

# The Sovereignty of Grief

## *Land Protest and Speculative Time*

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

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



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

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

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



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

compensation and eviction of residents, the demolition of homes and places of worship, and the repossession of the land. The government's hand in laying waste to places, communities, and people is justified in the now nostalgic language of socialist realism—futurist, hopeful, collectivist, and militant—in documents, press coverage, and mobilization billboards. This language of the socialist future past is deployed to rhetorically facilitate the move towards speculative capitalism under one-party rule. This is what Erik Harms refers to as “late socialism,” in which there is still “a staunch belief in the possibility for rational human planning to pave the way to a better future.”<sup>22</sup> In continuity with twentieth-century state socialism underwritten by Marxism-Leninism, the future of Vietnam as a place and places within it is, as Harms puts it, “framed by the linear notion of progress forward through time on the path toward modernization (*hiện đại hóa*).”<sup>23</sup> That better future is now speculative in new ways. Development requires capital investment, and hence an opportunity for speculation as the land awaits projected value-added transformation in forward-looking time. The process could also be understood in the reverse: it is speculation that spurs this process of repossession and development. Future time determines the social relations of the present as it strips the present of its past. What at first looks like a simple progressive temporality towards modernization may work in complex ways to produce profit for

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### POETIC KNOWLEDGE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### SUPERFLUITY: THE EXISTENTIALLY SURPLUS IN TEMPORAL ZONES OF EXCEPTION

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

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

selling his product as commodity capital to convert it into money capital, with which he then purchases new means of production as a different kind of commodity capital in  $C^2$ - $M$ - $C$ . Commercial capital conversion, on the other hand, can be represented in  $M$ - $C$ - $M'$ , where  $M$  is money,  $C$  is commodity, and  $M'$  is money plus profit. In other words, the merchant advances his money to buy the commodity only to turn around and sell the same commodity later, converting it back to money, hopefully with a profit.<sup>30</sup> In contrast, the credit-driven formula of financial capital can be understood as a shortened  $M$ - $M'$  process for the investor, where money makes more money, seemingly bypassing the commodity phase.<sup>31</sup> Using Marx's formulation of the various kinds of capital allows us to see that what today's investors speculate upon is not the future value of the commodity, but the future value of the money that has absorbed the commodity phase into itself. Beyond the stock exchange where investors speculate on the future profit of companies providing goods and services, this speculative capital functions in loans not only bearing interest but, more importantly, generating debts with risks that can be speculated upon as though they were commodities. Where Marx thought such dimension of capitalism would stay in check in relation to the rest of the economy until periodic moments of crisis when debt servicing outstrips the means of debtors to pay, interrupting the possibility of conversion of money into commodities and back again, our economy since at least the 1970s has embraced its financialization in which the circulation of projected "fictitious capital" outpaces production in the commodity capital conversion process.<sup>32</sup> In the United States, according to the Flow of Funds Accounts published by the Federal Reserve, "the value of total financial assets was approximately five times US GDP in 1980; by 2007, this ratio had doubled."<sup>33</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tourist resorts built to match visions of tropical paradise comprised the next category of land development that infused numbers with speculative fantasy in Vietnam. These projects required land appropriation, and hence most would require dispossession of local residents. Vietnam received increasing numbers of tourists each year. In 2019, the last year before pandemic disruptions, Vietnam received 18 million foreign visitors, generating an annual revenue of 755 trillion VND, or 9.2 percent of its annual GDP.<sup>54</sup> Vietnamese tourist resorts number in the thousands, attracting both foreign and domestic tourists. Each tourist resort has a history that speaks to this process of dispossession through land appropriation and development. One high-profile hub is the Hồ Tràm Strip, spread out along 2.2 kilometers of sandy beaches. The Hồ Tràm Strip is an investment project in a Vegas-style playground consisting of casinos, hotels, golf courses, restaurants, multiple housing sites, and other recreational sites. The Asian Coast Development, Ltd., based in Canada with transnational capital, won the government concession for the first integrated casino resort development project through its subsidiary the Hồ Tràm Project Company, Ltd., in 2007.<sup>55</sup> The first phase of hotel

accommodations opened with 541 rooms in 2013, and another 599 rooms in 2015, at the price of 138 USD a night. The Bluffs, its golf course designed by the supposedly “legendary” Greg Norman, teed off in October 2014.<sup>56</sup> While it was being built, construction workers were getting paid an average of 3 million VND per month, less than 150 USD, and receptionists with college degrees earned an average of 4 million VND a month after its opening, roughly the price of one night in one of its hotel rooms.<sup>57</sup>

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### DEMONSTRATIONS

Farmers and others responded collectively in various ways to the entire process, which was rife with corruption at every level and every government office involved, favoring investors with money to grease every palm along the way. One form of collective response was demonstrations, one of the biggest of which took place in 2007.<sup>71</sup> On June 22, after the general election of the new National Assembly, roughly fifty to a hundred persons, mainly women, came from six provinces in the South to congregate with posters in front of National Building 2 in Ho Chi Minh City. I was able to observe only intermittently this growing protest when I could get through lines of plainclothes police and security agents. Even with tight security, the protesters' number swelled to seventeen hundred trucked in from nineteen provinces by the fourth week.<sup>72</sup> Very quickly, spokespersons emerged to make their demands known to the government and the public. The protesters' posters and banners denounced local governments and appealed to the central government to help them get fair compensation for their appropriated land or homes. To make their message intelligible to a state whose language was for so long one of Manichean struggle between the People and its enemy, some of the biggest of their banners read: "The government of the *Tiền Giang* Province is bought by the enemy to corrupt the policy of the Party and government." Visually, these protesters deployed the recognizable iconography of socialist struggle. Banners and flags were uniformly red, creating a revolutionary color effect.

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

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

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

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

#### WHITE MARCHES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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