

Iterant Remains

Witnessing Sovereign Violence

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

JURIDICAL VIOLENCE AND THE VISUALIZATION OF HISTORY

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

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

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

LIFE IN THE METROPOLE AND DEATH IN THE COLONY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

TRUTH IN LIFE AND DEATH AS ERROR

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE VISUAL MEDIATION OF POLITICAL MURDER

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ITERANT REMAINS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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