

Untimely Habitation

Irreconcilability and Refugee Memory

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

LIBERATORY MEMORY AND TRAITOROUS REFUGEES

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

AMERICAN MEMORY AND BACKWARD REFUGEES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

REFUGEE ANAMNESIS: THE POLITICS AND ETHICS OF MOURNING

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE IRRECONCILABILITY OF TRAGEDY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

HISTORY'S WOUND: APHASIA AND THE UNTIMELY

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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