

# 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.<sup>1</sup>

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."<sup>2</sup>

Such a journey necessarily becomes errant in the ways that Édouard Glissant may have meant.<sup>3</sup> 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."<sup>4</sup> 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,"<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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?”<sup>7</sup> 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.”<sup>8</sup> 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.”<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.”<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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."<sup>17</sup> 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."<sup>18</sup> 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."<sup>19</sup>

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.”<sup>20</sup> 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.”<sup>21</sup>

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,<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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."<sup>24</sup> 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."<sup>25</sup> 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."<sup>26</sup> 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,"<sup>27</sup> and such act would give birth to new nations.<sup>28</sup> 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 *tâm 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,<sup>29</sup> 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.”<sup>30</sup> 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.”<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup>

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.<sup>33</sup> 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.”<sup>34</sup> 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.”<sup>35</sup>

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.<sup>36</sup> 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.<sup>37</sup> 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,<sup>38</sup> as well as the myriad ethnoracial differentiations within the colony for the purpose of colonial governance.<sup>39</sup> 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.”<sup>40</sup> 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.”<sup>41</sup> 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.”<sup>42</sup> 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.<sup>43</sup> 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.<sup>44</sup>

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.<sup>45</sup> 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.<sup>46</sup> In April of 2020, COVID deaths in the United States were said to have reached the number of American dead in the Vietnam War.<sup>47</sup> 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.<sup>48</sup> 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.”<sup>49</sup> 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’”<sup>50</sup> with pronouncements in 2021 that “our mission in Afghanistan was never supposed to be nation-building.”<sup>51</sup> 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. 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.”<sup>52</sup> 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.<sup>53</sup> 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.<sup>54</sup> 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.<sup>55</sup> 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.”<sup>56</sup> 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.”<sup>57</sup> 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.<sup>58</sup> 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.”<sup>59</sup> 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.”<sup>60</sup> 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.<sup>61</sup> 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.”<sup>62</sup> 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.<sup>63</sup> For the forces of progress in their day after the French Revolution, representations now “had to be located in History.”<sup>64</sup> 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.”<sup>65</sup> Kevin Bales estimates the enslaved number “twenty-seven million” in the world today.<sup>66</sup> 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.”<sup>67</sup> 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.<sup>68</sup> 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.”<sup>69</sup> 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.”<sup>70</sup> 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.<sup>71</sup> 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.”<sup>72</sup> 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.”<sup>73</sup> 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.<sup>74</sup> The poem refutes death’s truth as all encompassing, a critique that has been leveled at Afropessimism for centering death in Black being.<sup>75</sup> 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,”<sup>76</sup> permitting “dual descriptive statements and thereby of our modes/genres of being human.”<sup>77</sup> 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.”<sup>78</sup> 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.”<sup>79</sup> 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.”<sup>80</sup> 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.<sup>81</sup> 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.”<sup>82</sup> 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.”<sup>83</sup> 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.<sup>84</sup> 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,"<sup>85</sup> 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 unshored 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. Yến Lê 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.”<sup>86</sup> 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.<sup>87</sup> 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.”<sup>88</sup> 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.”<sup>89</sup> 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.”<sup>90</sup> 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.”<sup>91</sup> 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.<sup>92</sup> 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 interdiction 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.”<sup>93</sup> 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.<sup>94</sup> 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.”<sup>95</sup> 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,”<sup>96</sup> 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.