to mourn those lost at sea in building the two Boat People memorials on Bidong and Galang in 2005, then to resist the Vietnamese governments’ demands that the Malaysian and Indonesian governments demolish these memorials, refugees “sustained both Vietnamese refugee identity and the contemporary Vietnamese diaspora as a complex transnational ‘imagined community’ at the turn of the twenty-first century.”⁹¹

Refugee activism of the era generated both support to help settle refugees and knowledge about refugees for refugees, preparing the ground for memory work in the second generation. Building on Marianne Hirsch’s postmemory, Long Bui examines cultural productions from the second generation that show that refugee memory, imperfectly transmitted to the second generation, can become “fecund spaces” that would allow the younger cultural producers to construct their own refugee story in a “refugee repertoire.”⁹² Refugee memory provides the affective epistemological shift toward knowledge generated from not just “facts of history” but also “lived experience.”⁹³

In repeated instances where refugees have been mourned by others, our traumas have become fodder for what R. Clifton Spargo calls the “ethical uselessness of grief.”⁹⁴ Spargo reads Randall Jarrell’s 1940 and 1949 versions of an elegiac poem “The Refugees” to explore the diminishing “ethical significance of the lost other.”⁹⁵ Spargo thinks Jarrell invokes mourning as a sign of political futility if mourning is about our acceptance of the fate of others as an accomplished fact. Grief, in this formulation, has no ethical use since it constructs the moment to have passed. There is no longer any choice to be made, no action to take except the extrication of one’s self from the lost other. In such an economy of mourning, Vietnamese Americans as refugees occupy the position of self-mourners so that we would not be abandoned to our accomplished fates. The accounts of Boat People starved, drowned, raped at sea have been our own. Refugees mourn to know our history in ways beside and beyond humanist formulations. Refugees reenact memory in plays at commemoration ceremonies, in exhibits of photo-timelines, and in stories. Yes, we run the risk of living in moments of accomplished fate, as the walking dead. But for those of us who were, are refugees, we mourn to let the dead live on in us, speak in us, because they would otherwise be wholly silent.

Yet, treating the dead as though they are assimilable to ourselves does pose ethical questions for the living. This is an extension of the utilitarian economy of mourning. We mourn the dead in order to accuse the living. Vietnamese American practices of remembrance very often attack anyone who deviates from masculinist and heteronormative efforts to singularize memory and history against communism.⁹⁶ Few of us who had ever been active in the community could avoid the charge of being either a communist or a communist sympathizer at some point. As such, I was also the target of protests, defamation, and blacklisting more than once. Some assassinations in the early decades of community building were attributed to “The Front,” an organization that vouched retaking Vietnam by force and by intimidation of its perceived enemies in the community.⁹⁷ Political allegiances and affiliations in South Vietnam were historically complex, connected to affective kinship, struggles for social justice in nationalist and communist projects in relation to French colonial and American imperial contexts. Anticommunist rhetoric in the community, however, was reductive, retroactively attributed as the singular ideology of the Republic of Vietnam, and wielded as a weapon by groups and persons in the community for gains. Beyond these vicious but predictable deployments of anticommunism in the community, the dead are mourned so that we can denounce the current government of Vietnam. Granted, all governments must be held accountable because we must insist that “human misery must never be the silent residue of politics.”⁹⁸ Nevertheless, this agenda has necessitated the mourning of some of the dead while suppressing others in the war and its aftermath. At the commemoration ceremonies mentioned, the monument itself consisted of larger-than-life statues of an American and a Vietnamese soldier. There was no mention of those who died fighting in the National Liberation Front or the

People's Army of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Even if such exclusionist memorialization was often justified as responding to the repressive commemoration practices in Vietnam itself, civilians, women and children on either side, did not make it onto the altar. Neither did Indigenous and other minoritized peoples caught in the crossfire through all of the modern wars in Indochina, who were alternately mobilized and suppressed or evicted by opposing sides in colonialism and war of independence, imperialism and war of liberation, revolution, and socialist as well as capitalist dispossession. Instead, we lit our incense to an altar upholding portraits of ARVN officers who had committed suicide at the end of the war, at every commemoration since, as if their valorized acts were to be emulated in our own deaths at our own hands.

What might be required is a kind of hospitality, like Said's interpreter's patience for the foreign guest.⁹⁹ As mourners, we must be hospitable to the various dead of that war and its aftermath if we are to form our memory without cannibalizing various histories into the single story that becomes us. There were many sides in that Cold War's hot war that doubled as a civil war. There were many fates, many triumphs and tragedies. Refugee memory, though anamnestic to state formations, has its own matrix of repression and forgetting. I remember South Vietnam as a place where political dissent was very much alive against first Ngô Đình Diệm, then Nguyễn Văn Thiệu and the Americans, and also many independent views for or against the North's war-making in the South. Vietnamese suffered or prospered at the hands of the United States and the governments of the two Vietnams in myriad ways. Yet, when Vietnamese refugees reprise our history here in the United States, only those of the most reductive anticommunist views can emerge. Writing of commemoration practices in the Mariana Islands in the context of life after Japanese and American imperialism, Keith Camacho reminds us that "commemorations of the war also remember to forget certain events, issues, and experiences, as they, too, are fraught with the politics of exclusion and erasure."¹⁰⁰ Erased, occluded, overcome in triumphant statism, racist melancholic leftism, nationalism and imperialism, Vietnamese refugees seem to also engage in a form of recuperation of self and community through the erasure of our own others.

In mourning our dead, we might have to live with the idea that they are not entirely knowable to us. The dead's opacity will maintain the indeterminacy of various histories. Viet Thanh Nguyen has productively called for a rethinking of the "political," arguing for ambiguity coming out of collaborative antagonisms giving rise to an image of the war as "cryptic, haunting, ambiguous."¹⁰¹ A single version of history means a single version of ourselves condemned to retrace dead-ended paths of accomplished moments that would truly have passed, allowing others to cannibalize our history for their own ends, as though we have all died. While self-mourning has led to transformative refugee activism, it might also have led us to become our own dead and allowed those humanist subjects of history and

knowledge to extricate themselves from us, reassuring themselves: Let the dead bury their dead.

Vietnamese refugees may have things to tell those Americans who are so eager to consume refugee history in amnesiac retellings in its recent, present, and anticipated wars, in returns that feel melancholic in their reiterations of historical loss. And we have things to tell ourselves. Appropriation of the histories of others is an act of cannibalism, a radical lack of a dialogic recognition of those we killed, mistaking them for those we are about to kill. Granada is not Vietnam. Kuwait is not Vietnam. Somalia is not Vietnam. Afghanistan is not Vietnam. Iraq is not Vietnam. Yemen is not Vietnam. Syria is not Vietnam. Ukraine is not Vietnam. And now, Gaza, with its fresh horrors, is not Vietnam. All the places laid waste by humanist sovereign violence cannot be reduced to one another, but exist in relation to one another. Rethinking refugee memory as witnessing is a necessary act of preparation to think about not just the plight of other refugees but also the possibilities that they carry. The living must live, also in their alterity, beyond our use for them as though they are already dead. We who are guilty of consuming the dead shall be condemned to endlessly repeat ourselves in our failed ethics to recognize and be hospitable to one another. By way of his garden of forking paths, Ts'ui Pên, ventriloquized by Jorge L. Borges, speaks to us from the past, the accomplished fate of the dead.¹⁰² But what forking paths the dead like him leave to us will be first an indeterminacy we must accommodate as though the accomplished moment has yet to close. Then, we have an ethical choice we must make for our existence to remain various in timelines that unfold into pasts and futures.

What of all these places that have come to occupy the designation of Not Vietnam? This is where self-mourning becomes self-witnessing. Of refugees, Long Bui writes, "They bear witness to themselves,"¹⁰³ as counterpoint to Celan's lament that "No one / bears witness for the / witness."¹⁰⁴ We must self-bear our own history because, as refugees assigned to first legal and later discursive statelessness in racist interdictions to national belonging, our access to the human in modernist formulations of sovereignty is limited. We must become not masters but self-bearers of our history. If this is the basis for American racist gaslighting that we have abdicated the will to be human, it is because we have to circumvent the humanist mastery that brought suffering and death. Such circumvention, however, is far from not fighting for the future. We are always living and dying in each unfolding moment, whether it is called our human future or not. At the same time, we are aware that self-mourning harbors the dangers of constraining our political imaginings in an assimilation of others into ourselves. What mode of witnessing could refugees offer, particularly in a moment when Kabul suddenly looked like Saigon? When horrific scenes unfolded of Afghans clinging to the sides of U.S. Air Force cargo planes as they took off, many Vietnamese refugees lost our minds helplessly watching the horror unfold like some nightmarish return. I could not sleep and it was hard to breathe. Seeing Afghans fall to their deaths from those

soaring planes recalled the many ways of dying for South Vietnamese refugees fleeing the advancing North Vietnamese People's Army through the central region in March of 1975. So many refugees drowned as they tried to swim to ships that went over them. Many were crushed at the water's edge by amphibian vehicles trying to pick up withdrawing South Vietnamese troops. And some sat down in circles on the sand and pulled grenades between them because they could run no longer.¹⁰⁵ Amidst the screams in our minds, it was nevertheless incumbent upon us to remember that Kabul was far from Saigon. Yet, we also knew that what connected Kabul to Saigon was a racist mode of American military engagement, in which American leaders dehumanized their allies to justify first the imposition of American global interests and then the abandonment of American moral obligations. In self-witnessing, Vietnamese refugees returned to our own history as the grounds of annihilation by imperial and revolutionary violence. And as we did so, we returned to, and became, Celan's *no one*. From our place of annihilation, our undoing, we came up beside Afghans who were becoming refugees in catastrophic circumstance. Our witnessing would take the form of what Phi Hong Su calls radical empathy, at the threshold of life and death, truth and error, states of being and knowledge held in suspension.¹⁰⁶ The tension in this radical empathy kept the knowledge that Afghans were not Vietnamese side by side with the tightness that gripped our chests or the sights and sounds that would not leave our senses. The two kinds of knowledge are in proximity, but they are not assimilable, or even reconcilable. Such mode of being and witnessing in intimacy and suspension demand that we do not reconcile with what transpired even as we return to the grounds of history to prevent its closure.

I propose we approach Vietnamese refugee memory in the mode of tragedy, not to lay claim to the permanently aggrieved, and not to justify the one-ness of anticommunist narrativization. A tragic mode of being refuses reconciliation with history as what-had-transpired and brings forth the irreducible many-ness and its irreconcilability. This could guide an approach to refugee memory that must hold truths in suspension, and not the reduction of the past into a single version of history in anticommunist rhetoric, even when it is done to counteract the ways that the Vietnamese state, the American one, or powerful groups therein repress refugee knowledge in their organization of memory to move forth with their nationalist, imperialist, and racist agendas.

THE IRRECONCILABILITY OF TRAGEDY

Justifying the need to bury her brother against orders of the king, Antigone says in that ancient tragedy: "It is the dead / Not the living, who make the longest demands: We die for ever."¹⁰⁷ Antigone's two brothers, Eteocles and Polyneices, died fighting on opposite sides in the Theban civil war. Creon, the new king of Thebes, decides Polyneices, as enemy of state, may not be allowed the honor of a

burial. Grief-stricken and counting herself as already belonging to the ranks of the dead, whose deaths must be consumed by the state either as martyrs or traitors, Antigone points out the time of the dead as divergent from that of the living, and ultimately, divergent from that of the state as an embodiment of universal law. As a way to go beyond the recuperation of the progressive ideal, of nation and empire, and of community discussed in the previous sections, I reread Antigone here to think about the tragic mode of knowing and its insistence on the irreconcilability of ethical demands of the private to the public, of the dead to the living, of the less-than-human to the human, and hence of lived time to progressive history.

Exemplifying his approach to history, Hegel reads Sophocles' *Antigone* as the collision between two ethical demands: Creon's "provision for the welfare of the entire city," and Antigone's "family piety."¹⁰⁸ While acknowledging the "pathos" of a woman as "an essential content of rationality and freedom of will,"¹⁰⁹ Hegel still sees Antigone's claim as the appeal to the "inner gods of feeling, love, and kinship, not the daylight gods of free self-conscious national and political life."¹¹⁰ The daylight force, of course, finds its expression in Creon. Hegel's gendered reading of the opposition between Creon and Antigone allows us to understand the central place of reconciliation in Hegel's dialectical approach: "The word of reconciliation is the objectively existent spirit, which immediately apprehends the pure knowledge of itself qua universal essence in its opposite, in the pure knowledge of itself qua absolutely self-confined single individual—a reciprocal recognition which is Absolute Spirit."¹¹¹ Oppositional forces are moments of the ethical substance, which must dialectically reach a reconciliation in a return to itself at a higher level of universality in the Spirit. Simply put, Hegel reads Antigone's ethical demand as the half-blind force of antithesis needed to challenge Creon's reason of state as thesis, becoming the condition by which the latter reaches unity in a more universal version of itself. Difference in oppositional forces is merely instrumental to the ethical order's own division and reunification with itself. It is only through the division of the ethical substance into two powers individualized in Antigone's conscience and Creon's law that it can return to itself in a more comprehensive form ready for the next round of progression. Through such reconciliation, Hegel's progressive temporality spirals forth within the intellectual context of Enlightenment thought.

Because Antigone is often read as Hegel does, as embodying feelings, love, and kinship against national and political life, feminists have returned to her as a "principle of feminine defiance of statism and an example of anti-authoritarianism."¹¹² Rejecting what she calls the mortalist humanism that has retreated into mortality as the only universal condition left standing after decades of critique against Western universalism, Bonnie Honig argues for an agonistic humanism for which Antigone speaks in an oppositional politics of struggle necessary for democracy.¹¹³ Calling attention to how Antigone is a fictional character whose representative power is problematic, Judith Butler centers her critique of Hegelian readings of kinship at the limit of polis at a time when feminist politics was enmeshed in state

policies at the turn of this century. She argues that kinship provides that mediating link between the public and private spheres, as the enslaved, women, and children are excluded from the domain of the human and human language in the public sphere. Butler sees Antigone as not of the human, yet speaking human language in the political sphere, occasioning a “new field of the human, achieved through political catachresis,” a mis-speaking into which she is propelled in her half-dead state, displaced from gender, tainted by incestual kinship, condemned to death by both her father’s Oedipal curse and the laws of the state even before her eventual entombment at the end of the play.¹¹⁴

Because Hegel pushes for a reconciled unity in the ever greater universal laws of the state in relation to its people, he misses the agonistic politics as well as assumptions about the human embedded in the characterization of not just the oppositional ethical individualities of Antigone and Creon, but also the supposedly undifferentiated people in the chorus. The chorus for Hegel is “generality” finding its expression in “powerlessness” as “the common people itself compose merely the positive and passive material for the individuality of the government confronting it.”¹¹⁵ The common people here can only find power in their government as the individuation of ethical substance in its dialectical spirals. Countering this ahistorical reading of the chorus, Page DuBois suggests that choruses in these tragedies do not “stand for the citizens themselves, since they often represent foreign, inassimilable persons, slaves, barbarians, or ecstatic maenads.”¹¹⁶ The sounds of lament come from these persons inassimilable to the human as universal citizen.¹¹⁷ Their laments are untranslatable to political speech in the public realm of the human. Perhaps in such sonic dissonance, we would hear in tragedy conflict that does not seek reconciliation as assimilation in the next spiral towards the telos.

Such irreducible alterity can be seen in the dead with whom Antigone aligns herself: “Live your life,” she tells her sister Ismene, “I gave myself to death, long ago.”¹¹⁸ Antigone’s challenge is not so easily transcended by a more progressive, more universal polis of Thebes. Antigone’s *for ever* is not until the polis reaches a new and improved consciousness after having incorporated its challengers to itself. This *for ever* is not the story about the long view of human history as the march of civilization. This *for ever* belongs to the time of curses and hauntings, of the howling grief. Creon’s order to entomb Antigone speaks of his failure to reconcile her demand into a higher level of universality of the state. And refusing to be entombed, Antigone kills herself, thus actualizing herself among the dead. If the order of state is to rise on the very site of the submerged chaos of darkness in incest, treason, and anguish, then Antigone refuses to be submerged as the thing that gives force and power to the order of state above in the light of day. She would rather haunt them as the dead than be permanently entombed in the substrate of a statist dialectic of remembering and forgetting. She *for ever* haunts and disrupts the order of state, of the living as organized by the state. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, written by Sophocles after *Antigone* but set antecedent to it, when Creon, then

ruler of Thebes, asks him to return from exile to die and be buried in the soil of his country, blessing it, Oedipus vengefully swears: "My ghost to haunt thy country without end."¹¹⁹

In the end, Thebes remains unable to consummate its universal order. Without burial by the state to bind that life to the polity, or without successful state interdiction against burial to separate that life from the polity, the time of the dead remains out of joint with that organized for the living by the state, subsuming the dead at the boundaries it sets up between life and death. Samuel Durant reads tragedy as laying "bare not only time's dislocation, its out-of-jointness, but also the impossibility of setting it right, the impossibility of justice."¹²⁰ Antigone's demand does not rely on the framework of representational politics within the juridical order of the state, whose existence depends of the foundational violence of exception. Antigone's demand causes an impossibility within the Hegelian paradigm of the advancing universal basis of representational politics through dialectical movement. I want to consider Antigone's unending state of grief that signals the irreconcilability in the tragic mode. This part of her action remains unintelligible in the Enlightenment progressive paradigm. The heroine in tragedy here stages not a resolution to her conflict with her state, not a reconciliation over the past to redeem the present and future nation, but a refusal to participate in the state's project of universalization. She would rather haunt them from the ranks of the dead, for ever. Hers is a time out of joint. She dies not for country or historical progress but to prevent the closure of the story and of time in a suprahistorical perspective. Foucault warns of "a history whose function is to compose the finally reduced diversity of time into a totality fully closed upon itself; a history that always encourages the subjective recognitions and attributes a form of reconciliation to all the displacements of the past; a history whose perspective on all that precedes it implies the end of time, a completed development."¹²¹ If we must pass through a finality, let it not be also a closure.

Ferber reads Benjamin's distinction between the tragic and the sorrowful in the finality of death in the former, while death in the latter is "infinite, never at rest."¹²² I would bend the tragic towards that sorrowful failure to rest because its refusal to reconcile with the universal keeps the dispute open, and the game in play. The tragic mode of expression is about the irreconcilability of the various forms of life beyond the polis to its citizens, of the dead to the living, of the time of the dead to the time of the living, of the various pasts and futures to present agendas of governments, groups, even those in the refugee community. Instead, the tragic mode insists on the utterly particularistic against its cannibalization in the name of the universal. The tragic represents a rift in time, the temporal irreconcilability between the time in refugee memory and universal historical time of the human that advances Marxist historiography, liberal representational politics, as well as national and imperial time that must organize the past in order to move the polity towards the telos. I experienced this sense of irreconcilability,

the time rift, when I was taking care of my mother after we relocated her back to her hometown of Vũng Tàu following the worsening of what her doctors diagnosed as Alzheimer's disease.

HISTORY'S WOUND: APHASIA AND THE UNTIMELY

In 2010, for the thirty-fifth anniversary of the end of the war, I was in the city that was Saigon before, in the part of town that is still called Sài Gòn now by its current inhabitants. The government staged an impressive military parade in front of the Unification Palace. A red banner commemorating the North's victory hangs in front of the newly opened Vincom Center built on the former homes of evicted residents by Vietnam's biggest economic conglomerate. The banner exhorts an "Enthusiastic Welcome to the 35th Anniversary of the Day of Liberation of the South for Unification of the Nation, and International Labor Day" against a three-story-high backdrop of mannequins and models in lingerie and Jimmy Choo stilettos (figure 8). The language spoken there that noonday was one of past military glory hitching a ride with capitalism—a language that threatened violence as it promised a shopper's paradise.

But to my mother, who had died in Vietnam one year before, this language would have been alien. It did not become alien because she had spent more than thirty years in Orange County as a refugee. It was alien because the language she spoke at the end of her life was one much less unified, much less persuasive in its demonstration of force or riches. Rather, hers was full of holes and shadows, aphasic, fragmentary, Alzheimeric. Her recall of Vietnamese was diminishing. English had all but vanished.

Maybe because language shapes our perception of time,¹²³ my mother's sense of time mirrored her ruined language. One day in Vietnam shortly before she died, she anxiously muttered something about the fighting worsening—*đánh lớn dữ*. I tried to tell her that yes, the fighting did get worse, the South lost, and we fled to live in America, more than thirty years ago. She looked at me and then at the rustling tree by the wall across the street from where she was staying, in her hometown. It was her hometown where her father settled after his beginning as a street orphan, adopted and trained by a French contractor. It was the town he helped build on land conquered by the Vietnamese empire through genocidal means in the eighteenth century, while benefiting from colonial development as a young infrastructural contractor in the 1920s and '30s. Yet it was also here that he joined the Viet Minh Resistance, to be arrested at the start of France's reclamation of its colonies because it could as one of the victors of World War II. He was tortured for twenty-four hours by the French military intelligence *Deuxième Bureau* and thrown out to die in the courtyard. The Vietnamese cleaning staff there told us decades later that they did not dare to help him when they heard him beg for water in the night. My mother identified his remains by his teeth from a mass grave in



FIGURE 8. Government banner commemorating 35th anniversary of Liberation Day on Vincom Mall, Saigon. Photo by author, April 28, 2010.

the sand dunes on the outskirts of that town some twenty years after his death, when those who knew finally spoke up.

This town was where she grew up with her siblings. But it was her brother she adored. Admiring the science and technology that came with the French civilizing story, my uncle acquired French citizenship in the 1930s and spent more than a decade in Europe, training and working as a civil engineer. Like so many of his generation from corners of colonial empires, his encounter with racism deep in the heart of the métropole turned him into an anticolonial. He returned home to Cochinchina and initiated himself into the anticolonial armed struggle by way of making the calculations to dynamite a bridge in Tân Hương, a target the guerillas had failed to take down multiple times before. The physical hardship in the Resistance bases took him down with tuberculosis, and he died in 1948 from a dogged refusal to seek colonial medical treatment. My mother and grandmother arrived at his base in time only to bury him in the field under a makeshift marker. My mother named both her daughters after the bridge he blew up as a memorial to his success in anticolonial sabotage.

My mother could not leave behind this family legacy to go study in France, choosing instead to join the same anticolonial armed Resistance, where she met my father after he was released by Japanese forces towards the end of World War II,

having served a few years of a French-issued twenty-year sentence in hard labor on the penal island of Côn Đảo for his anticolonial activities with the Trotskyists and other anticolonials in the early 1940s. Both my parents were from this same small town, he from a thatched hut built on dirt floor and she from a brick and tile estate. He moved into her house. This was the home where they lived after the end of the anticolonial war, in a supposedly independent Republic of Vietnam soon embroiled in another anti-imperial/proxy/civil war. The family wealth had depleted a few years into that last war. Nevertheless, it was in what remained of that home that my siblings and I spent our primary years as inheritors, if no longer of wealth enabled by the colonial economy, then of a tangled political and moral legacy. My father continued and was at different times exiled for his political activities opposing both the Third Internationalist Vietnamese Communist Party and what he viewed as the authoritarian South Vietnamese governments in the First and Second Republic. But it was from my mother that I learned the lore and sound of anticolonial patriotism. She kept a mandolin, the instrument of choice, together with the harmonica in the Resistance, because they were compact and mobile.

The house where she was staying at the end of her life was not her home but a small rental. One night my mother woke to one of her panic fits, the first of many. She could hardly speak. She sobbed and insisted through broken Vietnamese and gestures that she had to go home. I told her we no longer had a home in Vietnam and gave her sedatives to no effect. Maybe out of sheer frustration, I thought I would let her see for herself how wrong she was. Then she would have no choice but to accept my objective, and no doubt superior, version of the progression of time past. I wheeled her to the locked gates of our old home to show her the dimly lit plaque on the side that read: “The Party’s Organizing Committee / The Province of Bà Rịa-Vũng Tàu.” Before the place became the property of that committee, the socialist Police for the Protection of Politics used it to detain and torture their targets for information. Our neighbors told us that in the years after the war, they would hear screams in the night.

“Má ơi . . . chờ . . . ở trông,” my mother stammered between sobs, outside those gates. I tried to tell her that her mother was not waiting inside because she was dead, that our home was no longer ours, because time passed and history transpired. Surely, she pleaded haltingly, “they” would let us in, to sleep, in the only home she remembered. She used the word *người ta* for “they, the humans,” as in “trăm năm trong cõi người ta” from the *Tale of Kiều*, which laments the course of events in “the realm of humans.”¹²⁴

Aphasia is defined in diagnostic guides as an impairment in language capabilities. Reading Freud’s essay on aphasia, Ilit Ferber argues against such definition of this condition as an individual’s disability. Ferber contends that “language’s faltering, stumbling, and in many cases basically falling apart, demonstrate that it is not that we have a wound in the brain that affects the linguistic apparatus—but that there is a wound in language itself. The pain of the wound is hence manifested

not in an individual suffering the injury,” but in “the body” of “language,” “which comes to be operating only around this injury.”¹²⁵ Freud posits that when the baby cries out, the cry is given communicative meaning only when it is met with human response. As such, there is a “primary rift,” between expression and communication, a “malfunctioning of language,” to which the aphasic patient returns.¹²⁶ The patient’s suffering is in this re-experiencing of the moment of wounding at the origin of language.

Unresponsive to my mother’s weeping and stammering speech, I stood there, one with history as it transpired. I was one with “they, the humans,” who my mother thought held the power to let her come home to her mother. I had wanted to accept history as accomplished, so that I could move on from that wounding moment of not just loss but also the enforced muteness of losers in history. Even in the haze of dementia, my mother could be funny in her recollections of her past. Though Buddhist, she dorded in a Catholic convent when she attended the Collège des Jeunes Filles Indigène or the French school for “native girls,” where she and her accomplices would retaliate against the nuns’ Catholic-centric rules by pulling pranks like setting off firecrackers under their beds. She could recount those stories and a stranger would not have known anything was amiss in her language ability. And the romanticist poems memorized in her youth gave her so much joy in her recitation without linguistic trouble. Such coherence disappeared when it came to the loss of the country for which she had fought and had lost so many loved ones. Her inarticulateness was one with her sorrow. I could not understand that, wounded myself under the interdiction of signification in the lineage of the vanquished. Did I tell myself that my mother’s memory in its pathology refused to register what came with revolution and liberation—all those wonderful hopeful things that I believed in? Did I think about how her love for her mother resurrected the matrilineal line from her dead-but-very-present mother to her and to the daughter standing beside her in the dark, momentarily challenging national unification and universal progress in the patriarchal historical narrativization of war victory? Did I see in her weeping the pathos of love from the realm of kinship against the cold plaques invoking state power like in some Hegelian feminist reading of Antigone’s refusal?

In truth, my mother had disabled my ability to reason in that moment. All I felt at first was frustration at her unreason. And then all I wanted was to smash the lock and push open those gates that I had climbed as a child, so my mother could go home to her mother.

What I inherit from my mother’s condition is the ability to inhabit this untimely return to the wound of history—its violence and its narrativization. Meditating on Césaire’s poetic knowledge in which all the pasts and futures are summoned, Gary Wilder proposes we think “untimeliness” in a present that is not or no longer identical with itself, requiring “processes of temporal confusion or illumination when conventional distinctions between past, present, and future no longer obtain,

when tenses blur and times (seem to) interpenetrate,” leading “social actors either to misrecognize or to deliberately conflate one historical period for another, to act ‘as if’ they inhabited an epoch that had already passed or had not yet arrived.”¹²⁷ Further gone than Wilder’s social actors, my mother inhabited a wound in time. In it, the humanist subject of history loses its relevance. Time’s promise loses its hold. My mother’s condition deranged this temporal mode of subjectification that requires the organization of memory for an expressed good. She required no coherence in language that must narrate self into biography and time into history. She was no Antigone, in that she was not a heroic individuality railing against the universalizing state. If, as Butler says, Antigone speaks a nonhuman language because she is excluded from the polis, my mother spoke a ruined language that could not deliver her into the historical time of the human. If Antigone claims herself among the dead, and Yvan Alagbé’s character in another tale utters, “I live with the dead. With the Moors, the Blacks, the mad,”¹²⁸ my mother made no deliberate ethical claim. She just knew the dead to be there, living beside her even if she could not return to their hold. If Antigone shows us the irreconcilable in the tragic mode of knowing, my mother’s ruined time makes any reconciliation irrelevant. She already mingled with traces of the dead, the father’s teeth in the sand dunes, the brother’s body beneath the marker, the mother’s shadow in the confiscated house. They were the unhuman because they had no future time in which to reach the humanist telos. Because time for her had not progressed, she knew the past to be unaccomplished. In her sorrow, she retained what came before loss, through loss, beyond loss.

We can say my mother forgot. But it was more than and less than forgetting. It was the disintegration of the subject to do the forgetting. She lived in the untimely and deranged the collective memory that was and continues to be organized, enforced by subtle or overt gestures of threat and reward. Gestures that must be performed over and over, rehearsed over and over. I woke one night in Saigon to the People’s Army of Vietnam rehearsing down the boulevard under my window for its parade to celebrate the thirtieth of April, day of National Liberation. But with each of those gestures, in the 3 a.m. shadows cast by marching troops, in the rhythmic sounds of their ceremonious footfalls and the shifting of their AK-47s, lurked other shadows—the dead that refused to leave, that ate holes through the triumphant memory of history. The dead, resurrected by my mother in her fits, could not refuse soldiers and their rifles any more than she could refuse those who locked her gates and sealed her home with a plaque invoking the victors of war. But neither could she refuse those she loved. Her forgetting was a form of errant loving that may allow the dead to be amongst us, and places long gone to shelter us. She opened herself to a time in which the dead sit or walk, laugh or scream. They even wait for us to come home to sleep, against locked gates.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION: ALMOST

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1. THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GRIEF: LAND PROTEST AND SPECULATIVE TIME

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13. These policies resulted in multiple displacements. Southerners from urban areas were displaced, and their relocation to these New Economic Zones displaced Indigenous communities. While talking to members of the Indigenous Châu Ro community in Bà Rịa and Long Thành in August 2019, I heard stories of their displacement first by the war effort by the National Liberation Front and the South Vietnamese government, then by New Economic Zones after the war that resulted in massive deforestation and the destruction of their way of life. State-sponsored settlements served the regime's strategic and developmental purposes and severely threatened the economic, cultural, and social viability of Indigenous communities. These effects range from land dispossession to monopoly of commercial activities by settled migrants from North Vietnam. Many placenames in the region now are combinations of local names and placenames in North Vietnam. There is now a Lâm Hà district, in the province of Lâm Đồng, for example, in a combination to reflect large post-1975 settler communities from the Hanoi area in northern Vietnam. I observed deleterious effects on indigenous villages in my many visits to the region from 2006 to 2018. As a result of the settler colonial policies of both the Republic of Vietnam from 1954 to 1975 and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam after 1975, the dominant ethnic Vietnamese have now become the majority in the Central Highlands. See Phan An, "Người Việt ở Tây Nguyên: Lịch Sử Hình Thành Và Quan Hệ Tộc Người" [Viets in the Central Highlands: History and ethnic relations], *Tạp Chí Phát Triển Kinh Tế-Xã Hội Đà Nẵng* 6, no. 54 (2013): 26–37, <https://dised.danang.gov.vn/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=6gTxPTk8FnE%3D&tabid=62>. For a more comprehensive picture of settler colonial policies in the Central Highlands after 1975, see Grant Evans, "Internal Colonialism in the Central Highlands of Vietnam," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 33, no. 5 (2018): S30–60, www.jstor.org/stable/26531807.

14. Oona Paredes, working with Indigenous communities in the Philippines, directly addresses the positionality of those who may be able to trace some Indigenous ancestry but not to Indigenous status and its political and moral claims. See Oona Paredes, "More Indigenous than Others: The Paradox of Indigeneity among the Hugaanon Lumad," *Sojourn* 37, no. 1 (2022): 27–57, <https://doi.org/10.1355/sj37-1b>.

15. Alexandria Huynh, "Their Only Desire Was to Be Together in the Home They Loved," in Christina Barron, "Youth Laureates Share Their 'Poetry of the Pandemic,'" *Washington Post*, April 28, 2021, www.washingtonpost.com/kidspost/interactive/2021/spoken-word-pandemic-poetry/.

16. For methods that highlight the relationality between historically incommensurate entities and locations, see Shu-mei Shih, "Comparison as Relation," in *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses*, ed. Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 79–98.

17. Josephine Nock-Hee Park, *Apparitions of Asia: Modernist Forms and Asian American Poetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 134.

18. Nguyễn Thị Hiền, "'Seats for Spirits to Sit Upon': Becoming a Spirit Medium in Contemporary Vietnam," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 38, no. 3 (2007): 549.

19. For the connections between Cao Đài practices in Vietnam and in refugee communities, see Janet Hoskins, "Diaspora as Religious Doctrine: An 'Apostle of Vietnamese Nationalism' Comes to California," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 6, no. 1 (2011): 43–86.

20. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 49.
21. Wynter, "Unsettling Coloniality," 257–337.
22. Césaire, "Poetry and Knowledge," li–lii.
23. Quoted in Robin D.G. Kelley, "The Poetics of Anticolonialism," introduction to Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (Monthly Review Press, 2000), 25.
24. Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 7.
25. Césaire, "Poetry and Knowledge," xlvii.
26. Purnima Mankekar, *Unsettling India: Affect, Temporality, Transnationality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 17.
27. Césaire, "Poetry and Knowledge," xlix.
28. Louis Althusser, "Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 164.
29. Hong, *Death*, 71.
30. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume III: The Process of Capitalist Production as a Whole*, ed. Frederick Engels, trans. Ernest Untermann (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr and Company, 1909), 314–30.
31. Marx, 412.
32. These are terms that Marx uses in *Capital, Volume III*, 550.
33. Robin Greenwood and David Scharfstein, "The Growth of Finance," *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 27, no. 2 (2013): 3–28, esp. 4, <https://doi.org/10.2307/23391688>.
34. Achille Mbembe, "Aesthetics of Superfluity," *Public Culture*, 16, no. 3 (2004), 373–405, 374, <https://doi.org/10.1215/0899236>.
35. Mbembe, "Aesthetics of Superfluity," 375.
36. Tadiar, "Life-Times," 26.
37. Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 1.
38. Tadiar, "Life-Times," 27.
39. For a detailed discussion of the ambiguity of land rights, householders' attempts to control and possess land and home, and Vietnam's economic turn towards real estate investment and financial speculation, see Erik Harms, "Neo-geomancy and Real Estate Fever in Postreform Vietnam," *positions: east asia cultures critique*, 20, no. 2 (2012): 405–34, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10679847-1538470>.
40. Thanh Quang, "Tình Cảnh Dân Oan và Vấn Nạn Cường Chiếm Đất Đai," *RFA On-line*, March 8, 2009, www.rfa.org/vietnamese/in_depth/Why-land-related-problems-persistent-in-vietnam-tquang-03082009150715.html.
41. For more information, see Phú Mỹ Hưng Development Co. Ltd., "Phú Mỹ Hưng," accessed January 8, 2016, <https://phumyhung.vn>; and Phú Mỹ Hưng Development Co. Ltd., Ho Chi Minh City Government Website, Southern Area Management Board, www.bqlkhunam.hochiminhcity.gov.vn/web/guest/cong-ty-lien-doanh-phu-my-hung (accessed January 8, 2016). For a detailed history and analysis of Phú Mỹ Hưng, see Erik Harms, *Luxury and Rubble: Civility and Dispossession in the New Saigon* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 27–57.
42. See Phú Mỹ Hưng Development Co. Ltd., "Phú Mỹ Hưng"
43. Field notes, September 11, 2014.

44. Hoàng Huyền, “Trần truồng, tự sát . . . vì bức xúc giải toả đất” [Stripping, suicide . . . because of land repossession discontents], *Soha*, May 29, 2012, <http://soha.vn/xa-hoi/tran-truong-tu-sat-vi-buc-xuc-giai-toa-dat-20120529042111231.htm>.
45. Võ Văn Thành and Đức Bình, “Bảo Tồn Quỹ Đất Nông Nghiệp” [Preserving agricultural land], *Tuổi Trẻ Cuối Tuần*, no. 26 (2009), 4–5.
46. Field notes, April 7, 2009.
47. Võ Đắc Danh, *Thế Giới Người Điên—Bút ký* [The world of the mad—reportage] (Ho Chi Minh City: NXB Trẻ, 2007), 127–31.
48. Thanh Quang, “Tinh Cảnh.”
49. Erik Harms, “Beauty as Control in the New Saigon: Eviction, New Urban Zones, and Atomized Dissent in a Southeast Asian City,” *American Ethnologist*, 39, no. 4, (2012): 735–50. www.jstor.org/stable/23358113.
50. Vietwikipedia, “Khu Công Nghiệp Việt Nam” [Industrial zones in Vietnam], accessed February 27, 2015, http://vi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khu_công_nghiệp_Việt_Nam. See also Thủ Tướng Chính Phủ, “Quyết định số 1107/QĐ-TTg ngày 21/8/2006 của Thủ tướng Chính phủ Phê duyệt Quy hoạch phát triển các khu công nghiệp ở Việt Nam đến năm 2015 và định hướng đến năm 2020” [Prime ministerial resolution number 1107/QĐ-TTg on August 21, 2006, signed by the prime minister approving development plans for industrial zones in Vietnam to 2015, and charting visions to 2020], archived on *Luật Việt Nam: Tiềm ích văn bản luật* [Vietnamese laws: Legal documents], accessed December 7, 2021, <https://luatvietnam.vn/cong-nghiep/quyet-dinh-1107-qd-ttg-thu-tuong-chinh-phu-19049-d1.html>.
51. “80 tỷ USD đầu tư vào khu công nghiệp sau 2 thập kỷ” [Eighty billion USD invested in industrial zones after two decades], *Công Thương Việt Nam*, Ministry of Planning and Investment, February 18, 2012, <https://congthuong.vn/80-ty-usd-dau-tu-vao-khu-cong-nghiep-sau-2-thap-ky-8979.html>.
52. Mộc Minh, “Việt Nam sẽ có số khu công nghiệp gấp 1,5 lần hiện nay” [Vietnam will have 1.5 times the current number of industrial zones], *Vietnam Economy*, September 2, 2021, <https://vneconomy.vn/viet-nam-se-co-so-khu-cong-nghiep-gap-1-5-lan-hien-nay.htm>.
53. Tran Dinh Thanh Lam, “Environment-Vietnam: River Pollution Scandal a Wake-up Call,” Inter Press Service News Agency, December 12, 2008, www.ipsnews.net/2008/12/environment-vietnam-river-pollution-scandal-a-wake-up-call/.
54. Vietnam National Authority of Tourism, Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, “Báo Cáo Thường Niên Du Lịch Việt Nam 2019” [Annual report on tourism for Vietnam in 2019], Hanoi: NXB Lao Động, 12, https://images.vietnamtourism.gov.vn/vn//dmdocuments/2021/bao_cao_thuong_nien_2019_final.pdf.
55. The project’s website is online at “Ixora Ho Tram by Fusion,” Asian Coast Development, accessed February 27, 2015, <https://asiancoastdevelopment.com>.
56. “Ixora Ho Tram.”
57. Field notes, August 19, 2012.
58. Blurb on Ecopark website, “Ecopark Grand—The Island,” Ecopark Group Joint Stock Company, accessed December 7, 2021, <https://ecopark.com.vn/ecopark-overviewen.html>.
59. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 75.

60. This percentage varies by project, locality, and other considerations by the investors and local governmental units involved.

61. *Compulsory Land Acquisition and Voluntary Land Conversion in Vietnam: The Conceptual Approach, Land Valuation and Grievance Redress Mechanism* (Hanoi: World Bank, 2011), 4.

62. Large cities may use different mechanisms. In Ho Chi Minh City, for example, compensation rates were set by the Southern Center for Consulting and Price Assessment Services of the Ministry of Finance, and the Ho Chi Minh City Bureau of Finance. See *Compulsory Land Acquisition* for more on these land acquisition practices.

63. *Compulsory Land Acquisition*, 5.

64. *Compulsory Land Acquisition*, 7.

65. For their story and others, see Võ Đức Danh, *Thế Giới Người Diên*, 116–36.

66. For more on these New Economic Zones and their impact on South Vietnamese families, see chapter 4.

67. One Indigenous Châu Ro family recounted to me how they were displaced by the war, torn between South Vietnamese, American, Australian, and National Liberation Front forces who sought to relocate them to places under their control respectively. Then after the war, this community once again lost the forest that provided not just fish, game, roots, fruits, and other resources, but connection to forebearers and a sense of home. The Châu Ro families scattered across Bà Rịa and Đồng Nai provinces as a result of this recent history of dispossession. Now in the first decades of this century, these Indigenous families again faced prospects of losing their homes as urbanization accompanied speculation. Field notes, August 30, 2019.

68. The number of reports on incidents of injury and death is astounding both from the state media and nonstate online sources. These continue to the time of this writing. See for example Trần Hoàng, “Vụ tự thiêu tại UBND phường: Chồng, con nạn nhân nói gì?” [The self-immolation case at the Ward People’s Committee: What did the victim’s husband and children say?], *Tiến Phong: Cơ Quan Trung Ương Của Đoàn TNCS Hồ Chí Minh* [Vanguard: Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth League], April 7, 2015, www.tienphong.vn/xa-hoi/vu-tu-thieu-tai-ubnd-phuong-chong-con-nan-nhan-noi-gi-844365.tpo; Thanh Thảo, “Phản đối giải toà, kỹ sư Phạm Thành Sơn tự thiêu trước UBND Đà Nẵng” [Protest against eviction, engineer Phạm Thành Sơn self-immolate in front of the People’s Committee], *VietInfo*, February 19, 2011, www.vietinfo.eu/tin-viet-nam/phan-doi-giai-toa-ky-su-pham-thanh-son-tu-thieu-truoc-ubnd-da-nang.html; Hải Ninh, “Vì Sao Dân Oan Phái Tự Thiêu?” [Why do dân oan self-immolate?], *Radio Free Asia*, October 5, 2015, www.rfa.org/vietnamese/in_depth/injustice-victims-last-resort-self-immolation-hn-05102015101542.html/.

69. Search terms of *giải toà* and *cưỡng chế* will bring up hundreds of clips. See for example Nhật Kỳ Yeu Nuoc, “Người Dân Khốn Khổ . . .” [The people suffer. . .], YouTube video, 7:07, September 13, 2013, <https://youtu.be/QCKcooUoGpo>; Nguoi Yeu Nuoc Viet, “Phụ Nữ Việt Thà Chết Để Giữ Đất . . .” [Vietnamese woman would rather die than lose her land], YouTube video, 12:08, July 25, 2012, <https://youtu.be/Z7PUMC21Cpc>; Nhật Kỳ Yeu Nuoc, “Chính Quyền Cướp Đất Chôn Sống Người Dân . . .” [The government robs people of their land and buries them alive. . .], YouTube video, 7:35, October 6, 2013, <https://youtu.be/qjvEckpnfDs>; VOA Tiếng Việt, “Xe Ủi Cán Người Phản Đối Cường Chế Đất ở Hải Dương” [Bulldozer runs over protesters against land confiscation in Hải Dương], YouTube video, 4:45, July 10, 2015, <https://youtu.be/csZ-7CuUrn4>.

70. For more information on the land conflict in Đồng Tâm, see for example “Đồng Tâm: Trước Tết, công luận Việt Nam chia rẽ sâu sắc” [Đồng Tâm: Before the new year, public opinion deeply divided], *BBC News Tiếng Việt*, January 13, 2020, www.bbc.com/vietnamese/vietnam-51087971; “Thủ trưởng Bộ Công an: Cha con ông Lê Đình Kinh nhận tiền từ phần tử chống đối” [Vice Minister of Public Security: Lê Đình Kinh received money from elements opposing the government], *Hải Quan Online*, January 14, 2020, <https://haiquanonline.com.vn/thu-truong-bo-cong-an-cha-con-ong-le-dinh-kinh-nhan-tien-tu-phan-tu-chong-doi-118835.html>.

71. Protests over what came to be known as the Văn Giang land dispute near Hanoi are similar to the 2007 demonstrations in Ho Chi Minh City in that villagers who were dispossessed for the Ecopark development project organized protests in Hanoi, on one occasion with four thousand demonstrators in late August 2006, and kept up their protests for more than a decade. See Tria Kerkvliet, “Protests over Land,” and Labbé, “Media Dissent.”

72. Kerkvliet, “Protests over Land,” 33.

73. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

74. “Muốn cho tình trạng này không còn xảy ra nữa, thì chúng ta phải đòi hỏi cho bằng được nhân quyền, công lý và công bằng xã hội. Buộc họ phải trả lại cái quyền sống và quyền làm người cho ta, là vấn đề quan trọng nhất. Muốn như thế, thì phải chấm dứt cái nạn độc quyền cai trị,” quoted in “Giải tán đoàn dân khiếu kiện” [Petitioners disbanded], *BBC tiếng Việt*, July 18, 2007, www.bbc.com/vietnamese/vietnam/story/2007/07/070718_viet_protests_update.shtml.

75. See for instance, “Thích Quảng Độ và các tham vọng chính trị đội lốt tôn giáo” [Thích Quảng Độ and political ambitions under the guise of religion], *Nhân Dân Điện Tử*, August 27, 2007, <https://nhandan.vn/tin-tuc-su-kien/thich-quang-do-va-cac-tham-vong-chinh-tri-doi-lot-ton-giao-436099/>.

76. Khối 8406, “Kháng thư số 16 Phản đối nhà cầm quyền Cộng sản Việt Nam đàn áp Dân oan khiếu kiện đêm 18 rạng ngày 19-07-2007” [Bloc 8406, Letter of protest against the Communist government of Vietnam’s repression of *dân oan* petitioners during the night of July 18 and early morning of July 19, 2007], *Tự Do Thông Tin Ngôn Luận*, July 20, 2007, www.tdngonluan.com/tailieu/tl_khangthu16_khoi8406.htm.

77. Khối 8406.

78. Tâm Tinh Tuổi Trẻ, “Wind of Change: From Burma to Vietnam?,” *Burma Wind of Change* (blog), October 31, 2007, <http://burma-windofchange.blogspot.com/>.

79. John Berger, “Erogenous Zone,” in *Selected Essays* (New York: Vintage International, 2003), 566.

80. Heonik Kwon, *The Ghosts of War in Vietnam* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 24–25.

81. Ocean Vuong, “A Little Closer to the Edge,” in *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2016), 13.

82. John Berger, “The Hour of Poetry,” in *Selected Essays* (New York: Vintage International, 2003), 450.

83. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004), xiv.

84. Butler, 35.

2. ASSEMBLAGES OF LAUGHTER AND SORROW: WOMEN WORKERS AND ALLEGORICAL FRAGMENTS

1. “Than thì than thế thôi, chứ giờ mà chỉ trông chờ vào đồng lương và phụ cấp thôi (khoảng hơn 3 triệu) thì chắc các con tôi lại đến thất học mất. Đó là lý do tại sao tôi cứ phải bám lấy công ty và đi làm như một cái máy. Biết là bản thân cũng chả có sức mà làm mãi thế này được, nhưng được lúc nào hay lúc ấy . . . Thật là, có việc làm thêm cũng chết mà không có việc làm thêm cũng chết.” Quoted in Nhóm Phóng Viên, “Công nhân lao động dệt-may: Những nỗi khổ không giống ai” [Textile garment workers: Their unique suffering], *Lao Động*, February 6, 2016, <https://laodong.vn/archived/cong-nhan-lao-dong-det-may-nhung-noi-kho-khong-giong-ai-675645.ldo>.

2. “Tôi làm công nhân may, 45 tuổi mắt đã mờ, tay đã run, làm không bằng thợ trẻ. Tôi chỉ còn làm nổi chừng 5 năm nữa là . . . hết xí quách nên 55 tuổi nghỉ hưu đã là quá sức, nói gì kéo dài thêm nữa.” Quoted in “Tăng tuổi hưu: Phải cân nhắc,” *Dân Trí*, September 8, 2016, <https://dantri.com.vn/lao-dong-viec-lam/tang-tuoi-huu-phai-can-nhac-2016090809083269.htm>.

3. The colonial practice of recruiting and moving low-waged labor among colonies and the metropolises was widespread. This practice generated migrant surplus workforces within and across empires. See for example Josep M. Fradera, *The Imperial Nation: Citizens and Subjects in the British, French, Spanish, and American Empires*, trans. Ruth MacKay (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018). For the use of “coolie” labor from Tonkin in Cochinchine, Cambodia, and French colonies in the Pacific like Nouvelle-Calédonie, see for example Thuy Linh Nguyen, “Overpopulation, Racial Degeneracy and Birth Control in French Colonial Vietnam,” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 19, no. 3 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1353/cch.2018.0024>.

4. Vinh Nguyen, “Refugeetude.”

5. David Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu, *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 5.

6. I made visits to factories and factory towns in Đồng Nai and Bình Dương in the summers of 2012, 2014, and 2019. Also cited here are my earlier publications that rely on fieldwork conducted in the summer of 2000 in the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City.

7. The importance of print fiction in modern Vietnamese history can be seen in the actions taken by various state authorities to control it. The French colonial government heavily censored it in the first half of the twentieth century, as did the governments of the Republic of Vietnam in the south from the mid-1950s to 1975. The Democratic Republic state in the North quite violently suppressed writers’ demands for greater freedom of representation, as was most evident in the Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm Affair of 1956–58 and the Anti-Revisionist Campaign of the 1960s. The current government of the Socialist Republic continues to censor and regularly recalls publications from circulation. Even well-known writers who came from the socialist era in North Vietnam such as Dương Thu Hương, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, and Phạm Thị Hoài repeatedly ran into trouble with the authorities.

8. Benjamin, *Origin*, 235.

9. Benjamin, 232.

10. Phan Thi Thanh and Nguyễn Thị Bích Thúy, “Labor Relations in Vietnamese Enterprises during the Renovation Period through the Gender Lens” (paper presented at Work-

shop on “Managing Femininity: The Socialization of Gender in Vietnam,” at the National University of Singapore, August 1–2, 2000), 3, 6.

11. Phan and Nguyễn, 3, 6; Bùi Thị Kim Quy, “Some Features of the Family Life of Female Garment Workers in Some Enterprises with Foreign Investment in HCM City,” paper presented at workshop on “Managing Femininity: The Socialization of Gender in Vietnam, National University of Singapore, August 1–2, 2000, 2.

12. *Made in Vietnam: Labor Rights Violations in Vietnam's Export Manufacturing Sector* (Washington, DC: Worker Rights Consortium, 2013), www.usfashionindustry.com/pdf_files/WRC-Report-Vietnam.pdf.

13. Figures are from the Institute for the Study of Labor and Society, cited in Hồng Minh, “Đũa thần' nào gỡ khổ cho lao động nữ ở nông thôn?” [What magic wand can alleviate the suffering of women laborers in the countryside?], *Pháp Luật Việt Nam*, May 4, 2017, <http://baophapluat.vn/dan-sinh/dua-than-nao-go-kho-cho-lao-dong-nu-o-nong-thon-332764.html>.

14. A 2014 Better Work report puts the number of Vietnamese women in the garment industry at 80 percent. Better Work, “Research Brief: Gender Equality at the Workplace, Baseline Findings from Better Work Vietnam,” accessed December 6, 2023, <https://betterwork.org/wp-content/uploads/Vietnam-Research-Brief-V4.pdf>.

15. Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume One* [1867]. In *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 422.

16. Better Work, “Research Brief: Gender Equality at the Workplace.”

17. Tadiar, “Life-Times,” 26.

18. Hong, *Death*, 67.

19. Robinson, *Black Marxism*.

20. Cited in Hong, *Death*, 67.

21. Hong, 66–67.

22. Hayot, “Chinese Bodies, 102–3.

23. Hayot, 102.

24. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1989), 191–92.

25. Long Bui, “Asian Roboticism: Connecting Mechanized Labor to the Automation of Work,” *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology*, no. 19 (2020): 119–20, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15691497-12341544>.

26. See for instance, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Women Workers and Capitalist Scripts: Ideologies of Domination, Common Interests and the Politics of Solidarity,” in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, ed. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (New York: Routledge, 1997), 3–29; Angie Ngoc Tran, “Global Subcontracting and Women Workers in Comparative Perspective,” in *Globalization and Third World Socialism: Cuba and Vietnam*, ed. Claes Brundenius and John Weeks (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001), 217–36.

27. Angie Ngoc Tran, “Through the Eye of the Needle: Vietnamese Textile and Garment Industries Rejoining the Global Economy,” *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 10, no. 2 (1998): 82–126, www.jstor.org/stable/40860578.

28. T.K. Trần, “Ngày 01/05: Luật Lao động VN chấp nhận các tổ chức đại diện công nhân tới đâu?” [January 5: How far does Vietnam's labor law accept organizations representing workers?], *BBC Tiếng Việt*, May 1, 2021, www.bbc.com/vietnamese/forum-56929812.

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39. Nguyễn-võ, "Class Sense," 192–93.
40. Như Phú, "Sống dưới mức tối thiểu: Khổ như công nhân!" [Living below minimum standards: Suffer like a worker!], *Người Lao Động*, August 30, 2015, <http://nld.com.vn/cong-doan/song-duoi-muc-toi-thieu-kho-nhu-cong-nhan-20150830215038977.htm>. In response to questions about workers working with toxic chemicals at a public relations tour I attended in July 2019, a representative of Hiệp Phước industrial zone in the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City explained that each enterprise will have its own seemingly inadequate remedies such as uniforms, or providing milk drinks to exposed workers at break time.
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49. “Not Yet.”

50. “Not Yet.”

51. Organizing across an industry must go through state organs like the People’s Committees in each relevant locality as well as central organs to set up “negotiating committees.” See the text of the 2019 labor laws that went into effect in 2021 at Quốc Hội, Cộng Hoà Xã Hội Chủ Nghĩa Việt Nam, “Bộ Luật Lao Động 45/2019/QH14” [Labor Laws 45/2019/QH14], Văn Bản Gốc Bộ Luật, accessed July 26, 2023, <https://vbpl.vn/TW/Pages/vbpg-van-ban-goc.aspx?ItemID=139264>.

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54. *Lịch Sử Đảng Cộng Sản Việt Nam: Trích Văn Kiện Đảng, Tập 1* [History of the Vietnamese Communist Party: From party documents, volume 1] (Hanoi, NXB Giao Khoa Mac-Lenin, 1978), 85–86.

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56. “Lòng vô sản phải mang tình nhân loại / Chí đã quyết ra đi là tiến mãi!” Tố Hữu, “Đời Thợ” [The worker’s life], in *Từ Ấy* [Since then] (first published in 1946 under the title *Thơ* [Poems], then in 1959 under *Từ Ấy*), *Thi Viện*, accessed December 27, 2017, www.thivien.net/T%E1%BB%91-H%E1%BB%AFu/%C4%90%E1%BB%9Di-th%E1%BB%A3/poem-xg9ePOa14wdPAx8blMR2dQ.

57. More contemporary poets working out of the coal mines, the historically and metaphorically imagined birthplace of Vietnamese communism under colonialism, seek not the redemptive future of revolution but the quotidian sentiments they find in the hard present of their lives. See for example multi-author collections like *Bản Tình Ca Thợ Mỏ I* [Love song of miners I] (Quảng Ninh, Vietnam: NXB Quảng Ninh, 2002); *Bản Tình Ca Thợ Mỏ II* [Love song of miners II] (Quảng Ninh, Vietnam: NXB Quảng Ninh, 2005); and *Tình Thơ trong Lửa Than* [Poetic sentiments in coal fire] (Cẩm Phả, Vietnam: NXB Hội Nhà Văn, 2010).

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59. See for instance Lương Hoài Nam, “Bản vẽ Chính Sách Phát Triển Kinh Tế Tư Nhân trong Thời Kỳ Đổi Mới” [On policies to develop the private economic sector during Đổi Mới], *Tạp Chí Cộng Sản*, no. 647 (2002): 27–30, 36; and Nguyễn Thế Kiệt, “Vấn Đề Giai Cấp và Đấu Tranh Giai Cấp ở Việt Nam Hiện Nay” [Class and class struggle in Vietnam today], *Tạp Chí Cộng Sản*, no. 645 (2002), 24–27, 26–27.

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63. See Nguyễn-võ, “Class Sense.”

64. Pham Thi Hoai, “The Saigon Tailor Shop,” in *Vietnam: A Traveler's Literary Companion*, trans. Nguyễn Quý Đức, ed. John Balaban and Nguyễn Quý Đức (San Francisco: Whereabouts Press, 1996), 28–41, 43.

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89. Lee, *Exquisite*, 26.
90. Margaret E. Owens, "The Revenger's Tragedy as Trauerspiel," *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 55, no. 2 (2015): 403, www.jstor.org/stable/24511411.
91. Cited in Lee, *Exquisite*, 26.
92. Espiritu, *Body Counts*, 157.
93. See for example, Kevin D. Lam, *Youth Gangs, Racism, and Schooling: Vietnamese American Youth in a Postcolonial Context* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Kimberly Yam, "The Forgotten Asian Refugees Fed into the U.S. Prison System," *HuffPost* (blog), January 29, 2018, www.huffpost.com/entry/southeast-asian-prison-deportation-pipeline_n_5a1dd48ee4b0569950233065; "Southeast Asian Americans and the School-to-Prison-to-Deportation Pipeline," Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC), accessed August 5, 2021, www.searac.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/SEAA-School-to-Deportation-Pipeline_o.pdf.
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3. ITERANT REMAINS: WITNESSING SOVEREIGN VIOLENCE

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2. Jacques Derrida, "Majesties," in *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 117.
3. Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *Selected Writings*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004): 241.
4. Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 32.

5. Olivia Laing, *Everybody: A Book about Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2021), 133.
6. Mirzoeff, *Right to Look*, 2.
7. Mirzoeff, 3.
8. Mirzoeff, 137.
9. Mirzoeff, 5, 22.
10. Campt, *Image Matters*, 80.
11. Foucault, *Society*, 65–87, 239–65.
12. Weheliye, “After Man,” 328.
13. Césaire, *Discourse*, 36.
14. Rob Schmitz, “Germany Officially Recognizes It Committed Genocide in Present-Day Namibia,” National Public Radio, May 28, 2021, www.npr.org/2021/05/28/1001233776/germany-officially-recognizes-it-committed-genocide-in-present-day-namibia.
15. Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” 23–24.
16. Michael Taussig, “Culture of Terror—Space of Death. Roger Casement’s Putumayo Report and the Explanation of Torture,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26, no. 3 (1984): 467–97, www.jstor.org/stable/178552.
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18. Césaire, *Discourse*, 48.
19. Helle Rydstrom, “The Politics of Colonial Violence: Gendered Atrocities in French Occupied Vietnam,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 22, no. 2 (2015): 198, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506814538860>.
20. Rydstrom, “Politics of Colonial Violence,” 193.
21. Kenneth H. Williams, ed., *LeMay on Vietnam* (Washington, DC: Airforce History and Museums Program, 2017), 1.
22. James Maycock, “War within War,” *The Guardian*, September 14, 2001, www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2001/sep/15/weekend7.weekend3; and data compiled in Abbott, “Vietnam War Casualties.”
23. Fanon, *Wretched*, 312.
24. The Vietnamese slogan translates to “Resolve to die so the fatherland can resolve to live.” The Cuban revolutionary slogan became the foil for a new anthem of antigovernment protests in pandemic 2021 with the reggaeton “Patria y Vida.” See Bill Chappell, “The Hip-Hop Song That’s Driving Cuba’s Unprecedented Protests,” National Public Radio, July 13, 2021, www.npr.org/2021/07/13/1015318087/the-hip-hop-song-thats-driving-cubas-unprecedented-protests.
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26. Sartre, preface to Fanon, *Wretched*, 22.
27. Hannah Arendt, “Reflections on Violence,” *Journal of International Affairs* 23, no. 1 (1969), 4–5.
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29. See for example Kosal Path, “Hà Nội’s Responses to Beijing’s Renewed Enthusiasm to Aid North Vietnam, 1970–1972,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 6, no. 3 (2011): 106, <https://doi.org/10.1525/vs.2011.6.3.101>; and Martin Loicano, “The Role of Weapons in the Second

Indochina War: Republic of Vietnam Perspectives and Perceptions,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 8, no. 2 (2013): 37–80, <https://doi.org/10.1525/vs.2013.8.2.37>.

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31. Fanon, 93.
32. Fanon, 98.
33. Shawn McHale, “Understanding the Fanatic Mind? The Việt Minh and Race Hatred in the First Indochina War (1945–1954),” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 4, no. 3 (2009): 99, <https://doi.org/10.1525/vs.2009.4.3.98>. In contrast, during the Vietnam War, Vietnamese Communist mobilization targeted African American soldiers to dissuade them from fighting an imperialist war when they were subjected to racism at home. The success of liberatory war determined what kind of racial narrative got deployed by anticolonial, anti-imperial nationalist forces. See Marc Jason Gilbert, “From Tonkin to Tikrit: Communist Propaganda, the Wars in Vietnam and Modern World History,” *World History Connected* 5, no. 1 (2007), <https://worldhistoryconnected.press.uiillinois.edu/5.1/gilbert.html>.
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36. Fanon, *Wretched*, 95.
37. Marx, *Capital, Volume One*, 320.
38. Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” 19–20.
39. King, *Black Shoals*, 17.
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45. These photos are compiled, scanned, and made available to the general public on the website. See “Genocide Studies Program: Cambodia Genocide Project,” Yale University, Documentation Center of Cambodia (*DC-Cam*), and University of New South Wales (UNSW), Sydney, Australia, accessed December 6, 2023, www.yale.edu/cgp/img.html.
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52. Um, 5.

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54. Nguyễn-võ, *Khmer-Viet*, 1–14.
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56. Um, *From the Land*, 193.
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61. See Cao Văn Thân, “Land Reform and Agricultural Development, 1968–1975,” in *The Republic of Vietnam, 1955–1975: Vietnamese Perspectives on Nation Building*, ed. Sean Fear and Tuong Vu, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020), 47–56.
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66. “chết còn ngoan cổ này.” Trần Đình, 86. *Ngoan cổ* refers to the refusal to accept the truth according to the party line.
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79. These photographic images can be viewed at Dmitri Baltermants, "Đầu Tổ Địa Chủ tại Bắc Việt: Photos by the Prominent Soviet Photojournalist Dmitri Baltermants (1912–1990) Taken in North Vietnam in 1955," posted by Manhhai, *Flickr*, accessed July 3, 2023, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/13476480@No7/albums/72157625139582419/with/5125224442/>.
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81. Damian Sutton, *Photography, Cinema, Memory: The Crystal Image of Time* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 207–27.
82. Sutton, 221, 211.
83. Edwin E. Moise, "Land Reform and Land Reform Errors in North Vietnam," *Pacific Affairs* 49, no. 1 (1976): 73, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2756362>.
84. Althusser, "Cremonini," 164.
85. Althusser, 164.
86. Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 6.
87. Campt, 6.
88. Chhun, "Walking," 27.
89. Um, *In the Land*, 193–94.
90. Darnella Frazier, Digital image, "Read This Powerful Statement from Darnella Frazier, Who Filmed George Floyd's Murder," post by Joe Hernandez, National Public Radio, May 26, 2021, www.npr.org/2021/05/26/1000475344/read-this-powerful-statement-from-darnella-frazier-who-filmed-george-floyds-murd?sc=ipad&f=1001.
91. Frazier.
92. Frazier.
93. Frazier.
94. Frazier.
95. Hartman, "Venus," 3.
96. Frazier, "Read This."
97. Daniel Payne, "White America Awakened?" *Politico*, May 26, 2019, www.politico.com/news/2021/05/25/white-people-racial-justice-activism-george-floyd-490545.
98. Derrida, "Poetics," 68.
99. Derrida, 68.
100. Derrida, 66.
101. Pollock, "Dying," 235.

102. Pollock, 235.
103. Ocean Vuong, "Threshold," in *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2016), 3.
104. Quoted in Derrida, "Poetics," 67.
105. Phi Hong Su, personal communication, August 16, 2021. For a different sense of "radical empathy" that excavates privileges, see for example Terri E. Givens, *Radical Empathy: Finding a Path to Bridging Racial Divides* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2021); or, for a feminist radical empathy, see Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives," *Archivaria* 81 (2016), 23–43, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/687705>.
106. Yvan Alagbé, "Sand Niggers," in *Yellow Negroes and Other Imaginary Creatures*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: New York Review of Books, 2018), 109.
107. Charles Mohr, "Street Clashes Go On in Vietnam, Foe Still Holds parts of Cities; Johnson Pledges Never to Yield," *New York Times*, February 2, 1968, 1, www.nytimes.com/1968/02/02/archives/street-clashes-go-on-in-vietnam-foe-still-holds-parts-of-cities.html.
108. Bonnie Honig, "Antigone's Two Laws: Greek Tragedy and the Politics of Humanism," *New Literary History* 41 (2010): 1, www.jstor.org/stable/40666482.
109. Thy Phu, *Warring Visions: Photography and Vietnam* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), 8–9, 16.
110. Eddie Adams, "Eulogy: General Nguyen Ngoc Loan," *Time*, July 27, 1998, <http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,988783,00.html>.
111. See "'Saigon Execution,' bức ảnh định mệnh" ["Saigon Execution," a fateful photograph], *Người Việt*, May 14, 2020, www.nguoi-viet.com/dien-dan/saigon-execution-buc-anh-dinh-men/; and Max Hastings, *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy, 1945–1975* (New York: Harper, 2018), 467.
112. Adrienne Rich, "Diving into the Wreck," in *Diving into the Wreck: Poems 1971–1972* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), 24.
113. Trần Đình, *Đền Cù*, 86.

4. HISTORY INTERRUPTED: THE DEATH OF SOUTH VIETNAM AND REFUGEE HAUNTINGS

1. "Khi tôi chết hãy đem tôi ra biển / và trên đường hãy nhớ hát quốc ca / ôi lâu quá không còn ai hát nữa / (bài hát giờ cũng như một hồn ma)." Du Tử Lê, "Khi tôi chết hãy đem tôi ra biển" [When I die please take me out to sea], *Thi Vien*, September 8, 2006, www.thivien.net/Du-T%E1%BB%AD-L%C3%AA/Khi-t%C3%B4i-ch%E1%BA%BFT-h%C3%A3y-%C4%91em-t%C3%B4i-ra-bi%E1%BB%83n/poem-HOzjYHxWxrVih7rLtTBw.
2. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 10–12.
3. Quoted in Hadji Bakara, "Introduction: Refugee Literatures," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 50, no. 3 (2020): 289, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jnt.2020.0016>.
4. Some historians argue that the only agreement was over the temporary creation of separate zones north and south of the 17th parallel and a ceasefire, while the general election provision was unsigned and vague. For a debate over the partition and election provisions of the Geneva Accords, see for example Richard A. Falk, "International Law and the United States Role in the Viet Nam War," *Yale Law Journal*, 75, no. 7 (1966): 1129; and John Norton Moore, "International Law and the United States Role in Viet Nam: A Reply," *Yale Law*

Journal, 76, no. 6 (1967): 1056–64. Robert Callahan cites Ang Cheng Guan, who argues that the Vietnamese Communist leadership knew from the start that the general election would not take place, based on the 6th Plenary Session of the Vietnam Workers' Party (July 15–18, 1954) and a spring 1959 meeting in which Communist Party Secretary General Lê Duẩn told Hungarian diplomat Janos Radvanyi that “no one in Hanoi had been surprised when the election was not held” and that the ‘election issue was kept alive because it had great propaganda value’ in terms of presenting the DRV on the side of legality and as an injured party.” Robert Callahan, “Vietnamese Land Reform: The Domestic Impetus to Communist Compromises at Geneva” (Honors thesis, Illinois Wesleyan University, 2004), 5, http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/history_honproj/17.

5. Duy Lap Nguyen, *The Unimagined Community: Imperialism and Culture in South Vietnam* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 3. See also Mieczyslaw Maneli and Dinh Nhu Ngo, “Secret Telegram from Maneli (Saigon) to Spasowski (Warsaw) [Ciphergram No. 11424],” September 4, 1963, accessed January 6, 2020, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/118971>. For another analysis of the First Republic’s rejection of the American Cold War’s project accompanying “dehumanizing capitalism and liberal developmentalism,” see Mitchell Tan, “Spiritual Fraternities: The Transnational Networks of Ngô Đình Diệm’s Personalist Revolution and the Republic of Vietnam, 1955–1963,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 14, no. 2 (2019): 1–67, esp. 3, <https://doi.org/10.1525/vs.2019.14.2.1>.

6. My familiarity with this scene comes from my involvement with multiple journals and publications as an editor and writer from the 1980s through the 2000s in Southern California. *Hợp Lưu, Đối Thoại, Tạp Chí Thơ, Talawas, Tiền Vệ*, and Văn Nghệ Publishing House were among the literary journals and publishing houses with global readerships. Writers and critics in Vietnam could circumvent the state-owned and heavily censored cultural venues in Vietnam by contributing to these refugee and diasporic forums.

7. “Chúng em tin rằng cái cảnh tượng được tạo ra là do ý muốn của một anh hồn có thể được thông báo cho chân không để chân không đào tạo nên cảnh tượng đó trong thực tế.” Nguyễn Mạnh Côn, “Lời Nguyễn Trọng Không” [Prayers in the Void], in *Những Truyện Ngắn Hay Nhất của Quê Hương Chúng Ta* [Our country’s best stories: Twenty years of literature in the South, 1954–1973] (Saigon: NXB Sóng, 1973), 319.

8. This list also includes myself, writing fiction under the name Nguyễn Hương.

9. Thụy Khuê, “Vấn Đề Đoạn Tuyệt với Quá Khứ để Lên Đường” [The issue of breaking with the past to begin the journey], *Hợp Lưu*, no. 68 (December 2002 / January 2003), 44–46.

10. Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, “Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming,” in *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism*, ed. Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 1–56.

11. Fernando Coronil, “Toward a Critique of Globalcentrism: Speculations on Capitalism’s Nature,” in Comaroff and Comaroff, *Millennial Capitalism*, 78.

12. Comaroff and Comaroff, “Millennial Capitalism,” 4.

13. Marx, *Capital, Volume One*, 320.

14. Marx, 321.

15. Marx, 324.

16. Franz Roh, “Magical Realism: Post-Expressionism,” in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 15–31.

17. Graham Harman, "Realism without Materialism," *SubStance* 40, no. 2, issue 125 (2011): 71, www.jstor.org/stable/41300200.
18. Eugene L. Arva, "Writing the Vanishing Real: Hyperreality and Magical Realism," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 38, no. 1 (2008): 61, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jnt.0.0002>.
19. Eva Aldea, *Magical Realism and Deleuze: The Indiscernibility of Difference in Postcolonial Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 86.
20. Quoted by Isaac Chotiner, "A Penn Law Professor Wants to Make America White Again," *The New Yorker*, August 23, 2019, www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/a-penn-law-professor-wants-to-make-america-white-again.
21. Quoted in Chotiner, "Penn Law Professor."
22. Eli Watkins and Abby Phillip, "Trump Decries Immigrants from 'Shithole Countries' Coming to US," CNN, January 12, 2018, www.cnn.com/2018/01/11/politics/immigrants-shithole-countries-trump/index.html.
23. Quoted in Chotiner, "Penn Law Professor."
24. Espiritu, *Body Counts*, 107.
25. Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xvii.
26. Lawrence-Minh Bùi Davis, "The Ghost as Ghost: Compulsory Rationalism and Asian American Literature, Post-1965" (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 2014), https://drum.lib.umd.edu/bitstream/handle/1903/15243/Davis_umd_0117E_15039.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.
27. "Mục đích của tôi là lập một cuộc lễ tạ ơn những vị giáo sư đã dạy tôi viết văn nhà quê, hoang đường, hóm hỉnh, trào lộng và châm biếm, đặc biệt của nông dân miền Tây vào đầu thế kỷ XX này." Hồ Hữu Tường, "Giới Thiệu" [Introduction], in *Kể Chuyện* [Storytelling] (Saigon: Huệ Minh, 1955), vii.
28. "Mấy là duy vật mà tin chuyện dị đoan nữa à?" and "... có duy tâm duy vật gì trong câu chuyện hoang đường." Hồ Hữu Tường, "Cọp Hú" [Howling tiger], in *Kể Chuyện*, [Storytelling] (Saigon: Huệ Minh, 1955), 42.
29. Hồ Minh Dũng, "Người Ăn Mày Trên Phố Bolsa" [The Beggar on Bolsa Street], in *Hoa Vạn Hạt, Cuối Mùa* [Flower of ten thousand seeds, end of season] (Glendale, CA: Đại Nam, 1996), 17–30.
30. Nguyễn Danh Bằng, "Phòng Lạ" [Strange room], in *Phòng Lạ*. (Đà Nẵng, Vietnam: NXB Đà Nẵng, 2005), 91–102.
31. Đặng Thơ Thơ, "Mở Tương Lai" [Open the future], *Hợp Lưu* no. 82 (2005), 45–60.
32. August, "Re-placing the Accent," 72.
33. August, 80.
34. August, 68.
35. Văn Bảy, "Trào lưu mới: Người Việt đọc văn học Việt bằng tiếng nước ngoài" [New trend: Vietnamese read Vietnamese literature in foreign languages], *Thế Thao Văn Hóa*, June 2, 2014, <https://thethaovanhoa.vn/van-hoa/trao-luu-moi-nguoi-viet-doc-van-hoc-viet-bang-tieng-nuoc-ngoai-n20140102153025995.htm>.
36. See for instance John Erikson, "Metakoi and Magical Realism in the Maghrebian Narratives of Tahar ben Jalloun and Abdelkebir Khatibi," in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Farris (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 427–50.

37. Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Reconstructing Liberalism? Notes toward a Conversation between Area Studies and Refugee Studies,” *Public Culture* 10, no. 3 (1998), 457–81, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-10-3-457>.

38. Chakrabarty, 468, 470.

39. See for example Judith Williamson, “Woman Is an Island,” in *Theorizing Feminism*, ed. Anne C. Hermann and Abigail J. Stewart (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1994), 382–400; and Ann McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

40. “Nó vui mừng tự giới thiệu là nữ bí thư của tôi—tôi ở đây là chồng nó. . . .” Nguyễn Mạnh Côn, “Lời Nguyễn Trọng Không,” 302.

41. “không phải hạng người mới trông thấy khẩu súng đã run lên bần bật.” Nguyễn Mạnh Côn, 302.

42. In my conversations with members of the Vietnamese American community over the course of more than three decades, I listened to many eyewitness accounts of assassinations, attacks, and massacres by the VCP-led Viet Minh against other groups such as the Hoà Hảo, Cao Đài, Bình Xuyên, the Fourth Internationalists or Trotskyists, Đại Việt Quốc Dân Đảng, and Việt Quốc or Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng, which in turn inspired counter killings. See also Lê Xuân Khoa, *Việt Nam 1945–1995, Vol. 1* (Bethesda, MD: Tiên Rồng, 2004), 68–71; Ngô Văn, *In the Crossfire: Adventures of a Vietnamese Revolutionary*, trans. Ken Knabb and Hélène Fleury (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2010), <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/ngo-van-in-the-crossfire>; Shawn McHale, “Caught between Propaganda and History,” The Wilson Center’s Cold War International History Project, October 2014, accessed July 17, 2023, at <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/caught-between-propaganda-and-history>.

43. “Anh thân yêu.” Nguyễn Mạnh Côn, “Lời Nguyễn Trọng Không,” 318.

44. “Em biết có ông đoán mộng mà chữa được người điên; có ông đoán mộng mà tìm thấy nguyên nhân, từ 30 năm trước, căn bệnh của một người đàn bà mắc chứng tâm lãn. Nhưng họ sẽ không hiểu gì về những giấc mơ của em. Trước hết, vì khoa chữa tâm bệnh hiện nay chỉ do các y sĩ tây phương nghiên cứu, mà tâm hồn em, em biết khác với tâm hồn người đàn bà tây phương một trời một vực. Ví dụ, người đàn bà Việt Nam lúc nào cũng chịu thiệt với chồng, mà người đàn bà tây phương không bao giờ chấp nhận điều đó. Vì sao? Vì người đàn bà tây phương thèm khát hưởng thụ từ người chồng nên tự nhiên phải có mặc cảm tùy thuộc, thua kém đối với người chồng đó—và đã có mặc cảm thua kém thì luôn luôn có phản ứng đền bù, tức là đòi hỏi được bình quyền và tranh giành mọi ưu thế. Người đàn bà Việt tất nhiên cũng biết hưởng thụ, nhưng không coi sự hưởng thụ là một lạc thú không thể không có ở đời, cho nên bề ngoài thì người đàn bà Việt lệ thuộc nặng nề người chồng về sự sống vật chất hàng ngày, nhưng ngược trong lòng lại không cần người đàn ông quá lắm. Em nghĩ thế mà cho rằng các bác sĩ thần kinh không thể căn cứ vào những nguyên tắc tâm lý Âu Mỹ mà tìm thấy căn bệnh cho em được.” Nguyễn Mạnh Côn, 303–4.

45. “Còn người đàn bà, với lòng thương yêu người chồng quân nhân, đã đạt tới sự cảm thông với Trời Đất, và bằng một niềm tin không giới hạn, bà ta được chân không mẫu nhiệm đưa trở vào giấc mơ để sửa đổi giấc mơ ấy và cứu chồng khỏi tai nạn. Nguyễn Mạnh Côn’s introduction to his story “Lời Nguyễn Trọng Không,” 298.

46. Writing about the death of the Republican subject, Saigon poet Thanh Tâm Tuyền wrote in 1965 in response to Hanoi critics of the 1957 printing of his novel *Bếp Lửa* (The Hearth):

Những nhà phê bình ở Hà Nội đã gọi các nhân vật trong cuốn sách này là bọn tôi mọi nô lệ. Họ hỏi: trong khi họ xây dựng xã hội chủ nghĩa, bọn này đi đâu? [...] Bọn chúng đã đi trong thống khổ của lịch sử tới cái chết, cái chết như sự từ chối quyết liệt. Tại sao? Cái chết lựa chọn không phi lý, nó sẽ làm nảy sinh sự thật, sự thật của những người chết truyền lưu cho kẻ sống sót.

Mỗi nhà văn chính là một kẻ sống sót.

[Hanoi critics call the characters in this book servants and slaves. They ask: While they build socialism, where are these slaves going? [...] Those slaves have gone through the misery of history to arrive at a death, a death as a radical rejection. Why? [...] A death chosen not without reason will bring forth a truth, a truth the dead leave for those who survive.

Each writer is a survivor.]

Thanh Tâm Tuyền, Foreword to the second printing of *Bếp Lửa* (1965), accessed February 20, 2006, <http://amvc.free.fr/Damvc/GioiThieu/ThanhTamTuyen/TTTuyenNDBepLua.htm>.

47. “Hồi còn trong trại giam, những năm về sau, chúng tôi, sở dĩ được sống sót là nhờ vào niềm hy vọng ấy, khi thân xác mòn, sức lực kiệt, chúng tôi đã được một liều thuốc—mong manh—ấy cứu.” Hồ Minh Dũng, “Người Ăn Mày trên Phố Bolsa,” 20.

48. “Đi qua một hành lang bệnh viện miễn phí, từ những hệ thống máy vi tính tân kỳ bên trong, có thể chữa lành tức khắc tất cả mọi thứ bệnh.” And “Vào trong một siêu thị, người ta có thể ăn bất cứ gì vào bụng, miễn là đừng bỏ túi thì thôi.” Hồ Minh Dũng, 20–21.

49. “Một người Việt Nam bao năm cùng cực, mang trong phủ tạng hàng trăm thứ bệnh như tôi, còn mong gì hơn thế.” Hồ Minh Dũng, 20.

50. “Xưa trong chế độ quân chủ, quyền bất khả xâm, chỉ có tầng lớp vua chúa, hoàng tộc. Nay, quyền ấy thuộc về người.” Hồ Minh Dũng, 21.

51. “. . . một người bản xứ nào chửi vào mặt rằng đồ ăn hại, thì đó là lời đồn đãi ác ý, hay không phải họ nhắm vào mình. Có thể là một dân tộc thiếu số khác hoặc vì gian truân quá mà tâm hồn mình sinh ra nhiều ảo ảnh chẳng?” Hồ Minh Dũng, 21.

52. Vinh Nguyen, “Refugeetude,” 110.

53. Aihwa Ong, *Buddha Is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, the New America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

54. “. . . không phải anh nghe ngóng về nguồn tin ấy, mà anh nghe giữa khoảng không gian có những âm thanh là lạ, buồn xé ruột, như những cánh ruồi đang vùng vẫy trong mạng nhện.” Hồ Minh Dũng, “Người Ăn Mày trên Phố Bolsa,” 27.

55. “Ở một đất nước giàu sang, kỹ nghệ chế biến thực phẩm chú trọng hàng đầu như thế, mà bạn nói, ăn gì cũng không ngon, nhạt phèo.” Hồ Minh Dũng, 18.

56. “Xương cốt vợ anh màu xám, rất mịn.” Hồ Minh Dũng, 22.

57. “Biển lúc nào cũng trong vắt, chiều sâu không ám ảnh.” Hồ Minh Dũng, 29.

58. “. . . chỉ vào đám mây trắng kia mà nói: quê nhà ta ở dưới đó.” Hồ Minh Dũng, 30.

59. “Những ngày ở ngoài biển khơi với chồng, tro cốt người đàn bà ấy trở nên xanh biếc, lóng lánh, có những đường vân trong suốt như tóc mới mọc.” Hồ Minh Dũng, 30.

60. Yển Lê Espiritu, “The ‘We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose’ Syndrome: U.S. Press Coverage of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the ‘Fall of Saigon,’” *American Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (2006), 329–52, www.jstor.org/stable/40068366.

61. “hàng thổ cẩm bạc giả linh tinh.” Nguyễn Danh Bằng, “Phòng Lạ,” 91.
62. “Anh mềm nhũn trong cảm giác yếu đuối.” Nguyễn Danh Bằng, 91.
63. “Việc cố hiểu và tìm tòi về một quá khứ nhọc nhằn hơn anh tưởng, nó chẳng dễ dàng hơn việc khai phá điều gì đó mới lạ.” Nguyễn Danh Bằng, 91.
64. “Họ cư xử với anh như một người xâm hại, một kẻ xa lạ đến để đánh cắp cái gì đó của họ.” Nguyễn Danh Bằng, 92.
65. “Khối bạc khổng lồ đang rung lên từng chi tiết tinh xảo và chạm lạnh lạnh. Cô lại bảo ‘Anh về đi.’ Anh bảo ‘Sao?’. Cô chẳng trả lời vẫn nhìn anh cực kỳ nghiêm nghị! ‘Có hội à?’. ‘Vâng.’ Anh cảm thấy xấu hổ nói lí nhí: ‘Thế em đi đi.’ Cô chưa kịp qua khỏi khúc quanh đã mất hút tan loãng vào màu trắng của không gian. Màu trắng lẫn dần về phía anh. Anh quay đi . . .” Nguyễn Danh Bằng, 93.
66. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1961), 194.
67. Levinas, 196.
68. “Ngôi làng đẹp như một phế tích. Tre bên rìa làng vẫn rậm và đầy, núi vẫn từng hòn dựng đứng lẫn trong mây, sông cao chảy mượt mà. Ngoài sông, người ngư phủ mặt áo lá bằng xơ dừa, đang lướt trên con thuyền tre bằng ba thân tre tàu dài ghép lại.” Nguyễn Danh Bằng, “Phòng Lạ,” 96.
69. “Anh có cảm giác như đang quan sát đồng tiền cổ trong hiệu đồ cổ, cổ phán đoán thật già.” Nguyễn Danh Bằng, 96.
70. “. . . hoàn toàn xa khỏi thế giới của những mối liên hệ.” Nguyễn Danh Bằng, 98.
71. “Và chúng ta một mình với *khoảng trống* không kích thước.” Nguyễn Danh Bằng, 99.
72. “‘Thế còn chiếc mũ?’, bất thành linh anh chợt nhớ ra và hỏi.
“Anh nhớ lại trước cả khi trời trở lạnh, anh đã gặp chiếc mũ bạc trong viện bảo tàng Châu Á. Nó được đặt trong cái lồng kính, chiếu sáng bằng ngọn đèn vàng nhỏ. Không khí trong phòng khô và lạnh. Anh nhìn chiếc mũ bạc rất lâu, lâu lắm, nhưng lại bắt đầu thấy hình ảnh của một con gà con. Ngày còn bé, anh hay đứng nhìn vào trong phòng ngủ của một căn nhà bỏ hoang. Trong căn phòng ngủ cô đại mọc um tùm từ những đường nứt trên nền. Anh thấy xác một con gà con, trên người nó còn ít lông màu vàng. Nặng gắt. Nhiều ngày nó chuyển sang màu đen bẹp đi.” Nguyễn Danh Bằng, 100.
73. “Cứ thế anh trần truồng đi xuyên qua những con vật kỳ lạ đang ẩn nấp sau những dây hành lang xám mờ quanh quẹo.” Nguyễn Danh Bằng, 101.
74. “một người da vàng;” “đang rộ lên xanh um,” Nguyễn Danh Bằng, 101.
75. “Con sông Merced sẽ được gói lại trong cái hộp. Cũng như nhiều điều xảy ra trong quá khứ được cất gọn trong những bịch gói phong kín, nhãn hiệu gọn ghẽ. Có món ghi rõ niên hiệu, có món còn lại như vật thể thô không ai nhận ra! Có nhiều điều khác trong quá khứ hoàn toàn nằm ở vùng ngoài! Một lọ gốm cổ bay lơ lửng trong khoảng tối không giới hạn.” Nguyễn Danh Bằng, 102.
76. Nguyễn Danh Bằng, personal communication, February 17, 2006.
77. “cuộc sống chỉ toàn là tương lai,” Đặng Thơ Thơ, “Mở Tương Lai,” 45.
78. Julia Kristeva, “Women’s Time,” trans. Alice Jardine and Harry Blake, *Signs* 7, no. 1 (1981): 14, www.jstor.org/stable/3173503.
79. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 2, 3–4.

80. J. Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 2.

81. “Lúc đó là cuối tháng, và những con người thiếu ăn đang thèm thịt heo khủng khiếp. Họ xếp hàng vòng vèo từ mé hông chợ Thanh Đa, vòng qua lô E, chạy dọc xuống lô A, ra ngoài đường cái. Mỗi người một cuốn sổ thịt trong tay. Họ mệt mỏi và nhẩn nhục, chán chường và hy vọng, đứng giữa nắng trưa chói ngất chờ mua khẩu phần nửa ký thịt mỡ một tháng. Tôi nhìn những đồng xương cao ngất và thịt vụn. Tôi nhìn những con ruồi đen nhánh bay quần quanh những tảng ruột bầy nhầy. Tôi nhìn những con người giống tôi, và tôi buồn khôn tả. Đột nhiên tôi hiểu ra mình đã khác: tôi không thèm thịt nữa, đã từ lâu.” Đặng Thơ Thơ, “Mở Tương Lai,” 57.

82. “Mỗi lọ đựng thứ chất lỏng trong suốt, nặng sòng sánh.” “Có vàng cũng không mua được.” Đặng Thơ Thơ, 53.

83. Nguyễn Du, *Truyện Kiều* (Tân Bình, Viet Nam: NXB Thanh Niên), 12.

84. “thế giới sau 30 tháng 4 không rõ ngày tháng nữa. Ngày 30 tháng 4 sẽ nổi dài rất lâu, nổi mãi về sau, qua nhiều thập kỷ. Nếu chúng tôi sống lâu trăm tuổi thì nó cũng kéo dài hàng thế kỷ.” Đặng Thơ Thơ, “Mở Tương Lai,” 53–54.

85. Leah Devun and Zeb Tortorici, “Trans, Time, and History,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (November 2018): 520, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-7090003>.

86. “Cô Hồng Trang bắt đầu khóc, tóc cô xoả xụi dính đầy nước mưa và đất. Nhưng cái chết tôi không vô nghĩa. Cô ngừng lên nói với Hương. Tương lai không có quyền thay đổi một cái chết trong quá khứ. Mọi giá trị sẽ thay đổi. Nhưng giá của cái chết thì không.” Đặng Thơ Thơ, “Mở Tương Lai,” 59.

87. “. . . tị tử, cũng như nằm mơ là cử chỉ của hy vọng vào những điều chưa biết. Nó còn là dấu thánh đóng lên mình những linh hồn miễn nhiễm đời đời.” Đặng Thơ Thơ, 60.

88. My uncle-in-law, for example, spent seventeen years in such a camp in North Vietnam after the war because he was a member of the Tân Đại Việt, an opposition party to both the First and Second Republics in South Vietnam under Ngô Đình Diệm and Nguyễn Văn Thiệu. Many of his stories revolve around the use of constant fear, hard labor, and severe food deprivation to force prisoners to produce self-criticism and self-narration confirming the party’s historical truth.

89. Estimates of the number of people incarcerated in reeducation camps vary. One estimate puts the incarcerated at one million, and the number of those who died in these camps at about 165,000. Though some terms went for as long as eighteen years, most ranged from three to ten years. See Anh Do, Tran Phan, and Eugene Garcia, “Camp Z30-D: The Survivors,” Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, March 1, 2002, <https://dartcenter.org/content/camp-z30-d-survivors>.

90. For descriptions of life in these New Economic Zones and the work of women and children sent there, see also memoirs, such as Trương Quang Thi, “Ký ức vụn của một đứa trẻ trong vùng Kinh Tế Mới” [Fragments of memory of a child from the New Economic Zone], *Hải Ngoại Phiếm Đàm*, October 11, 2018, <https://haingoaiphiemdham.com/a13177/ky-uc-vun-cua-mot-dua-tre-trong-vung-kinh-te-moi>; or Phước An, “Vinh Biệt Vùng Kinh Tế Mới” [Farewell, New Economic Zone], *Người Phương Nam*, August 3, 2020, <http://nguoiphuongnam52.blogspot.com/2020/08/vinh-biet-kinh-te-moi-phuoc-an.html>.

91. Đặng Thơ Thơ, personal communication, April 4, 2006.

92. Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 7.

93. Freeman, 7.
94. Đặng Thơ Thơ, personal communication, March 1, 2006.
95. Đặng Thơ Thơ, personal communication, August 25, 2022.
96. Ly Thuy Nguyen, "Queer Dis/inheritance and Refugee Futures," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 48, no.1–2 (2020): 221, <https://doi.org/10.1353/wsq.2020.0026>.
97. Viet Thanh Nguyen, "Impossible to Forget, Difficult to Remember: Vietnam and the Art of Dinh Q. Lê," in *A Tapestry of Memories: The Art of Dinh Q. Lê*, Bellevue Arts Museum exhibition catalog, 2007, 19–29, <https://vietnguyen.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Dinh-Q-Le-article-in-color-small-size.pdf>.
98. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 3.
99. Dante Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova* [The New Life], trans. A. S. Kline, accessed August 3, 2020, <https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Italian/TheNewLifeI.php>.
100. Quoted in Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 2.
101. Nguyen, "Refugeetude," 110–11.

5. UNTIMELY HABITATION: IRRECONCILABILITY AND REFUGEE MEMORY

1. See Espiritu's account of Colonel Cẩn's death and his commemoration in refugee remembrance, *Body Counts*, 105–38. Colonel Cẩn is also the subject of the short film *Who Was Colonel Hồ Ngọc Cẩn?*, directed by Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi (Thesis, Pomona College, 2013), <https://vimeo.com/66522275>.
2. Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); and Yến Lê Espiritu, "About Ghost Stories: The Vietnam War and 'Rememoration,'" *PMLA* 123, no. 5 (2008): 1700–1702.
3. Espiritu, *Body Counts*, 2–3.
4. See for instance, T. J. English, *Born to Kill: The Rise and Fall of America's Bloodiest Asian Gang* (New York: William Morrow, 1995). Also, see Kevin D. Lam, "Racism, Schooling, and the Streets: A Critical Analysis of Vietnamese American Youth Gang Formation in Southern California," *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement* 7 (2012): 1–14, <http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/2153-8999.1043>.
5. Edward Said, "Preface to the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition," In *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 2003), xxix.
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9. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 2: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954–1955*, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), 164.

10. Theodor W. Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society," in *Prisms*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen and Samuel Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), 34.

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14. Susan Schultz, "Wednesday, August 02, 2006," *Dementia Blog*, August 2, 2006, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/54329/wednesday-august-02-2006.

15. Nguyễn-võ, "Into Time," 76.

16. Page DuBois, "Toppling the Hero: Polyphony in the Tragic City," *New Literary History* 35, no. 1, (2004): 71, 74, www.jstor.org/stable/20057821.

17. Kathleen M. Sands, "Tragedy, Theology, and Feminism in the Time after Time," *New Literary History* 35, no. 1 (2004): 43, <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2004.0023>.

18. Sibylle Fischer, "History and Catastrophe," *Small Axe* 33: *A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 14, no. 3 (2010): 168, <https://doi.org/10.1215/07990537-2010-032>.

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20. See for example Trần Văn Thủy's film *Tiếng Vĩ Cầm ở Mỹ Lai* [The sound of violin at My Lai] (Vietnam: My Lai Peace Park Project, 1998).

21. For example, Dương Thu Hương, *Novel without a Name*, trans. Phan Huy Đường and Nina McPherson (New York: William Morrow, 1995). Dương Thu Hương had to debut her novel with a diasporic Vietnamese publisher and with a French publisher. She spent short stints in prison and longer periods under various forms of house arrest.

22. Olga Dror, "Translator's Introduction," in *Mourning Headband for Hue: An Account of the Battle for Hue, Vietnam 1968*, by Nhã Ca (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), xv–lxv; Dror, "Learning from the Hue Massacre," *New York Times: Vietnam* '67, February 20, 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/02/20/opinion/hue-massacre-vietnam-war.html.

23. Cited in Do, Phan, and Garcia, "Camp Z30-D." Estimates of the number of people incarcerated in reeducation camps vary. The authors of this report estimate one million South Vietnamese were incarcerated, and about 165,000 died in these camps. Though some were kept for as long as eighteen years, most were imprisoned from three to ten years. There are many memoirs written by former inmates. See for example Hoa Minh Truong, *The Dark Journey: Inside the Reeducation Camps of Viet Cong* (Durham, CT: Eloquent Books, 2010); Hà Thúc Sinh, *Đại Học Máu: Chuyện Kể về 1685 Ngày Tù dưới Chế Độ Cộng Sản Việt nam* [Blood university: The story of 1685 prison days under the Vietnamese communist regime] (San Jose, CA: Nhân Văn, 1985).

24. See for example Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy: The War after the War* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986).

25. Vietnamese-language refugee documents and memoirs that recount harrowing escapes over land or sea and life in refugee camps can be found at *Hành Trình Tìm Tự Do*, <https://httdt.wordpress.com/about-2/>, accessed September 7, 2022.

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27. See Bộ Trưởng Bộ Giáo Dục, “240/QĐ” [Minister of Education, Resolution 240/QĐ], accessed August 29, 2023, <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Giao-duc/Quyet-dinh-240-QD-nam-1984-chinh-ta-thuat-ngu-tieng-Viet-sach-giao-khoa-bao-van-ban-nganh-giao-duc-216818.aspx>.

28. Bộ Trưởng Bộ Giáo Dục.

29. “Sự ra đi của nó âm thầm giống như những dấu tích của nền văn hoá đệ nhất, đệ nhị cộng hoà VN vậy.” Trịnh Thanh Thủy, “Cái chết của một ngôn ngữ: Tiếng Việt Sài Gòn cũ” [Death of a language: Old Saigon’s Vietnamese], *Talawas*, November 28, 2006, www.talawas.org/talaDB/showFile.php?res=8650&rb=06.

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37. Olga Dror, “Learning from the Hue Massacre.”

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60. Cole, 69–70.
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INDEX

- Adams, Eddie, 88, 114, 115, 116
- Adorno, Theodor, 154
- affect, 21, 39, 103, 178; epistemology and, 21, 39, 177; land and, 55; nation and, 12, 163, 166
- Afghanistan, 13–14, 29, 152, 167, 173, 180–81
- Africa, 8, 10, 39, 90; Africans, 8, 38, 63, 94
- African Americans: police brutality and, 14, 28, 29, 110–12; Vietnam War and, 12, 92
- Agamben, Giorgio, 6–7, 8, 42, 89, 90
- Alagbé, Yvan, 113, 189
- Aldea, Eva, 123
- Algeria, 11, 208n25
- allegory, 23, 25, 63–64, 81–85, 87, 144;
assemblages and, 63–64; fragments in, 63–64, 81–85
- Althusser, Louis, 39–40, 109
- Anderson, Benedict, 9, 117
- anticolonialism, 2, 9, 25, 146, 186; anticolonial
armed resistance in Vietnam, 9, 10, 101,
124, 126–27, 128, 130, 146, 161, 185, 185–87;
nation and, 10, 26, 91, 117–19, 162, 163; South
Vietnam and, 27, 129, 156, 164; violence and,
10–11, 91–95, 97, 100, 208n25
- anticommunism, 114, 129, 164. *See also*
Vietnamese refugees
- Antigone* (Sophocles), 27, 157, 181–84, 188, 189
- aphasia, 28, 155, 156, 187. *See also* dementia
- April 30th (event), 144–45, 150, 154, 166, 186, 189
- Arcades Project, The* (Benjamin), 81
- Arendt, Hannah, 7, 15, 93
- Asia, 8, 12, 37, 45, 47, 60; Asia Pacific Economic
Cooperation (APEC) summit in, 70; labor
in, 60, 66; refugee camps in, 177
- Asian Americans: immigration and, 172;
labor and, 60, 66; violence against, 29, 175, 83
- Atlantic Charter (1941), 11
- August, Timothy, 27, 125
- Auschwitz, 154
- Bales, Kevin, 15, 68
- Baltermants, Dmitri, 88, 100, 105, 106–7, 108,
109, 110, 114, 116, 211n79
- Bannon, Steve, 172
- Baroque period, 6, 63–64, 81–83, 85; sorrow
play in, 23, 63, 81; sovereignty and, 6, 23, 81;
allegory in, 81–83
- being: Hegel and, 6; modes of, 4, 17, 18, 19–22, 23,
25, 26, 28, 34, 35, 39, 64, 118, 119, 125, 130, 148,
181; nonbeing and, 20, 116, 146; refugees and,
28, 155, 156
- Belew, Kathleen, 15
- Benjamin, Walter, 6, 23, 184; allegory and, 25,
63–64, 81–83; left melancholy and, 163;
trauerspiel and, 63, 81; violence and, 89, 103.
See also allegory; sorrow
- Berger, John, 53
- Berlant, Laurent, 166
- Biden, Joseph R., 13–14, 152, 173, 193n50

- binary and duality, 8, 18–19, 21, 38, 38, 57, 110, 129; being-nonbeing, 146; East-West, 131–32; gender, 132, 142, 145–46, 147; life-death, 26, 98, 100, 103, 146; presence-absence, 146; reason-unreason, 8, 19, 91; truth-error, 26, 98, 100, 103
- biopolitics, 6–8, 19, 68, 87, 134, 144, 151; race and, 7, 8, 12, 90, 113, 147
- Black Lives Matter, 111
- Black Painting No. 40 (Tranh Đen Số 40)*, 104, 107–10, 116. *See also* Nguyễn Thái Tuấn
- Black Studies, 4, 19–20; Afropessimism and, 19; Black feminism and, 4, 35, 95
- Blinken, Antony, 14
- Bloc 8406, 52
- boomerang effect, 7, 14, 90
- Borges, Jorge L., 1, 20, 180
- Brown, Wendy, 163–64, 165
- Buddhism, 31, 52, 98, 116, 162, 188; epistemology and, 21
- Bui, Long, 13, 66, 177, 180
- Burns, Ken and Lynn Novick, 152, 172–74
- Bush, George, H.W., 151, 167
- Bush, George, W., 151–52, 168–70, 171, 172
- Butler, Judith, 56, 79, 182–83, 189
- California, 3, 37, 74, 133, 167, 175
- Camacho, Keith, 179
- Cambodia, 9, 10, 11, 12, 22, 95, 110; Cambodian American memory, 22, 110, 153; mass killings in, 88, 100, 154, 164, 165; North Vietnam and, 99, 159; People's Republic of Kampuchea, 97; South Vietnam and, 92, 99; U.S. bombing campaigns in, 12, 92, 99; U.S. war and, 9, 10, 151, 166; Vietnamese colonization of, 36, 86, 95–96, 99, 193n37; Vietnamese memorialization in, 86, 97, 100, 110; war with Vietnam, 16, 26, 87
- Cambodian Revolution. *See* Khmer Rouge
- Camp of the Saints, The (Raspail)*, 172
- Campt, Tina, 90, 109
- Cao, Lan, 173
- Cao Đài, 37, 129, 164, 197n19, 215n42
- Capital (Marx)*, 121–22. *See also* Marx
- capitalism, 3, 6, 15, 19, 41, 42, 58–59, 67, 76, 165, 185; capital accumulation in, 5, 16, 17, 40, 49–50, 65–68; commodity and, 16, 26, 29, 40–41; 47, 64, 66, 73, 75, 77, 80, 81–82, 85, 94, 121–22, 126, 130, 135–36, 137–41, 143–44, 147–48; financial, 16, 17, 26, 40, 65, 67; Fordist, 122; global, 5, 15, 17, 23, 24, 29, 70, 73, 163; post-Fordist, 59, 66, 82, 121; production in, 16, 17, 25, 29, 40–41, 58–60, 63, 64–69, 73, 74, 75, 80–82, 85, 121–22, 169; racial, 15–16, 59, 65–66, 84, 123; South Vietnam and, 26, 78, 118, 213n5; spectral, 121–23; speculation in, 16, 24, 33, 34, 36, 40, 63. *See also* consumption
- Celan, Paul, 113, 154, 180, 181
- Césaire, Aimé, 7, 19, 24, 38–40, 55, 90, 91, 92, 188
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh, 125
- Cham, 36, 193n37
- Chatterjee, Partha, 10
- Chauvin, Derek, 14, 110–11
- Chhun, Lina, 22, 110
- China (People's Republic of), 11, 16, 29, 92, 93, 97, 100, 159, 164
- Choeung Ek, 25–26, 86–87, 96, 97–100, 106, 110, 116
- Chomsky, Noam and Edward S. Herman, 164
- Chun, Jennifer, 35
- civilizing mission, 2; *la mission civilisatrice*, 8, 91, 186; White Man's Burden, 11, 91
- class (social), 10, 27, 61, 78, 94, 101, 156; bourgeoisification, 47, 72; class struggle, 11, 101; middle, 25, 47, 61, 62, 67, 72, 74–79, 137, 139, 140, 141; proletarian, 29, 70, 59, 61, 62, 65, 66, 67, 68, 70, 72–74, 77, 78, 80, 120, 157, 172, 207n97
- Cochinchina, 60, 137, 186, 174
- Cold War, 11, 30, 93, 129, 132; South Vietnam and, 118, 129, 131, 146, 147, 152, 153, 163, 164, 167, 168, 179; Vietnamese refugees and, 136, 151, 153
- colonialism, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9–10, 11, 12, 23, 35, 40, 60, 63, 65, 91, 94, 124, 163, 179; French, 2, 8, 24, 36, 60, 62, 93, 99, 156; language and, 125–26; nationalism and, 93–95; postcolonial nation and, 10, 11, 18, 26, 103, 117–19, 174; race and, 5, 6, 12, 38, 123; Spanish, 38; violence and, 2, 7, 11, 24, 87–88, 90–92, 99, 113. *See also* empire
- Comaroff, Jean and John Comaroff, 121
- comedy, 25, 62, 74–81
- Confederate Lost Cause, 29, 156
- consumption, 17, 64, 67, 72, 73, 137, 139; class and, 62, 66, 67–68, 73–81; commodity fetish and, 121–23; consumer, 17, 24, 25, 62, 64, 83, 84, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138, 140, 141; finance and, 16, 58, 67, 82; neoliberal freedom and, 5, 24, 61, 64, 65, 67, 68
- coolie (*cu li*), 25, 60–61, 66, 84, 202n3
- Coyne, Christopher and Abigail Hall, 14
- Đặng Thơ Thơ, 120, 124, 141, 145, 146, 148.
See also “Mở Tương Lai”
- dân oan*, 54–55, 106
- Dante Alighieri, 148
- Đạo Mẫu*, 37

- Davis, Lawrence-Minh Bui, 124
- death, 2, 3, 15, 17, 56, 80, 81–82, 86, 97–98, 115, 140, 158, 161, 182, 184; the corpse, 80–83; the dead, 5, 20, 22, 24, 26, 27, 28, 37, 54–57, 100, 103, 110, 111–16, 154–57, 178–79, 188–89, 216n46; death camps, 6–7, 8, 90, 100, 154; death of nation, 117, 119, 126, 132, 141–48; economics of, 4, 5, 6, 42, 45, 50, 54, 58, 62; life and, 6, 8, 20, 28, 38, 39, 57, 80, 87, 88, 90–92, 99–100, 103, 106, 113, 116, 117, 134, 155, 184; metrics of, 10, 13, 107, 151; politics of, 2, 4, 5, 17, 95–97, 100–110; race and, 90–92; refugees and, 56, 117, 139, 150, 162, 165, 177–81; sovereignty and, 6, 7–8, 9, 42, 92–94; truth-error and, 19, 26, 94–97, 99, 102, 103, 110, 113–14; witnessing and, 110–16, 181
- Dega association, 92
- dementia, 28, 155–156, 185, 188. *See also* aphasia
- deportation, 13, 29, 83, 169, 171, 172, 175
- Derrida, Jacques, 88, 112
- dialectic: Hegelian, 5–6, 9, 22, 28, 34, 39, 56, 89, 95, 113, 143, 144, 156, 157, 165, 182–84; Marxian, 113, 122, 144; tidalectic and, 39, 56
- Điện Biên Phủ, 93, 117, 129
- Dinh, Viet, 169, 170
- disability studies, 4, 28; ableism and, 28, 155–56
- Discourse on Colonialism* (Césaire), 7
- displacement: about, 22, 23, 87, 149, 184; binary, 90, 131, 135; land and, 24; 34–37, 44–47, 197n13; refugees and, 36–37, 155; temporal-spatial, 79
- dispossession: capitalist, 28, 29, 34–37, 40–56, 65, 66, 106, 137, 158; socialist, 24, 36, 54, 106, 179
- Đổi Mới*, 64–65, 72
- Đồng Nai, 46, 47–48, 50, 67
- Dror, Olga, 163
- DuBois, Page, 157, 183
- Du Bois, W. E. B., 12, 19, 38
- Durgin, Patrick, 155
- Du Tử Lê, 117
- Eagleton, Terry, 77
- Edelman, Lee, 142
- Edwards, Brent Hayes, 10
- Ehrlichman, John, 14
- empire, 4, 10, 22, 27, 114, 148, 151, 155, 157, 163, 164, 182; European, 8, 90, 186, 202n3; U.S., 3, 12–14, 18, 152, 154, 168–70; Vietnamese, 36, 99, 185. *See also* colonialism
- Enlightenment, 4, 6, 11, 17, 23, 39, 57, 87, 155; epistemology and, 26, 38, 40, 52, 56, 88–89, 95, 97, 110, 112–14, 116, 123, 155; historiography and, 63, 81, 143, 182, 184; humanism and, 6, 8, 10, 23, 26, 39, 40, 63, 87, 92, 168; redemption and, 11, 26, 82, 91, 95; sovereignty and, 6, 55, 63, 91; truth and, 10, 26; violence and, 95, 100, 102, 114
- epistemology: alternative, 17–23, 64, 83, 85, 88, 110, 119–20, 122–24, 126, 151, 154–55, 175, 177; Hmong, 19; objective, 4, 6, 9, 19, 22–23, 28, 86, 112, 182, 187; rational, 26, 38, 88, 89, 110, 113, 122, 123, 124, 132; violence and, 94–95, 156. *See also* Enlightenment
- Espiritu, Yễn Lê, 22, 83, 124, 136, 151, 170
- Europe, 10, 12, 38, 63, 45, 67, 90, 91, 92, 106, 115, 123, 131, 146, 160, 172; European colonialism, 6, 10, 11, 12, 90, 92, 93, 95, 163; violence and, 7, 90–92, 97, 100
- eviction, 16, 24, 33, 42, 54; violence and, 7–9, 50–51, 200nn68,69
- export processing zones, 45, 65
- Fanon, Frantz, 9, 10, 26, 92–95, 99, 100, 117
- Felski, Rita, 76
- femininity: class and, 66–68, 72–74, 74–81; consumption and, 73–81; ethics and, 146–48; lost nation and, 126–41; tragedy and, 182–83
- feminism: aesthetics and, 97, 115; Black, 4, 35, 95; ethics and, 113, 115; feminism of color, 4, 5; feminist analysis, 27, 78, 110, 126, 142, 182–83, 188
- Ferber, Ilit, 184, 187–88
- First Indochina War (1946–1954), 9, 10, 92, 117, 126
- Floyd, George, 14, 26, 88, 110, 113
- Foucault, Michel, 6, 7, 90, 184
- fragments: allegory and, 63–64, 81–85; body and, 25, 58, 62–64, 84; memory and, 155, 156, 185
- Frazier, Darnella, 26, 88, 110–13, 116
- freedom: history and, 15, 62, 95, 158; humanist, 2, 5–6, 8, 9, 10, 89, 182; neoliberal, 5, 24, 25, 64, 68, 82, 84, 170; U.S. and, 11–12, 91–92, 132, 133–34, 151, 166
- French Revolution, 10, 15, 39, 89, 95, 154, 158
- Freud, Sigmund, 188
- Fukuyama, Francis, 165
- future: almost, 5, 20, 28, 30; alternative, 39, 120, 155, 180, 188–89; assemblages and, 25, 82–85; consumer's, 77–79; end of time and, 16–17, 29, 90, 118, 120, 148–49, 153–54; finance and, 6, 16, 24, 33, 34, 37, 40–42, 45, 48, 64; humanist, 14, 19, 28, 30, 89, 173; iterant, 106–9; progress and, 2, 5, 9, 15, 26, 49, 55, 67, 77, 145, 157; redemptive, 23, 26, 56, 72, 111, 146, 154, 184; reproductive, 142–44; socialist and postsocialist, 10, 31, 33, 48–49, 71, 96, 158; spatial, 47, 59, 67, 74; teleological, 40, 45, 165, 189

Gandhi, Evyn Lê Espiritu, 196n12, 219n1
Gaza, 29, 180

General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
(GATT), 11, 70

Geneva Accords, 117, 212–13n4

Geneva Conventions, 168

Gill, Michael and Nirmala Erevelles, 155

Giroux, Henry, 15, 68

Glissant, Édouard, 4, 10, 20, 24, 37, 39

Gonzalez, Alberto, 168, 170

Gordon, Avery, 99, 124

Grenada Revolution, 16, 151, 153, 165, 167

grief, 21, 24, 30, 34–37, 40, 53–57; refugees and,
178; state and, 162–63; tragedy and, 182–84

Grosz, Elizabeth, 76

habeas corpus, 89

Halberstam, J. Jack, 142, 146

Hanoi, 47, 49, 51, 74, 79, 99, 115, 159, 197n13

Harman, Graham, 122–23

Harms, Erik, 33, 34, 45, 198nn39,41

Hartman, Saidiya, 5, 111, 147

Harvey, David, 66

haunting, 22, 24, 26, 27, 120, 124, 126, 136,

148, 157–58; commodity and, 121–23, 136;

disability and, 155–56; feminine, 119, 126,

147–48; queer, 119, 126, 142, 148; Saigon and,

78; South Vietnam and, 126, 147, 167; tragedy

and, 183–84; violence and, 109–10, 111

Hayot, Eric, 66

Heart Sutra, 21

Hegel, G. W. F.: *Antigone* and, 27–28, 157, 165,
182–84; dialectic and, 39, 56, 156; Lordship
and Bondage, 5–6, 8–9, 113; progressive
historiography and, 8–10, 83, 94

Hildebrand, George and Gareth Porter, 164

Hirsch, Marianne, 177

Hmong, 12, 19, 92, 167

Hồ Biểu Chánh, 77

Hồ Chí Minh, 48, 100–102, 106, 165, 210n62,
222n39

Ho Chi Minh City, 31, 47, 52, 74, 78, 159. *See also*
Saigon

Hồ Hữu Tường, 124

Hồ Minh Dũng, 120, 124, 133, 136, 147. *See also*
“Người Ăn Mày Trên Phố Bolsa”

homo sacer, 6–7

Hong, Grace K., 5, 40, 65

Hong, Mai-Linh, 18

Hồ Ngọc Cẩn, 150

Honig, Bonnie, 115, 182

Hồ Trầm, 46–47

Hullot-Kentor, Robert, 30

humanism: antihumanism, 39–40, 109;

dehumanization and, 17–18, 20, 60, 148, 163,

181; epistemology and, 19, 20, 22, 26, 27, 37,

38–40, 87, 122–23; fragmentation in, 25, 63,

78–80, 82, 85; historiography and, 13, 16–17,

22, 89–90, 115, 143, 153–54; human worth, 24,

25, 173; interdiction in, 24, 83, 120, 151; Man

in, 8, 37–39; mastery in, 5–6, 143, 155–56;

modern, 6, 10, 12, 19, 23, 28, 60, 63, 168, 182;

refugees and, 176, 178–80; sovereignty and,

4, 18, 22–23, 59, 84, 99, 114, 119, 146; telos

in, 28, 29, 88, 157, 165, 189; violence and, 18,

93–95, 180

Humanitarian Operations (HO) Program, 176

Huynh, Alexandria, 36

Indigenous Peoples, 8, 36, 66, 90, 137–38, 151,

166; Cham, 36, 193n37; Châu Ro (Chơ

Ro), 36, 197n13, 200n67; Dega association,

92; indigeneity, 55, 141, 197n14; Ê Đê, 36;

K'ho, 36; Mạ, 36; studies, 4; Vietnam and,

50, 94, 145, 158, 197n13; Vietnamese settler

colonialism and, 36, 137, 197n13; Vietnam

War and, 10, 92; X'tieng, 36

Indochina, 8, 10, 11, 14, 36, 86, 88, 91–92, 165, 179

Indochinese bloc, 99

Iraq, 29, 152, 167, 168, 180

January 6th (event), 29, 156

Johnson, Lyndon B., 12

Jones, Saeed, 30

Kerry, John, 151

Khmer, 36, 95, 96, 98, 99, 137

Khmer Rouge, 10, 99, 110; colonization and,

95–96, 99; mass killing by, 26, 86–87, 96, 97,

110; race and, 95, 96, 99; revolution, 95–96;

truth and error and, 95–96, 99–100

Kim, Jodi, 4

King, Martin Luther King Jr., 12

King, Tiffany, 39, 95

Kipnis, Laura, 78

Kristeva, Julia, 79, 142

Ku Klux Klan, 15

labor: Asian, 60, 66; collective action, 61,

70–72; colonialism and, 8, 38, 60, 91, 202n3;

disposability and, 4, 5, 15–17, 25, 39, 60, 68, 82;

feminized, 58, 66–67, 75–78, 81; racialized, 25,

59–60, 65–66, 135; surplus, 16, 25, 40, 59, 63,

65–66; truth and value in, 9, 10, 94–95, 121–22,

165; Vietnam (Socialist) and, 64–65, 70–73, 79,

145, 159, 171; Vietnamese refugee, 60–61, 65

- Lai, Thanhha, 84
 Lam, Mariam B., 153, 165–66, 176
 land: protest, 24, 34–35, 51–57; settler colonialism and, 35–36; speculation and, 24, 31–34, 40–51
 land reform: in North Vietnam, 25–26, 88, 95, 100–110; in South Vietnam, 100–101, 102–3, 118
 Laos, 10, 11, 12–13, 92
 Lê Duẩn, 130
 Lee, Rachel, 82–83
 LeMay, Curtis, 92
 Levinas, Emmanuel, 138, 148
 Lê Xuân Khoa, 176
 liberation, 1, 2, 6, 16, 18–19, 72, 82, 100, 153, 157, 158; *giải phóng*, 32; national, 118, 119, 126, 129, 148, 152, 158, 163–64; violence and, 6, 10, 11, 25–26, 86–90, 92–96, 100–110, 149
 life: after catastrophe, 27, 35, 55, 61, 84, 116, 117, 144, 146, 148; death and, 4, 6, 8, 20, 28, 38–39, 42, 56, 57, 90–92, 97–100, 103–5, 109–10, 142, 154, 184; economics of, 67–69; sovereignty and, 6, 11; truth and, 10, 17, 26, 87, 94–97, 110, 112–16, 139, 140, 155. *See also* biopolitics
 Little Saigon, 133, 134, 153, 165, 175
 Loicano, Martin, 173
 “Lời Nguyễn Trọng Không” (Nguyễn Mạnh Côn), 120, 124, 126–33
 Lowe, Lisa, 8
 Ly, Boreth, 98

 magical realism, 120–24
 Make America Great Again (MAGA), 1, 29, 30, 151, 172. *See also* Trump
 Malkki, Liisa, 18
 Mankekar, Purnima, 39
 Marcuse, Herbert, 76
 Marx, Karl: capital, 40–41; commodity, 94–95, 121–22, 123, 136, 143; labor, 65, 94–95; production, 82; proletariat, 207n97
 Marxism, 39, 71, 82, 122, 124, 165, 166; historiography and, 80, 96, 144, 184; Marxism-Leninism, 10, 33, 71, 95; terror and, 10, 94–95, 96, 101–2, 107; theory of value in, 9, 10, 94–95
 masculinity: consumption and, 137–41; femininity and, 78, 126, 129–33, 137; proletarian class and, 25, 63, 65, 72–73, 78; refugee, 135, 178; sovereignty and, 9, 73, 119, 131, 143, 147–48
 mastery: colonial and imperial, 6, 91, 95, 156, 180; epistemology and, 19, 27, 156; humanist 5–6, 8–9, 10, 15, 17, 20, 22, 34, 89, 94, 144, 153, 154; liberatory, 17, 19, 95, 143, 146. *See also* Hegel; sovereignty
 Mbembe, Achille, 7–8, 10, 42, 90, 94, 95
 McKittrick, Katherine, 20
 Mekong Delta, 82, 124
 melancholy, 22–23, 116, 136; imperial, 146, 167; left, 165–66, 179; refugee, 176, 180; white, 171–72, 175, 179
 memorialization, 25–26, 87, 97, 116; Boat People Memorials, 177; Choeung Ek, 25–26, 86–87, 97–100, 110; Missing Piece Project, 166–67; Moving Wall Memorial, 166–67; postwar Vietnam, 48, 161–63; refugee, 150, 177, 178–79; Vietnam Veterans Memorial, 151, 166
 memory: the dead and, 20, 28, 100, 110, 150, 154–55, 156, 157, 160, 166, 178–80, 181–84, 189; forgetting and, 27–28, 154–58, 184–89; free of, 20, 30; knowledge and, 4–5, 22, 56, 110, 111; postmemory, 177; refugee, 27–28, 124, 134, 135, 139, 140, 141, 148, 151–52, 153, 154–58, 175–81, 184–89; U.S. and, 152–53, 163–75; Vietnam (Socialist) and, 152–53, 158–63
 Miller, Steve, 172
 Mirzoeff, Nicholas, 15, 89
 modernization, 12, 17, 92; Vietnam and, 24, 31, 32, 33, 42, 45–50, 64, 71, 72, 84
 Moten, Fred, 19, 90
 “Mở Tương Lai” (Đăng Thơ Thơ), 124, 141–48
 mourning, 22, 54–55, 56–57, 113, 160–62, 175–81.
See also grief; memory
 Mỹ Lai massacre, 158, 174

 nationalism, 9–10, 125, 144; anticolonial, 10, 93–94, 97, 117, 118, 129, 163–64; Chinese, 29; ethnonationalism, 11–12; national singular in, 10, 94, 192n32; refugees and, 154, 166, 176, 178–79; South Vietnam and, 117–18, 128, 129, 130–31, 135, 147, 173; U.S. and, 11–12, 66, 123, 151, 172, 174–75; Vietnam (Socialist) and, 29, 72, 132, 159
 National Liberation Front (Mặt Trận Dân Tộc Giải Phóng Miền Nam Việt Nam), 1, 10, 131, 150, 152, 156, 159, 161, 163, 178; Indigenous Peoples and, 197n13, 200n67; Tết Offensive and, 89, 114, 163
 Nazi, 6, 90, 106, 128
 necropolitics, 6–11, 39, 55, 90, 97, 100, 103.
See also death
 neoliberalism, 5, 17, 13, 24, 25, 48, 61, 169. *See also* consumption; freedom; sovereignty
 New Economic Zones, 36, 50, 145, 158, 197n13, 218n90
 Ngô, Fiona, Mimi Thi Nguyen, and Mariam B. Lam, 153
 Ngô Đình Diệm, 52, 118, 127, 129, 179

- Ngô Đình Nhu, 118
 “Người Ăn Mày Trên Phố Bolsa” (Hồ Minh Dũng), 124, 133–36
nguy, 95, 131, 133, 145
 Nguyen, Duy Lap, 118
 Nguyen, Ly Thuy, 147
 Nguyen, Mai Phuong, 177
 Nguyen, Viet Thanh, 29, 103, 147, 175, 179
 Nguyen, Vinh, 22, 60, 133, 149
 Nguyễn Danh Bằng, 120, 124, 136–41, 147.
 See also “Phòng Lạ”
 Nguyễn dynasty, 99
 Nguyễn Mạnh Côn, 120, 124, 126–33, 136, 141, 147.
 See also “Lời Nguyễn Trong Không”
 Nguyễn Ngọc Loan, 88–89, 114–15
 Nguyễn Tấn Dũng, 47, 52, 160
 Nguyễn Thái Tuấn, 88, 100, 103–10, 116. *See also*
 Black Painting No. 40
 Nguyễn thị Hiến, 37
 Nguyễn Thị Năm, 101–2, 109, 116, 210n61
 Nguyễn Tuấn, 115
 Nguyễn Văn Lém, 89, 114–15
 Nguyễn Văn Long, 150
 Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, 118
 Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm Affair, 202n7
 Nhơn Trạch, 46, 47–49
 Nixon, Richard M., 14
 North Vietnam (Democratic Republic of Vietnam), 10, 25–26, 27, 36, 72, 117–18, 124, 150; anticolonialism in, 93, 163; Cambodia and, 92, 99; U.S. war against, 92, 164; war with South Vietnam, 130, 152, 173, 181.
 See also land reform

 Obama, Barack H., 152, 162, 170–71
Oedipus at Colonus (Sophocles), 183–84
 ontology: alternative, 20–23, 64, 82–83, 106, 119–20, 122–23; humanist, 17, 122. *See also* being
 Operation Frequent Wind, 2
 Owens, Margaret E., 83

 Paredes, Oona, 197n14
 Park, Josephine, 37
 Pathet Lao, 10, 12
 people of color, 28, 38, 68. *See also* race
 People’s Army of Vietnam, 11, 101, 189
 Phạm Thị Hoài, 61, 74–81, 202n7. *See also*
 “Tiềm Mây Sài Gòn”
 “Phòng Lạ” (Nguyễn Danh Bằng), 124, 136–41
 photography, 86, 90, 97–98, 107–8, 112, 115;
 iconic, 26, 114–16; Land Reform Campaign and, 26, 88, 105–10, 114

 Phu, Thy, 115
 Phú Mỹ Hưng, 43, 47
 poetic knowledge, 19, 21, 24, 37–40, 53, 55–56, 188. *See also* Césaire; Glissant
Poetics of Relation, The (Glissant), 20
 Polanyi, Karl, 117
 Pollock, Griselda, 97, 98, 107, 112–13, 114
 progress: dialectical, 5, 34, 39, 157, 158, 165, 182–84; economics of, 15–17, 42–43, 45, 59, 63, 64–65, 67, 72, 84; historiography of, 4, 8–9, 12, 13, 22, 25, 64, 115, 142–43, 145; humanist, 4, 5, 12, 13, 17, 20, 28, 59, 81, 115–16; narrativization of, 15, 188; politics of, 27–28, 29, 33, 64–65, 79, 83, 84–85, 151, 152–55, 157, 163–64, 165–66; violence of, 87, 89–96, 103, 108, 115; visualization of, 15, 89–90
 Project Ngoc, 177
 protest, 34–35; demonstration as, 34, 51–52, 53–54; labor, 59, 62, 70–72; land, 24, 44, 47, 52–57; refugees and, 148, 165–66
 puppet, 14, 95, 102, 109, 158; South Vietnamese as, 2, 118, 129, 131, 145, 148, 163, 164–65

 Quán Thế Âm Bồ Tát (Avalokiteshvara), 21, 84
 Quashie, Kevin, 19
 queerness: reproduction and, 142–44; sociality and, 27, 126, 145, 148; temporality and, 119–20, 126, 141–47, 148

 race and racism, 4, 7, 29, 82–83; anticolonialism and, 9–11, 92–94, 96, 97, 99, 209n33; biopolitics and, 7–8; colonialism and, 7–11, 90–93, 97–98, 123; color line, 11, 38; economics of, 15–17, 25, 59–61, 65–66, 67, 78, 79, 84–85; historiography and, 15–17, 19; human worth and, 15, 12–15, 36; refugees and, 18, 20, 25, 27, 59–61, 83–84, 115, 123, 133–36, 146–47, 148, 163, 165–66, 170, 171–72, 174–75, 180; U.S. and, 3, 11–15, 19, 27, 29, 83, 88, 110–13, 118, 133–36, 151, 152, 169, 174–75, 181; violence and, 5, 7–11, 11–14, 90–94; war propaganda and, 94, 209n33
 racial capitalism, 15–16, 65–66, 82. *See also* Cedric Robinson
 Reagan, Ronald, 151
 reason: humanist, 8, 24, 19, 35, 38, 40, 91, 123, 182, 188; knowledge and, 21, 28, 38–40, 56, 95, 121–23, 124, 126, 132, 155, 188; life and, 87, 110, 116; political expression and, 52; 35, 37, 56, 57; race and, 8, 38, 123–24; terror and, 95–100, 102, 107

- reconciliation: dialectical, 27–28, 146;
irreconcilability, 114, 116, 181–85, 189; refugees
and, 28–30, 156–57, 159, 162, 181, 184–85
- redemption: allegory and, 64, 81–83; capitalist, 4,
282; Christian, 38; heteronormative, 146–47;
history and, 145–46, 184, 154; mastery and,
2, 8–9, 95, 143; sovereignty and, 11, 16, 26, 30,
64, 72, 82–83, 94, 95; telos and, 88, 109.
See also Enlightenment; future
- Reed, Thuy, 175
- reeducation camps, 50, 133, 145, 158–59, 176,
218nn88,89, 220n23
- refuge, 2, 4, 17–18, 19, 27, 30; allegorical
assemblages as, 25, 84; grief as, 24; haunting
as, 27, 126, 133, 148–49; the untimely as, 28,
157, 158, 184–85; witnessing as, 26, 87
- refugee(s), 4, 18, 23, 36; crises of, 28, 29; Critical
Refugee Studies, 4, 22; human rights and, 18,
168; methods and, 17–24, 27, 117; racialization
of, 13–14, 118, 147, 133–35; refugee regimes, 18,
26, 87, 113; violence and, 86, 88, 103. *See also*
Vietnamese refugees
- “Refugees, The” (Jarrell), 178
- relationality, 21, 39, 62, 99, 145, 197nn16
- representation, 19, 23, 26, 29, 123, 126; literary,
125; politics of 24, 34, 35, 37, 38, 39–40, 51–52,
55, 109, 184; symbolic, 25, 62–64, 70, 77, 82;
visual, 26, 98, 103, 113–14
- revolution, 2, 9, 23, 39, 82, 145–46, 151, 153–54,
156, 158, 163; color revolutions, 52–53,
56; historiography and, 16–17, 25, 71, 89,
142–43, 145–46, 153–54, 158; Maoist, 95, 96;
Marxist-Leninist, 95; nationalist, 128, 143,
146, 153; socialist, 10, 23, 32, 38, 49, 122, 145,
146, 153, 158, 165; violence and, 5, 10–11, 15, 21,
25–26, 86–87, 88, 91–110, 116, 163, 181
- Rich, Adrienne, 116
- Robinson, Cedric, 15–16, 65
- Roh, David, 60
- Roh, Franz, 122
- ruins, 5, 154; Benjamin and, 63–64, 83; capitalist,
25, 64; human, 17, 23, 84; time and, 17, 20, 153,
158. *See also* Baroque period; fragments
- Rydstrom, Helle, 91
- Sade, Marquis de, 89
- Said, Edward, 153, 179
- Saigon, 1, 32, 74, 78–79, 137, 148, 173, 185, 189;
Fall of, 141, 146, 150; Kabul and, 14, 18, 180,
181; postwar changes, 15–61
Saigon Execution (Adams), 114
- Sartre, Jean-Paul, 10, 92–93, 94, 100
- Schlund-Vials, Cathy, 96, 100, 153
- Schmitt, Carl, 42, 89
- Scott, David, 16, 81, 153
- Second Indochina War (1950s–1975), 126, 130.
See also Vietnam War
- Sedgwick, Eve, 19, 21
- settler colonialism: European, 8, 125–26;
U.S., 8, 36, 125–26; Vietnamese, 11, 24, 36, 40,
125–26, 185. *See also* Indigenous Peoples
- shamanism, 37, 53
- Sisavath, Davorn, 12, 92
- slavery, 4–5, 8, 38, 91, 123; contemporary, 15, 68;
mastery and, 5–6, 63
- socialism: anticolonial, 10, 88, 94, 158; capital
accumulation in, 5; gender and, 61–63, 72–74,
143; historiography and, 84, 114, 143, 145–46,
153–54, 165; industrial, 64–65; labor activism
and, 70–72; labor camps and, 145, 158–59;
late socialism, 25, 33, 48–49, 52, 54, 59, 61,
73–74; materialism and 121–22; melancholy
and, 165–66; New Socialist Man, 50, 143;
postsocialism, 78, 143, 153; proletariat and,
61–63, 65, 70, 72–74; scientific, 39, 107;
socialist dispossession, 36, 40, 43–44, 48,
54, 106, 179; socialist iconography, 51, 53,
107; socialist modernity, 45, 64–65; socialist
realism, 31, 33, 107; sovereignty in, 6, 55, 57,
70, 83. *See also* revolution
- Sontag, Susan, 115
- sorrow, 6, 30, 60, 61–62, 84–85, 103, 184, 188, 189;
comedy and, 74–81
- sorrow play (*trauerspiel*), 23, 63, 81
- Southeast Asia, 91; war in, 92, 164, 167
- Southeast Asians, 21, 66, 151, 166, 171; deportation
of, 172; refugee activism, 124, 125, 170, 176–77
- Southeast Asia Resource Action Center
(SEARAC), formerly Indochina Refugee
Action Center (IRAC), 176–77
- South Vietnam (Republic of Vietnam), 1, 2, 52,
117–18, 124, 129, 130, 146, 174, 178; anticolonial
forces in, 117–18, 129, 164, 187; Army of, 2, 133,
150, 160, 179; end of, 26–27, 29, 124, 133, 136,
141, 142–43, 146, 150, 152, 180–81; erasure of,
145, 152, 158–63, 172, 173–74; First Republic, 2,
52, 100–101, 118, 160, 187; Indigenous Peoples
and, 36; literature in, 119–21, 122, 124, 126,
147–48; military action by, 10, 12–13, 92, 99;
people in, 145, 166–67; Second Republic,
100–101, 102–3, 118, 126, 159–61, 172–75, 187;
sovereignty and, 27, 129, 130, 135, 146; U.S.
and, 12–13, 129, 130, 131–33, 156, 163–64,
166–68, 173–74. *See also* Vietnam War

- sovereignty: allegory and, 25, 82–85; grief and, 34, 35, 37, 55, 56–57; haunting and, 119–20, 126, 129–31, 140–41, 144, 147–49; historiography and, 4, 12, 17, 23; humanist, 5–6, 9, 51–52, 53, 55, 56, 58–59, 63, 70, 72, 74, 78, 81–82, 87, 88, 89, 90–94, 119, 144, 154; liberation and, 9–11, 25–26, 87, 91–94, 152; methods and, 18–23, 24; nation and, 27, 28–29, 55, 83, 117, 118, 126, 129–31, 135, 137, 145, 146, 152, 156, 164; neoliberal, 64, 78, 80, 82, 84, 140–41; race and, 7–15, 90, 119, 147; refugee and, 18, 27, 29, 83–84, 118, 119, 125, 135, 141, 147–49, 157, 180–81; U.S. imperialism and 11–15, 156, 168, 173; violence and, 5–15, 17, 23, 25–26, 88, 90–94, 154; witnessing and, 26, 99, 111–16, 180–81. *See also* mastery
- Soviet Union, 11, 93, 164
- Spargo, R. Clifton, 178
- Spiller, Hortense, 4
- state of exception, 7, 23, 42–43, 49, 81, 89–90
- Su, Phi Hong, 113, 181
- superfluity, 40–42, 45, 49
- Sutton, Damian, 106, 107
- Syria, 29, 180
- Tadiar, Neferti, 16, 42, 43, 65, 67, 103
- Tale of Kiều* (Nguyễn Du), 144, 187
- Tambree, Kali, 6
- Tan, Thanh, 173–74
- techno-Orientalism, 60
- terror: colonial, 7–8, 90–91; Marxist, 10, 94–95, 96, 101–2, 107; revolutionary, 86, 91, 94–97, 101–3, 159; truth and, 95–100, 102, 107, 110
- Tết Offensive (1968), 88–89, 114–15; massacre in Huế during, 158, 163
- Thanh Tâm Tuyền, 216n46
- Thích Quảng Độ, 52
- Third World, 17, 38, 123, 125
- Thorez, Maurice, 39
- Thù Thiêm, 31–33, 45
- Thụy Khuê, 120
- “Tiệm May Sài Gòn” (Phạm Thị Hoài), 61–62, 74–81
- time and history: alternative, 126, 155; death and, 97–98, 107–8, 112–13; end of, 16–17, 72, 146; irreconcilability in the untimely, 158, 184–85, 188–89; iterant, 107–10; lag in, 12, 17, 20, 63, 67, 82, 84–85, 91; narrativization of, 15, 188–89; progress and, 33, 42–43, 71–72, 84–85, 138, 182; queer temporality, 141–46, 146–47; redemption and, 91, 95, 109, 145–46, 147; rupture, 26, 146, 157–58; space and, 25, 42–43, 58–59, 62–63, 67–68, 78–90, 138; trans temporality, 141–46, 148; visualization of, 8, 15, 89–90
- Tố Hữu, 72, 73
- Tonkin, 91, 128
- Toul Sleng, 96, 98, 100
- tragedy, 28, 81, 144, 157, 181–85
- Tran, Angie Ngoc, 67, 72
- Tran, Quan Tue, 162, 177
- Trần Đình, 101, 102
- trans temporality, 141–46, 148
- Trotskyists, 129, 164, 187, 215n41, 222n39
- Trump, Donald J., 1, 28, 29, 123, 152, 156–57, 163, 168, 171–72
- truth: Enlightenment and, 10, 26; error and, 19, 26, 94–97, 98, 99, 102, 100, 103, 110, 113–14; life and 10, 17, 26, 87, 94–97, 110, 112–16, 139, 140, 155; terror and, 95–100, 102, 107, 110
- Ukraine, 29, 180
- Um, Khatharya, 98, 99, 100, 110, 153
- United Buddhist Church of Vietnam (Giáo Hội Phật Giáo Việt Nam Thống Nhất), 52
- United States: Afghanistan and, 13–14; capitalism in, 41, 126; citizenship in, 66; division of labor in, 25, 59; imperialism and, 10, 11–14, 37, 91–92, 118; Israel and, 56; Left-wing politics in, 163–66; racism in, 14, 66, 83, 118, 123, 133–34, 147, 171–72, 174; Right-wing politics in, 166–72; Southeast Asia and, 11–14, 91–92, 97, 99; Vietnam and, 162, 171. *See also* Cambodia; South Vietnam; Vietnamese refugees; Vietnam War
- Vang, Ma, 19
- Viet Cong, 1, 115. *See also* National Liberation Front
- Viet Minh, 100, 101, 117, 129, 161, 185, 209n33, 215n42
- Vietnam, 2, 5, 11, 29, 117, 148; anticolonialism in, 9–10, 101, 124, 126–27, 128, 129, 146, 161, 185, 186, 187; Cambodia and 16, 26, 36, 86, 99, 87, 97, 100, 110, 193n37; Indigenous Peoples and, 36, 50, 94, 145, 158, 197n13; labor and, 16, 25, 58–60, 61–63, 64–81, 82–85, 121; land issues in, 16, 24, 31–37, 42–57; literature in, 119, 125, 202n7; memorialization by, 26, 97–99, 152, 158–63, 185, 189; neoliberalization, 23, 64–65; postwar (Socialist Republic of Vietnam), 11, 16, 27, 145, 158–59, 185; U.S. and, 162, 170–72; precolonial, 11, 86, 99; settler colonialism by, 24, 36, 125–26, 185, 197n13. *See also* North Vietnam; South Vietnam

- Vietnamese Americans, 20, 26, 125, 150, 151, 154;
memory and, 163, 165–66, 171–72, 174–81.
See also Vietnamese refugees
- Vietnamese Communist Party, 10, 93, 130,
187; Đổi Mới and, 64–65; as Indochinese
Communist Party, 72; Land Reform and,
100–103, 106; modernization and, 33–34, 45,
64–65; monopoly by, 24, 52, 70–71, 158–59,
215n42, 222n39; workers and, 70–74; as
Workers' Party, 117
- Vietnamese literature. *See* Vietnam; Vietnamese
refugees
- Vietnamese refugees, 16, 21, 23, 50, 74; activism
by, 176–77; anticommunism and, 151, 154,
157, 163, 164–65, 175–79, 181; Boat People,
16, 165, 177; deportation of, 83, 175, 223n66;
displacement and, 24, 34, 36–37, 56; ethics
and, 146–49; haunting and, 27, 119–46;
Indigenous Peoples and, 36; knowledge and,
27, 37, 87; literature by, 26, 27, 117, 118–21,
122, 124, 125–26, 213n6; MAGA and, 29;
memory and, 27–28, 150–58, 175–81, 184–89;
racialization of, 13, 118, 134–35; racism
against, 148, 165–66, 175–76; refugee camps
and, 16, 177; U.S. politics and, 29, 163–72;
witnessing and, 26, 87, 110–16, 180–81;
working class, 25, 59–61, 66, 83, 84, 157
- Vietnamese Revolution, 72–73, 146, 157;
Indigenous Peoples and, 94, 179; Land
Reform Campaign, 100–110, 158–63.
See also Vietnamese Communist Party
- Vietnam syndrome, 151, 167
- Vietnam War, 10, 126, 129–30; anti-war
movement and, 14; atrocities in, 114–15, 158,
163, 174; Blacks and, 12, 14, 92; body count in,
10, 150–51; Chicanos and, 12; end of time and,
16, 153–54; iconic images from, 26, 88–89,
103, 114–16; military casualties in, 12–13;
refugee memory of, 150–58, 175–81, 184–89;
Socialist Republic of Vietnam memory
of, 158–63; Southeast Asian casualties in,
10, 12–13, 150–51; U.S. and, 11–13, 14–15, 92,
130–32, 136, 147; U.S. memory of, 163–75; U.S.
troops in, 12, 92; Vietnamization and, 12, 13.
See also South Vietnam
- violence. *See* anticolonialism; colonialism;
humanism; liberation; race; revolution;
sovereignty; terror
- Von Bothmer, Bernard, 167
- Võ Sũu, 114
- Vũng Tàu, 1, 46, 162, 185, 187
- Vuong, Ocean, 56, 113
- War on Terror, 152, 168–70
- Wehiliye, Alexander G., 4
- white marches, 34–35, 40, 52–57
- white supremacy, 5, 15, 28–29, 30, 123, 147, 151,
152, 156, 163, 171–72
- Wilder, Gary, 188, 189
- Wilkens, Matthew, 85
- witnessing: refugees and, 23, 25–26, 87, 88–89,
110–17, 180–81; testimony and, 112, 115
- workers, 58–85; living and working conditions,
67–70, 82. *See also* labor
- World Trade Organization (WTO), 11, 70
- World War II, 2, 9–10, 11, 169, 185, 186–87;
postwar, 13, 18, 70, 87, 91, 93, 97, 117, 168
- Wretched of the Earth*, *The* (Fanon), 10, 92–93.
See also Fanon
- Wynter, Sylvia, 8, 18–19, 35, 37–38, 82, 91, 123
- X, Malcolm, 12
- Yoneyama, Lisa, 12, 166

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