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Revolutionary Others: Migratory Subjects and Vietnamese Radicalism in the U.S. During and After the Vietnam War

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy/Doctor of Musical Arts

in

Ethnic Studies

by

Ly Thuý Nguyễn

Committee in charge:

Professor Yen Le Espiritu, Chair
Professor Simeon Man
Professor Christen Sasaki
Professor Kalindi Vora
Professor K. Wayne Yang

2021

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University of California San Diego

2021

DEDICATION

Luận văn này viết gửi cho những đứa con sinh ra sau
một cuộc chiến đã chia cắt gia đình của chúng ta. Cho
gia đình tôi, những người nửa kia ở lại. Cho những người
tị nạn đã rời đi và trở lại kịp thời, hoặc bất cứ khi nào.

*For the (queer) children of a war that separate our
parents. For my family who stayed. For those who
left/and returned in time, anytime.*

Cho ông bà nội ngoại của con, những bàn chân đứng trong
một cơn can qua lịch sử đã luôn khiến con nghĩ về quá khứ.
Dành cho ba mẹ, với tầm nhìn về tương lai đã chỉ đường
cho con. Vì gia đình nhỏ tôi tìm thấy nơi tha hương. Tặng Quyên.

*For my grandparents, whose planted feet in an unsettled
history made me wonder about the past. And my parents,
whose visions for the future kept me focused. For my
found family members away from home. For Quyên.*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dissertation Approval Page iii

Dedication iv

Table of Contents v

List Of Figures vi

Acknowledgement vii

Vita xi

Abstract of the Dissertation xii

Notes xiii

introduction 1

Chapter 1: Anti-Nation: Vietnamese Antiwar Activism in The U.S. 26

Chapter 2: Revolution 2.0: Refugee Returns 72

Chapter 3: Queer Dis/Inheritance and Refugee Futures 119

Epilogue: Revolution Shuffle: Refugee Speculative Imaginary 152

References 163

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1: USAID Students Group II arriving in LAX Airport. Source: USAID Archive………………………………………………………………………... 26

Figure 1.2 Cover of Ramparts magazine, volume 4, issue 12, April 1966………. 41

Figure 1.3: Bình's funeral march in San Francisco, 1972. Source: UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press…………………………………………………… 65

Figure 1.4: Photograph of Bình's body being covered and carried off the tarmac by Vietnamese authorities. Source: United Press International, reprinted by Vietnamese newspapers, the Cedar Rapids Gazette and with alternation by the New York Times on the front page of their July 3, 1972 issue…………………… 68

Figure 3.1: Left: Close up of one of the vaults as showcased at University of Washington. Photo courtesy of Linh Thủy Nguyễn. Right: Photo of exhibition taken by author at the San Diego Art Institute, March 2019……………………… 132

Figure 3.2: Mother and child on a boat in a desert……………………………….. 151

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A version of chapter 3 has been published as an article entitled "Queer Dis/Inheritance and Refugee Futures" in *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 48, no. 1–2, pp 218–35, 2020. The dissertation author was the sole author of this material.

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Nguyen, Ly Thuy. “Queer Dis/Inheritance and Refugee Futures.” *WSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly*, vol. 48, no. 1–2, pp 218–35, 2020

FIELDS OF STUDY

Comparative Ethnic Studies, Cultural Studies, Vietnamese American Studies, Asian American Studies

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Revolutionary Others: Migratory Subjects and Vietnamese Radicalism
in the U.S. During and After the Vietnam War

by

Ly Thuý Nguyễn

Doctor of Philosophy in Ethnic Studies

University of California San Diego, 2021

Professor Yến Lê Espiritu, Chair

Bringing together Global Asian Studies, Southeast Asian American Studies, Critical Refugee Studies, and queer studies, my dissertation *Revolutionary Others: Migratory Subjects and Vietnamese Radicalism in the United States During and After the Vietnam War* reconsiders Vietnam War historiography, which overgeneralizes anticommunist politics amongst Vietnamese refugees, to highlight the undercurrent history of Vietnamese diasporic radicalism enacted by refugees, activists, and artists, who organize for their futures against the increasing violence of the U.S. empire. This project argues that America's contested relationships to the

vast range of Vietnamese political actors throughout the Vietnam War era have shaped the long 1960s' leftist social movements, undergirded America's turn to neoliberal conservatism post-1980, and continued to inform the current political polarizations around Trump's America. The Vietnamese diasporic radical left formation can be traced back to the late 1960s—including antiwar activism by South Vietnamese exchange students in the U.S., the leftist formation amongst second-generation refugee descendants, and the queer/feminist critique and refugee speculative imaginaries by Vietnamese American artists and writers. This history demonstrates an alternative genealogy of Vietnamese revolutionary politics outside the communist victory, rooted in past and ongoing engagements with cross-racial solidarities, queer people of color critique, and transnational feminist world-making. Based on three years of original multi-sited archival research and oral history interviews with Vietnamese/American activists in Vietnam and the United States, analyses of visual arts by Vietnamese American refugee and refugee descendant artists, and my auto/ethnography as a bilingual, transnational Vietnamese queer scholar, this interdisciplinary and mixed-methods research captures a multifaceted movement that exists on the streets, online, in art and intellectual spaces. While critical scholarship on U.S. militarism and refugeehood has focused on displacement, trauma, and the impacts of war in people's public and intimate life, Revolutionary Others reminds scholars to take seriously the agency and world-building politics and radical politics based on community engagement, grassroots organizing, and political education that refugees and their descendants envision and enact.

NOTES

The Vietnamese name structure starts with last name, followed by middle name, and ends with first name. In this dissertation, I keep this order for Vietnamese names. Not all names are spelled in full diacritics: I tried to find out the right way to spell most Vietnamese names, except for names that I cannot verify the correct way to add diacritics. Because many people share a last name (Nguyen in particular), I mostly refer to them on a first name basis for distinction. Historical actors are referred to in the historically accurate way that they are known to the American public such as Ho Chi Minh, Ngo Dinh Diem, who are both referred to by their last name and spelled without diacritics. Nguyen Van Thieu, however, because of his common last name and how his government was known as the "Thieu regime," was addressed by his first name.

Introduction

On June 10th and 11th 2018, thousands of people across multiple cities in Vietnam took the street protest the plan for long term special economic zones for foreign investors and a draconian cybersecurity legislation. A few hours into the demonstration, chaos broke out[1] when the police struck a protestor. This protest would be the first major national protest since the Fall of Saigon in 1975. Protestors filled the intersection of Nguyễn Văn Trỗi[2] and Nam Kỳ Khởi Nghĩa,[3] the two main streets of Saigon that were renamed after the war to commemorate the Vietnamese Revolution. In this historical moment, a strange player took the main stage: William (Will) Nguyen, a second-generation Vietnamese American visiting Vietnam, climbed on top of a police's van, leading people to pass through when the police cars barricaded the sea of people. Others quickly followed suit, flipping down police vehicles, making their way through. Soon after, the anti-riot Mobile Police and men in plain clothes were seen violently breaking up the protest, dragging protestors into unmarked vans. The protests would go on, under police brutality and the deployed sonic weapon blasting intensely from the Coast guard. from LRAD Corporations. This American-built Long-Range Acoustic Devices that the Vietnamese police purchased were weapons of U.S. military operations in Iraq and have been used to squander protests in the United

[1] Will Nguyen, Twitter post, June 9, 2018, 10:44, PM. https://twitter.com/will_nguyen_

[2] In 1964, National Liberation Front member Nguyễn Văn Trỗi's failed attempt to assassinate Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and future ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge on Công Lý bridge led to his capture and execution by the South Vietnamese firing squad in Chí Hoà prison. He was commemorated as a young hero that died for the revolutionary cause in Vietnam and all over the socialist world. In Cuba, a stadium was named after him. In chapter 2, Asian American activists in Los Angeles revoked his name in their protest against the Vietnam War.

[3] Nam Kỳ Khởi Nghĩa ("revolution of the South") was named after the Cochinchina armed uprising against the French and the Japanese in 1940.

States in recent years.[4] At the end of the day, hundreds of people were detained, amongst them was Will, his head bleeding, dragged away by men in plain clothes.

Having just finished his master's degree in Singapore, Will went to Vietnam on a tourist visa to join the mass mobilization that was publicized through social media days before the action. Because of his *lý lịch* ("questionable" profile as an overseas Vietnamese, euphemism for "potential subversive"), he ended up being the most publicized arrest. Authorities declared that he was arrested on the charges of "illegally protest, agitate people to revolt, disobey [traffic] authorities,"[5] set out to be seven years in prison. In the U.S., his family and friends started a campaign to raise awareness, pressuring a seemingly dispassionate Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to push Vietnam for his immediate release. More than a month later, on July 19th, Will was made to offer a public apology on Vietnamese national television, self-condemn his involvement in the "anti-state activities."[6] The next day, he got a one-day trial, found guilty of "public disorder." The release statement reads, "as a first-time offender and a foreigner who showed remorse,"[7] his criminal charges were dropped. His punishment was reduced to a fine and deportation. By August 3rd, Will has made his way home to Houston, Texas.

Revolutionary Others: Migratory Subjects and Vietnamese Radicalism in the U.S. during and after the Vietnam War opens with Will's case because it encapsulates the limits of political

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[4] Vu, "Mass Protests Sweep Vietnam for the First Time in Decades." Acoustic Hailing Devices (AHDs) are used widely in the military throughout the world but LRAD became an all-encompassing term since its deployment to manage protestors at the Pittsburgh G20 Summit in September 2009 and more recently at the Ferguson protest and the current George Floyd protests. For a comprehensive history of sonic warfare, see Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*.

[5] Châu, "Xét xử William Nguyen về hành vi gây rối, kích động biểu tình." ["Trial of William Nguyen for causing trouble and inciting protests."]

[6] "American Arrested in Vietnam 'regrets' Breaking Law."

[7] Phan, "Trục xuất Việt kiều Mỹ Nguyen William Anh." ["Deporting Vietnamese American Nguyen William Anh."]

discourses on Vietnamese American political actor and their transnational activism when mediated through state narratives, as it is often the case. Indicated in the rhetoric surrounding Will's arrest is a deeply contradictory and anxious articulation of political agency and subjectivities under narratives of nation-states a(f)t(er) war, embodied by the figure of American-born Southern Vietnamese refugee descendants. Much of the media coverages highly focused on his violent arrest, a spectacle that redirects international attention away from the cause of demonstration. His politicized identity, a Vietnamese refugee descendant and American-born citizen, presents a new opportunity for the reiteration of conventional state narratives born out of Vietnam War legacies. For the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV), as the party's official publication indicates, Will's biography is self-evidence for his potential subversiveness; his participation strengthens the SRV state rhetoric on "political enemies" amongst the oversea population, the "terrorist and reactionary groups" trying to overthrow the Vietnamese revolutionary state since the fall of Saigon.[8] For the American press, as a Southern Vietnamese refugee descendant protesting the Vietnamese communist state, Will reaffirms American exceptionalism and its liberal logic of rescue: more than forty years after the Vietnam War, America is still saving South Vietnam and its political subjecthood. Will's arrest is often explained through discourses of freedom of political speech and

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[8] A two-parts article on Nhân Dân [The People], the official newspaper of the Communist Party wrote about the protest: "At the beginning of June 2018, after it was reported that the National Assembly discussed two drafts of the Law on Cybersecurity and the Draft Law on Special Economic-Administrative Units, immediately appeared on the internet a "call to react" with accusations such as "silencing the people", losing sovereignty, in order to turn this allegation into a "poison drug" to poison public opinion. [Author's note: The original sentence is intentionally confusing]. The so-called "Saigon city group" immediately launched a protest with the effective support of the Viet Tan terrorist organization and the so-called "patriotic diaries", "demonstration diaries", and sympathizers, and some supporters like William Nguyen came from abroad to Vietnam to participate… The remarkable point of these reactionary organizations is that there are not only Vietnamese abroad, but also some Vietnamese in the country." See Ha Nam, "Sự thật phía sau những cuộc biểu tình trái phép." ["The truth behind the illegal protests"].

human rights, of which the communist state continues to pose as an antithesis. For example, an article on ABS News reads:

> It's the kind of coerced, taped confession that's common in Vietnam, a communist country with one-party rule although it has modernized and reformed over the past couple decades to allow for some more economic freedoms and human rights. Still, protests are often met with violent crackdowns and prolonged detentions, and the media is tightly controlled, with great restrictions on political speech in particular.[9]

Caught in the figurative speech on democracy and freedom, much less focus was on the historical meaning and caliber of the 2018 national protest movement in Vietnam, nor how their struggle reflects more than convenient examples of the inherent corruptible power of communism. This protest was both about the right to organize in virtual space (against the Cybersecurity Law that would allow censorship of social media, where Vietnamese organizers and activists often communicate), and the concerns over what Nguyen-Vo Thu Huong has explained as the socialist aiding of capitalist land reappropritation in the name of modernization and development in postwar Vietnam.[10] Particularly, the Special Zone Law 2018 would allow special tax breaks, immigration and settlement privileges, property ownership, and land lease up to 99 years for foreign corporations, allowing corporations to invest in nuclear power plants or military equipment production. The geopolitical locations of the zones—two in coastal cities of Vân Đồn and Bắc Vân Phong, and one in the island of Phú Quốc—align with the ongoing tension between China and Vietnam over sea and islands. The new laws, as such, present historical and contemporary challenges around global restructuring of power through Asian/Chinese capitalism, contested sovereignty, and denationalization, a common occur for countries under the pressure of global capitalism. The people's response and how it was framed through state official narrative, on the

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[9] Finnegan, "After Pompeo Visit, Vietnam to Put American Beaten and Held on Trial."
[10] Nguyen-Vo and Hong, "The Grammar of Failure."

other hand, lurks in the shadow of Cold War political memory—bounded by old tropes of revolutionary states versus imperial power and its "tay sai" (collaborators).

Moving away from official politics produced by the Vietnam War and its remnants affixed to militarism and postwar diplomacy, this project concerns with non-state political actors whom I call "revolutionary others" whose complex political subjectivities remain marginal to our understanding of Vietnam and its diaspora. Attending to what Crystal Fun-hye Baik would call the "reencounters"[11] with Cold War political memory, this dissertation examines how revolutionary politics—symbolized by the Vietnamese liberation movement against U.S. imperialism—simultaneously enables and limits possibilities for the political imaginaries of radicalism in the U.S. around the context of social movement, community building, intergenerational memory, and future imaginaries. This dissertation contend that despite a perceived "failure" of the Leftist movement after 1970s, the communist victory of the Vietnam War still left a profound impact on the global political consciousness that lingers half a century later in Vietnam, the continental U.S., and around the globe—shaping the language, ideal, and praxis around empire and revolution. For instance, after the war, the U.S. military-industrial complex, haunted by the "Vietnam Syndrome," aggressively expanded to "restore" public faith in American exceptionalism, and has since fused discourses and procedures of humanitarianism and immigration with concerns for national security, racialized criminality, and public safety. To this current moment, the U.S.' involvement and defeat in Vietnam results in policies that informs seemingly separated instances of violence, including the increasing militarized police brutality against social movements and particularly Black people,[12] the criminalization and deportation of Southeast Asian refugees, and the

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[11] Baik, *Reencounters*.
[12] Ahmadi, "How America's Wars in Asia Militarized the Police at Home."

incarceration of Central American asylum seekers[13]—threaded via the surfacing white supremacist militancy in the most recent coup at Capitol Hill.[14] Despite these enduring legacies, dominant narratives about the Vietnam War are stuck with past concerns about American-centric moral and political lessons, ignoring the ongoing realities that Vietnamese war survivors and their descendants live with—filled with political negotiations deeply affected by but extend way beyond the war.

Engaging visual arts, cultural productions, and transnational histories of resistance, this dissertation explores the multifaceted political landscape of the Vietnamese refugee diaspora and the roles it plays on American politics from the Vietnam War era to the present. Particularly, I graft together a genealogy of Vietnamese diasporic radicalism, starting with the antiwar student-activists who arrived to the U.S. in 1960s, to the second-generation Vietnamese refugee descendants invested in building a Leftist political identity and movement amongst Vietnamese American, and the Vietnamese American feminist and queer cultural producers engaging with radical ethics of remembrance. Vietnamese diasporic radicalism, this dissertation contends, while emerging from a mutual collaboration with American leftist tradition during the 1960s, also diverges and extends into alternative imaginaries and praxis to accounts for post-1975 refugee anticommunism. In doing so, it demonstrates America's contested relationships to a vast range of Vietnamese political actors, state and non-state, throughout the Vietnam War era has shaped the long 1960s' leftist social movements, undergirded America's turn to neoliberal conservatism post-1980, and continued to inform the current political polarizations around Trump's America. Particularly, chapter 1 explores people involved in the South Vietnam nation-building and modernization project; chapter 2

[13] Seiff, "How the Vietnam War Shaped U.S. Immigration Policy."
[14] Bui, "Why the Flag of South Vietnam Flew at US Capitol Siege"; Nguyen, "There's a Reason the South Vietnamese Flag Flew during the Capitol Riot."

discusses the South Vietnamese refugee soldiers and leftist refugee descendants; chapter 3 examines Vietnamese American artists and cultural producers. Tracing these figures also unexpectedly reveals the inconspicuous movement of the CIA, the FBI, and what Kyle Burke has coined the "revolutionaries for the right," lurking in the shadowed political sphere that significantly shape the forms and directions of Vietnamese diasporic radicalism.

A discussion on terminology is necessary here. In Vietnam studies, historian Hue-Tam Ho-Tai's work *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* is a historiography of Vietnamese politics which distinguished radicalism and communism as two different genealogies. The former, she argued, is a "political mood… essentially nonideological current of reaction, both to colonial rule and to native accommodation to that rule," rooted from the "intellectual and social forces" of young, urban Vietnamese who self-exiled in the 1920s to go abroad and turned into revolutionaries.[15] Rooted in anticolonialism and strongly influenced by anarchism, this radicalism would be eventually replaced with the introduction of Marxism-Leninism in the 1930s.[16] Her work discusses radicalism as "the marriage of the personal and the historical"[17] in the context of French-educated urban student strikes, debates on women's emancipation against patriarchy, and intellectual explorations of imported political thought from French and Chinese politics. Meanwhile, Vietnamese communism, a well-examined topic, has a history of internationalism, fused with concerns over national liberation and class exploitation.[18] In my work, Vietnamese diasporic radicalism, as I demonstrate throughout the chapter, takes different forms in different historical contexts around the Vietnam War. In addition, because of its spatial and temporal break

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[15] Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution, 1.*
[16] Tai, 4.
[17] Tai, 56.
[18] Huynh Kim Khánh, *Vietnamese Communism 1925-1945*.

with the homeland, so to speak, the unique quality that Vietnamese diasporic radicalism has is its capacity to draw from both American radical tradition concerning critiques of race, class, gender and its concerns with diasporic memory and refugee subjectivity.

Revolutionary Others

"Revolutionary Others" starts with a simple critique of the Cold War binary of anticommunism versus communism that was the justification for the war in Vietnam, and to a broader sense, the U.S. geopolitical networks of domination in Asia-Pacific. This binary, as a consequence but perhaps to its own undoing, becomes a framework for social movements in the U.S., and continue to inform the understanding of radical politics—its conceptualization of social justice based on race, class, gender, the strategies and forms that it takes in mobilizing individuals and forming collective identities, and the rhetoric and vocabulary it adopts in cultivating a distinguish genealogy of thought and praxis. In so doing, strategies of resistance in the U.S. developed particular affinity and affiliation to what I call hegemonic radicalism—the legible forms of political self-identification, organizing tactics, discourses, and imaginaries around individual and collective ideals.

In *Vexy Thing: On Gender and Liberation,* historian Imani Perry points out an important reconsideration of "doctrine" or the binary way in which one "simply take a pro or con position."[19] She argues that "there is always a complicated architecture of relations of domination, one that often falls out of view in the assertion of the professed position."[20] Radicalism, in the way that it is bound to the extraordinary (as opposed to vernacular) language of politics, has become a sort of

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[19] Perry, *Vexy Thing*, 9.
[20] Perry, 9.

doctrine that stands opposite of its sole archenemy in an increasingly oversimplified tale of "us" against "them" and "enemy of the people," depending on where and when one speaks from. What I call hegemonic radicalism is not only in response to the type of state communism coming out of the decolonial era, but also how the fantasy of an institutionalized revolutionary politics remaining in the language and praxis of those who living under the belly of the capitalist beast. I coin this term to underlie the American Left's, as well as other socialist country like Cuba's, excavation of Vietnamese liberation movement, signified through the idealization of the National Liberation Front, colloquially known as the Viet Cong. The term builds on what Judy Wu has called the "radical orientalist" tendency of the American Left,[21] and in another context Sylvia Chong called the "oriental obscene"[22] to describe how the Third World Left—consisted of Black Power Movement, the Asian American movement, the Chicano movement, as well as other militant groups in the 1960s and 1970s—have looked to Vietnam's brutal images and ideals of an armed revolution as a viable model for social change. The term also describes the Vietnam Communist state's claims of radicalism as an "origin story" of for nationhood, effectively erasing other modes of political thought. This way, it affirms a patriarchal and masculinist construction of nationhood/homeland based on functionaries and tropes of revolutionary patriarchs and militant sacrifices. As such, hegemonic radicalism is incommensurable to refugee subjectivity, diasporic subjects, and queer subjects.

This dissertation thus asks: What lurks under this stronghold framework of binaric political imaginary? What remains unaccounted for, when the need for consolidation and solidification of politics, radical or otherwise, relies on both subjectivity and subjection under a set of leading

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[21] Wu, *Radicals on the Road*.
[22] Chong, *The Oriental Obscene*.

principals? More importantly, what are the things that "fall away,"[23] to borrow Neferti Tadiar's framework, of the revolutionary narrative on hegemonic radical politics, and concerns, as well as who can be considered its center? Following Tadiar's cautious reexamination of third world literature and culture's function as "a key instrument of national liberation movements"[24] through which the colonized world reclaims its "political-cultural agency"[25] and creates emancipatory subjects, below I discuss the Vietnamese official imaginary of revolutionary subjecthood and what it entails through the Party-sanctioned cultural voice.

The short history of modern Socialist Republic of Vietnam that articulates its roots in anti-colonial, anti-imperial, and internationalist politics is perhaps encapsulated in a poem by Chế Lan Viên, a former New Poetry[26] poet and a recruit of Vietnamese Communist Party, "Người đi tìm hình của nước" (He who left to find the country's image).[27] Contextualizing the "structure of feeling"[28] in the late 1920s with the popular slogan *xuất dương du học về nhà giúp nước* (Crossing oceans, studying abroad, returning home, helping country),[29] the poem narrated an origin story

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[23] Tadiar, *Things Fall Away*.
[24] Tadiar, *Things Fall Away*, 4.
[25] San Juan, *The Philippine Temptation*, 22. Quoted in Tadiar (2009), 5.
[26] The New Poetry (Thơ Mới) movement emerged as a new formation, set against the harsh economic conditions of the Great Depression in 1929-30, the deadly setbacks in the 1930s anticolonial movements, and the heightened urges by contemporary intellectuals to make sense of the world. The New Poetry movement consists of Franco-Vietnamese educated intellectual, who organized toward Westernization and a further break with Sino-Chinese influence. Considered as "Western educated petit bourgeoisies" (trí thức tiểu tư sản) by the Communist Party, many of the famous New Poetry authors found themselves becoming cultural workers for the Party to avoid ostracism. See Ninh, *A World Transformed*.
[27]. The literal meaning: He who has left to find the shape/image/form of the country. "Hình" in Vietnamese means a photo, a picture, illustration, or a shape/form. The word was used in the poem as a symbol, a metaphor that encompasses all of the meaning above.
[28] I borrow the term "structure of feeling" from Raymond Williams, "a felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time: a sense of the ways in which the particular activities combined into a way of thinking and living." Williams, *The Long Revolution*, 63.
[29] This sentiment is discussed in detail in Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*; Huynh Kim Khánh, *Vietnamese Communism 1925-1945*.

into one single moment, a starting point of an inevitable victory: "Ngày Bác Hồ ra đi tìm đường cứu nước"[30] ("The day Uncle Ho left to find ways to save the country"). This event is described in contemporary Vietnamese official discourse as the defining moment, "a great turning point in the Vietnamese revolution that changed the course of history and changed the fate of all Vietnamese people in the 20th century."[31]

This poem retold the sojourning voyages of Hồ Chí Minh (endearingly referred to as Him), mapping the seaports, ships, cities, countries that he passed through in order to ultimately arrive at Marxist-Leninist ideologies. This sojourning journey is narrated to be the formation of a political subjectivity (and at times, solution) that would give Vietnam a "shape," a "form," an "essence."[32] The poem weaves different points of view—the poet as a narrator, an eyewitness, a rescuee—to retell an 'origin' story of which the country is rebirthed in communist ideology. It is divided into three parts: the departure, the transnational journey-discovery of Leninism, and the revolutionary return to homeland that signals a rebirth. It starts from the moment of Ho departure from a colonized land—a beautiful but empty vessel, full of suffering and "puppets" with colonized minds who sought comfort in the forgetting of the rebellion spirits of their ancestors:

> *Trăm cơn mơ không chống nổi một đêm dày* A hundred dreams, helpless against the dark, thick night
> *Ta lại mặc cho mưa tuôn và gió thổi* We let the rain fall and the wind blow
> *Lòng ta thành con rối* We become the puppet
> *Cho cuộc đời giật dây* Letting life pull all the strings
> *Quanh hồ Gươm không ai bàn chuyện vua Lê* Around our city, no one speaks of our rebellious history[33]

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[30] June May 1911 is celebrated yearly in Vietnam.
[31] Tá Lâm, "Kỷ Niệm 100 Năm Ngày Bác Hồ Ra Đi Tìm Đường Cứu Nước."
[32] Chế, *Ánh Sáng và Phù Sa*.
[33] The translation is sense for sense. The Vietnamese line literally means: "Around Sword Lake, no one speaks of the Lê emperor." It refers to Lê Lợi, an emperor credited as one of the greatest heroes for leading Đại Việt to independence from the Chinese Ming Dynasty in 14th century. Sword Lake reference the tale of how Lê Lợi won the Ming dynasty with the help of a magical sword borrowed from the gods of water, and later had to return the sword at the lake. Sword Lake

Lòng ta đã thành rêu phong chuyện cũ At our core, an old citadel covered in moss[34]
Hiểu sao hết những tấm lòng lãnh tụ We cannot fully understand the leaders' heart
Tìm đường đi cho dân tộc theo đi Finding the path for the people to follow

Situating Hồ in the tradition of Lê emperor, one of the greatest heroes of Vietnam that put an end to the Chinese Ming Dynasty's colonialization of Vietnam in 14th century, Chế Lan Viên's poem historicizes Hồ's journey as a continuation of Lê Emperor's historic nation building dream that was disrupted because of modern colonialism, but nonetheless has carved out a "path." This path leads toward the "shape of a nation" that is not "an old poem carved into rocks," nor "a corner of homeland, a familiar place we're used to," and especially, not "an invisible god from a distant elsewhere." Definitively, the shape of the nation "is preserved or is lost. Golden was the past, *red* is the future." It is "the posture of the entire people, the glory for all twenty-five millions of us."

The core of this journey is a literary extrapolation of communist internationalism through a remapping the journey that Ho took: "cold wind in Paris, London fog, across the transpacific ocean on ships, following the shadow of a flag from the Americas to Africa, the land of freedom, the sky under enslavement, the route that the revolution is seeking." In a series of rhetorical questions asking these spaces to bear witness to the struggle Hồ Chí Minh went through, Chế Lan Viên described Ho's internal thoughts—dreams of liberation for a marvelous country with so much potentials and radical traditions that are restrained by colonialism. The questions came one after another to imagine all livelihoods of the Vietnamese people under arrest:

Ngày mai dân ta sẽ sống sao đây? What about our people's lives tomorrow?
Sông Hồng chảy về đâu? Và lịch sử? Where does Red River flow to? And history?

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is now in the center of Hanoi.

[34] The Vietnamese line can also be understood as: Our mind has become covered in moss and old tales. Thành as a noun means "citadel," as a verb means "to become." Here my translation goes with the images that were revoked in the poem: green moss, emperor, old myth, mythical lake. It makes more sense to understand thành as citadel, even though grammatically it should be "become."

Bao giờ dải Trường Sơn bừng giấc ngủ When will Truong Son mountain awake from its sleep?
Cánh tay thần Phù Đổng sẽ vươn mây? And the God of Strength's hand reaches the cloud?

Rồi cờ sẽ ra sao? Tiếng hát sẽ ra sao? What about the flag? What about the songs?
Nụ cười sẽ ra sao? What about laughters?
Ơi, độc lập! Oh, Independence!

The series of questions came together to narrate what freedom means: a light, a thought, a consciousness that arrive, "so brightly on the top of our head." It is "the Russian sun burning bright in the East." The last part of the poem imagines a scene where "the theses came to Him, and he cried on Lenin's words."[35] In so doing, this poem claims radicalism in its moves from abjection to glory, wherein the leader-patriarch finds the one true political thought that can give birth to the nation. The story of return gets rewritten into an inevitable journey of self-exploration and revolutionary absolutism that shaped Vietnam, in effect absolve *all* movements that come before and after as excess, eschewing these "vital modes of experience" in order to solidify what Tadiar calls "a proper historical subject."[36] This poem, as such, not only articulates Hồ as the visionary anticolonial leader, but in turn, defines a proper form of political agency rooted in his ideals.

This poem provides an instructive and foundational exemplum for my concept of genealogy and hegemonic radicalism, connected to a term I call "revolutionary others," which connects fragments of said revolutionary politics stemming out of Vietnam and the decolonial world in different social movements in the U.S.—from the antiwar, Third World movement, to the struggle against the U.S. government crackdown on leftist movement. The term points out the

[35] In the oft-told tale of Hồ, he was a member of the predominantly white French communist party and was frustrated that they did not have a sufficient critique of capitalism beyond class exploitation, nor did they care about French colonialism. HCM's "enlightened" moment was when he came across Lenin's "Theses on National and Colonial Questions" for the second congress of the Communist International. See the full document in Lenin, *Lenin's Collected Works,* 144-151.
[36] Tadiar, *Things Fall Away*, 5.

covert ways in which certain people's political subjectivity are "othered," rendered illegible and thus "fall away" out of the academic and cultural archive and repertoire of social movements. In my cases, Vietnamese diasporic subjects, refugee and refugee descendants, and queer subjects whose radicalism does not conform to brutal, militant politics are not considered the legible subject of radicalism.

I utilize the term "revolutionary others" here, first to delineate the genealogy of Vietnamese diasporic radicalism as unbound by, though at times supports and draws from, Vietnamese liberation movement-turn-state communism. Refugees and refugee descendants, as shown in Will's case, threatens the Vietnamese state's legitimacy; their presence is a powerful reminder of state violence—Tet Offensive massacre in Hue, reeducation camps, the deadly refugee exodus—no matter the explanation. Growing up in the North, one of the official history lessons that I grew up learning was that pro-America (or anti-communist) Vietnamese Southerners are "fake Americans" ("Mỹ Ngụy"), "national traitors," "collaborators"—"treacherous subjects,"[37] to borrow Lan Duong's word in a related context. This "imperialization" of South Vietnam, to appropriate Nixon's "Vietnamization," during war time, was a popular discourse amongst leftists and antiwar activists in the U.S., as it provides a critique of the South Vietnamese regime's authoritarianism. However, the Left's generally stayed silence to communist violence like the Tet Offensive, justifying it as an unfortunate consequence of insurgent militance.[38]

I purport that both political formations, radicalism in the diaspora and in Vietnam, are

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[37] Duong, *Treacherous Subjects*.

[38] Ayers, *Sing a Battle Song*. In this collection of essays by the Weather Underground, a group of militant Leftists who went underground in response to the FBI's crackdown on the antiwar movement, the Tet Offensive was mentioned mostly as a timeline. The most opiniated line was: "The Tet Offensive was extremely costly to the Vietnamese liberation fighters; it was also the decisive point in the victory over US ground forces." (598)

genealogical projects—unfixed, constantly in formation, grafted, imagined, historically situated, and capable of transformation. A genealogical method, in a Foucauldian sense, traces the discursive formation of incomplete and fractured system of power, allowing a critique of self proclaimed political and historical truth. A genealogical approach situates political activism, oftentimes situated in the externalized site of public masses and demonstration, together with family and lineage, central sites in the study of Vietnamese refugees, and to a certain extent, Asian American social lives. It extends and complicates the "personal as political" framework by situating the "personal" as mediated through the material relationship with a fraught (re)construction of family under war, refugeehood, displacement, and intergenerational trauma.

Vietnamese diasporic radicalism, as such, both resonates with yet always threatens to unsettle Vietnamese communism. Refugee radicalism is not about identities but political formations, which has the potentials to expand the category of revolutionary politics to account for not only past wars' refugee stories, but the emergent foreseeable futures where refugees and displaced people no longer signifies "state of exception." It illustrates Giorgio Agamben's proclamation that the refugee is "the sole category in which it is possible today to perceive the forms and limits of a political community to come." This way, these Vietnamese/American "revolutionary others" that this project centers and their investment in refugee subjectivity—often casted as fervently anticommunist—also "fall out" of what scholars have called the American "socialist imaginaries"[39] that once articulated their significance through a transnational solidarity between revolutions in Asia and the radical movements in the U.S.. This iteration of affined solidarity lends legitimacy and political vocabulary to the rise of the New Left, Third World consciousness, antiracist, feminist, and gay liberation, especially around the momentous antiwar

[39] For a comprehensive collection that encapsulates this imaginary, see Ho and Mullen, *Afro Asia*.

movement in the late 1960s to mid 1970s. Much of this radical tradition fades out after 1972, when the political assassinations and government crackdown on the radical left, particularly the Black Panthers and other dissidents, most notably through the FBI's COINTELPRO and the CIA's domestic activities against deemed foreign agitators to the antiwar movement. Tracking a historiography of Vietnamese diasporic radicalism makes visible an imminent but less visible discourse of how the Left, especially the Asian American Left falters after 1975: the end of the Vietnam War and the subsequent Southeast Asian refugee exodus to the U.S., introducing a moment of crisis to the U.S. racial and economic landscape.

A Tale of Two Nations

After the trial, Will Nguyen's representing lawyer Trinh Vinh Phuc disclosed that "the deportation sentence is a calculated move, potentially *a deal drawn between the two governments*… this trial is both legal and also has a diplomatic element."[40] The "deal drawn between the two governments" is a telling context through which I think through Vietnamese/American radicalism. Every single word constitutes much of the intrinsic and complex sets of relation that governs Vietnamese/American political subjectivities. "Deal," signifies the social contract, relation, diplomatic policies, aids, the ways in which the U.S. bounds to Vietnam in more than just its militarized and humanitarian efforts. "Drawn," because these things are often imagined, willed, constructed, forged, and sustained. "Between," an ambiguous chasm that connects two sites, confined in the seemingly bi-directionality of spaces, yet mapped by an intrinsic network for mobility that invited movements. "Two," the limit of legible powers allowed

[40] "Luật sư của Will Nguyễn: 'trục xuất' là bài toán khôn ngoan." ["Will Nguyen's Lawyer: 'deportation' is a wise move."]

under the framework of modern nation-state, flattening land/territory/people with the power structure imposed upon them, the set of binaries that continue to define Vietnam past and present—communist/anticommunist, homeland/diaspora, Vietnam/America. Also, these sets of relation: Government-vs-Government. Vietnam-hyphen-America. Vietnam-vs-America. Government-dash-Government. Two Vietnams, past and present, North and South, what is and what could have been. Two Americas, the power that be and those who want to break free from it, repression and social unrest, governance and resistance. Vietnamese-American, because of the matter at hand. "The strength of the hyphenate is in the way it foregrounds the inadequacy of its discursive construction."[41] The *deal drawn between two governments,* as this dissertation demonstrates, created the Vietnamese diaspora.

This simple phrase, as well as the punishment dealt to Will Nguyen, "deportation," encapsulates much of the structures that Vietnamese/American political actors oscillate in between. As I argued, Will's case is both symbolic and material in the way it makes visible how Vietnamese/American political subjectivities are transnational but almost always rendered through/governed by the contested sets of relation within and in-between the of regimes /nations from which they emerge. "Deportation" is the nation-state's weapon, how it kidnaps, incarcerates, and disappears racialized, politicized, and insurgent subjects,[42] and vice versa, how it racializes, politicizes, and marked people as non-belonging, "undesirable" subjects. As demonstrate in chapter 1, political deportation was also the deal made between South Vietnam and the U.S. in the 1970s to manage the South Vietnamese antiwar students who resisted their subjection/ subject formation. For the subjects of this dissertation, deportation takes the form of political exile rather

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[41] Feng, "Being Chinese American, Becoming Asian American," 39.
[42] Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones*.

than a structured displacement of undesirable populations or to control borders and regulate entry based on membership.

This set of relation, thus, serves as a starting point for this dissertation, which attempts to trace a genealogy of Vietnamese radicalism in the diaspora. In doing so, it must ask the question of when and how. When is the Vietnamese diaspora created, and in what circumstances? In following those that I call “revolutionary others,” “migratory subjects” who travel across oceans, I arrive at a moment other than the conventional marker of 1975—the year most scholarships would establish as the historical context, a “beginning” of sort to the formation of the Vietnamese diaspora. This dissertation reaches back two decades and a half earlier to the year of 1950, marked by the moment/movement of the U.S., who came to aid South Vietnam.

Mobility & Migratory Subjects

I use “movements” because, as we shall see in chapter 1, the nation-building in South Vietnam project mobilizes many structures of mobility and organizations—including state and non-state, military and civilian—consist of many groups and individuals to carry on this project. “The other war,” as contemporary policy makers call it, was indeed a social movement towards a common political goal. As such, this movement drew efforts from various sectors of American society, inside and outside of government offices, amongst advocate and religious groups, in unlikely spaces like universities, learning centers, campus buildings. The activists were policy makers, soldiers, volunteers, social scientists, university professors, administrators, aid workers—all working on what they would call an “experiment” of nation building. This experiment is also known by its other names—“pacification,” “to win the hearts and minds of Vietnamese people,” “development,” “modernization”—depending on which era one speaks from and what archives

one looks at. This re-periodization is significant because it intervenes into the Vietnam War timeline that tends to differentiate between different large-scale movements to and from Vietnam, mostly in terms of military operations, that the U.S. enacted: the Genève Accord of 1954, the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964, the bloody battles of 1968, Nixon's Vietnamization of 1969, the Paris Peace Accords of 1973, the refugee passage after the Fall of Saigon in 1975.

Movements also entail the transnational network across Asia-Pacific, signaling what Yen Le Espiritu, Lisa Lowe, and Lisa Yoneyama call the "transpacific entanglements,"[43] the overlapping topography of empires as well as the process of colonial transitions from European colonialism to American imperialism after World War II.[44] This geopolitical mapping actuates what Lowes call the "military-security-academic regime," catalyzing a type of militarized mobility that circulate knowledge formations and knowledge producers sponsored by U.S. State Department, the private sectors, and think tanks, who shared the same vision of capitalist expansion. As chapter 1 contends, this topography structures the transnational mobility of racialized subjects but also becomes undone in such process of governance. As they attempt to transport people from the colonies to the metropolis, that is, from the containment zone to the contact zone, radical sets of relation emerge. The transnational mobility culminate transnational movement, expanding into other journeys of return.

Contributions

Bringing together Global Asian Studies, Southeast Asian American Studies, Critical Refugee Studies, and queer studies, my dissertation reconsiders Vietnam War historiography,

[43] Espiritu, Lowe, and Yoneyama, "Transpacific Entanglements."
[44] Man, *Soldiering through Empire*.

which overgeneralizes anticommunist politics amongst Vietnamese refugees, to highlight the undercurrent history of Vietnamese diasporic radicalism enacted by refugees, activists, and artists, who organize for their futures against the increasing violence of the U.S. empire. Contributing to the studies of Asian American social movement,[45] this dissertation heeds Diane Fujino and Robyn Rodriguez's concerns over the decentering of activism within Asian American studies. Challenging Asian American studies' investment in leftist ideologies that has yet to develop a framework to reconcile with anticommunist Southeast Asian American refugee subjects beyond the model minority critique or as an addition to the migration problem, this project also invites the field to expand its theoretical approach to address refugees' diverse political agencies.

This dissertation contends with the *memories* of Vietnamese revolution and the forms of political subjectivities such memories enact. As the postwar refugee exodus signifies in chapter 2, Vietnamese revolutionary politics and its consequences, to borrow Baik's eloquent words, surfaces as "the spaces we inhabit, the immobilities that mark our lives, the personal histories we are unable to access, and the people we are forbidden to or cannot name."[46] In chapter 3, refugee memories and trauma become the center force of queer radical imagination and ethics of remembrance, necessitates important discussion on the vexed commonality of refugee and queer trauma, the violence of displacement, parental abuse and a materially situated queer politics of refusal.

The Vietnamese diasporic radical left formation, this dissertation shows, demonstrates an alternative genealogy of Vietnamese revolutionary politics outside the communist victory, rooted in past and ongoing engagements with cross-racial solidarities, queer people of color critique, and transnational feminist world-making. Based on three years of original multi-sited archival research

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[45] Fujino and Rodriguez, "The Legibility of Asian American Activism Studies."
[46] Baik, *Reencounters*, 6.

and oral history interviews with Vietnamese/American activists in Vietnam and the United States, analyses of visual arts by Vietnamese American refugee and refugee descendant artists, and my auto/ethnography as a bilingual, transnational Vietnamese queer scholar, this interdisciplinary and mixed-methods research captures a multifaceted movement that exists on the streets, online, in art and intellectual spaces.

While critical scholarship on U.S. militarism and refugeehood has focused on displacement, trauma, and the impacts of war in people's public and intimate life, "Revolutionary Others" reminds scholars to take seriously the agency and world-building politics and radical politics based on community engagement, grassroots organizing, and political education that refugees and their descendants envision and enact. My project critiques refugee studies scholarship that focuses on assimilation and integration, the Asian American historiography that fails to reconcile its U.S. race-based leftist genealogy with Vietnamese refugee and immigrant politics post-Vietnam War, and the official historiography. Overall, Revolutionary Others strives for two goals: a historiographic one that traces a genealogy of Vietnamese radicalism that centers on refugee narratives and political subjectivity, and a theoretical one that elevates the aforementioned as a site of radical thought in conversation with historical and contemporary social movements.

Chapter Overview

My study is the first in-depth study of Vietnamese diasporic radicalism in relation to Vietnamese refugee political subjectivity. In recent years, a generation of Vietnamese American scholars have revisited the erasure of South Vietnam and its subjects. However, most discourses

remain around refugee nationalism and the struggle for memory and representation.[47] Situated in Critical Refugee Studies, my work moves decisively away from the dominant "refugee crisis" framing in the social sciences and in popular media, and even in some Asian American studies scholarship, that conceptualizes the refugee as desperate and abject, which obfuscates and even legitimizes state militarism. Instead, my work addresses and foregrounds Vietnamese refugees' concerns, perspectives, knowledge production and global imaginings. Departing from historical, sociological, and political research that reproduces the refugee as only a passive object to be studied or a problem to be solved, my work integrates theoretical rigor and policy concerns with refugees' rich and complicated lived worlds—approaches that emphasize their complex political subjectivities. My fluency in Vietnamese and deep cultural understanding of Vietnamese history have been key in conducting this labor-intensive project.

"The Revolution will not be televised" but the destruction of war constituted a visual archive of violence that necessitated social movements in the U.S.[48] Vietnamese American scholars and others have written at length about the ways in which the visual archive of the war enables U.S. empire the rights to violence—both towards foreign population elsewhere and their citizens at home—as well as the resistance against such violence. Chapter 1 traces, on the one hand, the thread of violence around, within, centering the U.S. involvement in South Vietnam through the mutually co-constitutive elements of destruction and development that result in unaccountable loss of lives and sovereignty outside of battlefields and military operations. On the other hand, this chapter looks at how Vietnamese political actors discover and develop radical

[47] Bui, *Returns of War*; Nguyen, *South Vietnamese Soldiers*; Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese*.
[48] Chong, *The Oriental Obscene*; Sturken, "The Wall, the Screen, and the Image"; Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*.

resistance against such violence. Entitled "Return from Freedom: Vietnamese Antiwar Activism in the U.S," this chapter looks at United States' Agency for Development's "leadership training" exchange program and its cohort of 1968 students-turned-antiwar leaders from South Vietnam. This chapter posits these exchange students as anti-national, "demilitarized" bodies that make visible U.S. education's role as form of biopower within formations of state governance. I examine Cold War surveillance, militarism, and modernization in Vietnam (1953-1975) as extending U.S. settler/colonial regime of "represent and destroy" in Asia, specifically through the unsolved murder of a South-Vietnamese student sponsored under U.S. State Department who was deported because of his antiwar activism. This is a largely untold story about South Vietnamese exchange students who were radicalized along with the Third World movement, alongside Asian American activists, and who later fought their deportation orders to remain in the U.S. as political refugees.

The lesser-known history of South Vietnamese antiwar activism in the U.S. that I traced calls attention to the ways in which scholarship on Vietnamese diasporic politics has little to no knowledge of pre-1975 political activism. The chapter also shows the precarious position of South Vietnamese progressive political actors whose fleeting presence in the official and radical archive is both deliberate and unintentional—deliberate because the student activists wanted to avoid being identified and deported for their activism, and unintentional in the way the larger social movements were unable to evaluate their contribution beyond a mythic memory about Vietnamese martyrdom.

Chapter 2, "Refugee Return: Revolution 2.0" continues the discussion on the political genealogy of Vietnamese leftism of the 1960s antiwar movement, following the histories of violence that posit the Vietnamese diaspora not only within the well-studied context of the Vietnam War, the refugee passage, but also of extralegal militarism, political repression, and transnational political mobilizations in both the Right and the Left, which undergird the social and

racial tension of the Reagan era. This chapter takes a materialist approach to the politicization of refugee memories, discussing not only what Viet Thanh Nguyen calls "the struggle over [refugee] memories"[49] and political ideologies, but also about what they are made of, and what people make of them. It comments on the complex political relationship between secret and erasure, two interrelated epistemological problems in the struggle for legibility. Briefly tracing the history of refugee nationalist militarism, I then contrast it with the transnational political engagement undertaken by Vietnamese refugee descendants who return to Vietnam to politically engage with Vietnam negotiating past conflicts to redefine possibilities of Vietnamese American politics. The diasporic activists returning to Vietnam to reshape their radical/progressive politics, I argue, contribute to a new form of revolution outside of what the Communist state had claimed to achieve. Beyond the available narratives about the 1975 revolutionary moment, much of which are shaped by the Cold War framework and the American memories about Vietnam, this chapter explores the strategies that Vietnamese American activists and individuals deploy to develop their radical politics and yet holding space for refugee traumas—something that Vietnam's state communism has tried to undermine, erase, and recuperate. Its significance lies in the argument that centering refugee subjectivity opens new possibilities to reimagine a radical politics that attends to Southeast Asian American refugee and immigrant politics post-Vietnam War.

In chapter 3, "Queer Dis/inheritance and Refugee Future Work", I turn to the affective and the psyche in Vietnamese American cultural production, reading radical subjectivity in maternal refugee lineage and queer world-making praxis. This chapter investigates a framework I call queer dis/inheritance through queer reclamations of refugee lineage—challenging recently embraced queer politics of refusal, arguing that without considering the material condition of displacement

[49] Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*.

and dispossession, queer refusal risks reproducing its own white possessive individualism. Revisiting the Gay Liberation Front's futile and brief history, I make the connection between liberationist gay radicalism of the 1970s and queer dis/inheritance—both as survival tactics and political framework for generational belonging. Looking at how Vietnamese American artists navigate inherited traumas while fighting for ethical remembering, I forward a critical framework of refugee future work beyond projects of recovery and recuperation. I read the refusal to make refugee experiences into something knowable, to preserve the silence and protect the unknown, to rethink linear history into a sensory lineage, as manifestations of queer dis/inheritance.

To conclude, in the Epilogue, I turn to what abolitionist thinker Walidah Imarisha terms as "visionary fiction"—speculative fiction that concurs with social justice orientation—to theorize refugee radicalism as speculative world-building. It reorients the work of Vietnamese American political actors I study into the realm of memory/future work that is deeply commitment to a just future. I turn to speculative fiction to show how Vietnamese radicalism locates the refugee experiences not only in a *moving* history but also in a transformative future: a vision for justice beyond their own "national family," a refusal to turn wars into a private historical past, recuperable through official recognition and masculinist memory work. Reading the short story "Revolution Shuffle" by Bao Phi, an acclaimed Vietnamese refugee poet and life-long community organizer in Minneapolis, I offer the concept of refugee speculative imaginary to learn critical lessons on new problematics of military violence, challenging the limited solutions offered by nation-states.

Chapter 1: Return from Freedom: Vietnamese Antiwar Activism in the U.S

Two months after the Tet Offensive in 1968, sixty-four Vietnamese students, majority men, arrived in the United States—a country at war. Hand selected by the South Vietnamese government and United States Agency for International Development (USAID) officials,[50] they represented a renewed effort by the U.S. government to train pro-American, modernized, and loyal subjects for South Vietnam. Dressed nicely in suits and dresses, the students landed in LAX on March 23, and were dispersed in groups of tens to six different universities. Some of the assigned universities included UC San Diego, San Francisco State University, UC Berkeley, Northrop Institute of Technology, University of Washington, and University at Albany.

Figure 1.1: USAID Students Group II arriving in LAX Airport. Source: USAID Archive.

This group was the second cohort brought to the U.S. through the Leadership Program; the first cohort who arrived the previous year consisted of personnel from the Army of Republic of Vietnam. Begun in 1967 and ended in 1970, Leadership continued earlier exchange education projects, part and parcel of the U.S. nation-building project in South Vietnam. The exchange

[50] For a detailed discussion on this process, see Nguyen, *Antiwar Transnationalism*.

program, overseen by the U.S. State Department, was a part of many Cold War projects in Asia, including anti-communist, counterinsurgency, and capitalist developmental aid. The U.S.'s goal was to train South Vietnamese students with U.S.-based education in order to combat Northern communist persuasion.[51] The students went through an intensive selection process by the Saigon Ministry of Education to ensure their loyalty to both the United States and South Vietnam. According to a participant, his cohort were specifically trained to be "familiarized with Americas, so that after the war ended, assuming that they'd win the war, they'd have a young generation of leaders who can explain U.S. policies to the Vietnamese people."[52] The students were assigned majors that would assist nation-building, such as engineer, finances, agriculture, etc. To return and serve the government or work at the U.S. embassy was an obligation for Leadership participants; overall, many have returned and occupied important positions in the South Vietnamese government until the Fall of Saigon.[53] However, by 1969, most of the 1968 cohort has joined the antiwar movement, collaborating with other Vietnamese antiwar students on the East Coast, and cross-racially with the antiracist and student movements in Berkeley. By 1972, they have successfully organized a large demonstration at the Saigon Consulate in New York and staged a "Vietnamese invasion" in Southern Illinois University to publicize their opposition of the war. Following the two actions, FBI and Immigration Services cracked down on their nascent movement, resulting in the eventual murder of one student, Nguyễn Thái Bình. Seven other students were set to be deported; their trial lasted until 1974. In response, the students founded a multi-chapter organization Union of Vietnamese in the U.S. (UVUS), with hundreds of members

[51] United States Operations Mission to Vietnam, Student Records from Vietnam: Their Evaluation for Placement of Students in American Educational Institutions, 1962.
[52] Ngo Thanh Nhan, Personal communication, May 5, 2020.
[53] "Who We Are."

across the country, to continue organizing for peace. UVUS would be the first Vietnamese-led, multi-chapter antiwar organization in the U.S.

This chapter examines the U.S.-sponsored exchange students from Vietnam—the Leadership Scholarship students—who contributed to the antiwar movement during the years of 1968-1974 in order to investigate the relationship between exchange education and political subject formation, part of a larger conversation about U.S. empire formation and cross racial, transnational struggles for freedom. The students' antiwar activism has been largely forgotten in public memory, mentioned only in Vietnamese American activist circles.[54] Drawing on extensive archival research, textual and relational historical analyses, this chapter situates USAID and exchange education in the longer history of U.S. empire building in Asia-Pacific and at home. At the same time, I also delineate how the USAID students "demilitarized" such conditions created by empire and Cold War efforts, despite being contained by them, by utilizing their educational mobility and ontology as educated subjects.

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[54] To the time of this writing (2018), there have been no extensive publications on Vietnamese student antiwar activism. Some of the works that mentioned their activities in passing include Allen Douglass' writings on antiwar student activism in Southern Illinois University. Other Vietnam-focused writings include the dissertation by Vu Pham (2002) that discussed the history of Vietnamese Americans before 1975, Nguyen Tram Quang's article tracing Vietnamese American activism, and a recent book edited by thuan nguyen and Vy Nguyen, which has an interview with Ngo Thanh Nhan, a founder of the Union. See *Many Bridges, One River*; Nguyen, "Caring for the Soul of Our Community: Vietnamese Youth Activism of the 1960s and Today"; Fu, "Keeping Close to the Ground: Politics and Coalition in Asian American Community Organizing, 1969-1977." May Fu's dissertation, "Keeping Close to the Ground" briefly mentioned Nguyễn Thái Bình, and her upcoming book would be the first book that discussed the activities of the group.

While scholars have written about colonial education in Vietnam as well as Vietnamese exchange students' presence in the U.S. before and during the Vietnam War,[55] this chapter expands the conversation to critically reconceptualize the pedagogical and ontological question of being an Educated Subject. It situates "being educated" as a part of the colonial (con)quest to define human and humanity, whose genealogy can be traced to the moment of contact and resettlement. It links modern exchange education to the invention of liberal humanism charted by Lisa Lowe, one that conditioned the political and juridical spaces in which human lives are made legible in terms of

> political emancipation through citizenship in the state, the promise of economic freedom in the development of wage labor and exchange markets, and the conferencing of civilization to human persons educated in aesthetic and national culture—in each case unifying particularity, difference, or locality through universal concepts of reason and community.[56]

I conceptualize exchange education as simultaneously enclosed within yet unsettle the militarized educational mobility, revolting against the U.S. necro and biopolitical experiment of "making human subjects" by "demilitarizing" the war in Vietnam through political strategies and mobilizations in the U.S. This chapter's examination of the Vietnamese students' resistance follows what Saidiya Hartman in another context calls "experiments of the waywards"[57]—a radical re-imagining of freedom within an inhospitable present. I trace the journeys of these differentially "educated subjects," following their own experiments in imagining the resolution to a war that at one point too gruesome and impossible to end, not to prove their humanity within the framework of Western modernity but rather to imagine its disruption. Their "return" to Vietnam through

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[55] Pham, "Antedating and Anchoring Vietnamese America: Toward a Vietnamese American Historiography"; Nguyen, "Luggage To America: Vietnamese Intellectual And Entrepreneurial Immigrants In The New Millenium."
[56] Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, 4.
[57] Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*.

nationalist ideology and praxis disrupts the myth of the United States as the preemptive provider of freedom and ideal super-sovereignty.

U.S. National-Building in South Vietnam

Empire's Educational Project: Post World War II "Military-Security-Academic Regime"

By 1968, the (undeclared) war in Vietnam has entered its most heightened phase. The 70-day Khe Sanh siege and the Tết Offensive in January, followed by the My Lai Massacre in March, and carpet bombing by the U.S. in retaliation has turned the country into bloodbaths. At that time, more than 536,000 American military personnel had been transported to South Vietnam, and more than 14,500 Americans had been killed in combat.[58] Many historians consider the nation-building project in South Vietnam as having failed by 1965, as the country wasn't able to "contain" communism and prevent an all-out war—something that the 1954 Genève Accord has hoped to achieve. Historian Jessica Elkind, for example, argued that "Lyndon Johnson's decision to send ground troops to Vietnam was a direct outgrowth of earlier American involvement and experiences, notably the failure of nation-building."[59] Yet, at the Hawaii Conference in February 1966, the Johnson Administration has renewed the pledge with the Government of South Vietnam (GVN) with the Declaration of Honolulu.[60] Not only did Johnson continue what historians deemed "the failed modernization efforts,"[61] he wanted the nation-building project to be "as fundamental

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[58] Ayers, *Sing a Battle Song*, 87.
[59] Elkind, *Aid Under Fire*, 4.
[60] From February to April 1966, Johnson appointed Deputy Ambassador William Porter to direct the efforts in the field under Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, designated Robert W. Komer as the the President's Special Assistant to supervise and direct the civil operations from the Washington end with deputy Ambassador William Leonhart.
[61] Elkind, *Aid Under Fire*, 5.

to the successful resolution of the Vietnam conflict as are our military operations to ward off aggression"[62]—the "other war," fought by "the school teachers and health workers, the village chiefs and agricultural workers, the literate and those who would lead Vietnam toward social justice and modernization."[63] Among some of the new goals was a "new stress on health, education, and warfare," [64] overseen and managed by AID. An evaluation and research shows that in 1969, the agency was still managing 66 funded projects in various aspects of South Vietnamese civic life—from agriculture, education, land reform, public administration, public health, to rural development, technical support, refugee relief and social welfare.[65]

The USAID program in South Vietnam, in its own words, was the "largest and most intensive undertaking in the history of AID, . . . an unprecedented effort to relieve human suffering and achieve nation-building goals in the midst of war."[66] Emerged in 1961, USAID was the culmination of various aid attempts from the U.S. a decade earlier to suppress a global communist crusade in Asia-Pacific, and in South Vietnam in particular. USAID represented the embrace of modernization theories within U.S. foreign policies starting in the 1950s; its immediate predecessor is the U.S. Foreign Operations Administration (USFOA) (1953-1955), established through Reorganization Plan No. 7 of 1953 (67 Stat. 639) to oversee foreign assistance programs.

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[62] Komer, "The Other War in Vietnam: A Progress Report," 2.
[63] Komer, 1.
[64] Komer, 2.
[65] "A.I.D Funded Projects in Vietnam."
[66] Bureau for Vietnam, "The A.I.D Program in Vietnam." In terms of national education alone, from 1954 to 1974, the U.S. had provided approximately $ 94.1 million in direct funding, over 5.4 billion piasters (around $20 million in its lowest exchange rate) in counterpart funds to create a national, comprehensive system of education. In 1966, through USAID, South Vietnam secured a system of schools and colleges, trained teachers in new subjects, created new curricula and instructional materials. 40 secondary vocational schools, 28 vocational technical schools, 15 secondary schools, 12 public and private institutions of higher learning, among many others, were created during the overall period.

Both USAID and USFOA were promoted and led by U.S. imperialist desire to govern the world order and constituted the Cold War solution to the emerging decolonizing states after World War II.[67] As Michael Latham demonstrated, both agencies reflected the rise of social scientists—architects of modernization theories—in government positions as well as the conversion of U.S. universities into foreign assistance and nation-building projects overseas.[68] USFOA director, Harold Stassen, believed that "American universities should be tapped as 'manpower reservoirs' for the extension of Americanism abroad."[69] As such, while historians date U.S. intervention in South Vietnam to *after* the Genève Accord in July 20, 1954, the Cold War military-security-academic regime and its pathways preceded that event. I contend that it is through tracing the U.S. militarized educational mobility that we relocate U.S. nation-building in South Vietnam in the map of U.S. empire-building that precedes the Cold War.

Near the end of *Orientalism*, Edward Said distinguished the rise of social sciences, empiricism, and the strong influence of U.S. military academic establishment. These enterprises have renewed U.S. approach to the region,[70] still sharply informed by the racial knowledge produced through the European colonial lens of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, and yet

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[67] Latham, "Redirecting the Revolution? The USA and the Failure of Nation-Building in South Vietnam"; For a thorough discussion on post-World War II anticommunist repression against revolutionary struggles across the Philippines, Korea, and Japan, see Man, *Soldiering through Empire*.

[68] Some other cases include, Latham noted, "Harvard economist Lincoln Gordon, for example, served on Kennedy's Latin American task force and later became US ambassador to Brazil. MIT political scientist Lucian Pye mixed his scholarly endeavors with service as an advisor to the Agency for International Development and work as an instructor at State Department counter-insurgency seminars. Stanford economist Eugene Staley led a development mission to South Vietnam and, most dramatically, Walt Rostow left MIT's Center for International Studies to become the chair of the State Department's Policy Planning Council under Kennedy and national security advisor under Lyndon Johnson," 32.

[69] "The University on the Make," 14.

[70] Said, *Orientalism*.

distinctive in its self-claimed position as anticolonial. Such trajectory reflects the settler colonial pedagogy—"the racialized constitution of U.S. modernity, humanism, and liberalism"[71]— that allowed the U.S. to position itself as the benevolent rescuer of the emerging Third World in Asia. This positioning dictates the specialized knowledge production on Asia, especially in newly emerged area studies and developmental studies, with the transition of former colonial officers into development studies teachers, researchers, and expatriate consultants, whose investments in neocolonial structures in postcolonial states were oftentimes complexly shaped by their nostalgia for the colonized culture.[72] This transition was made possible in parts thanks to the privileging of colonial archive and knowledge published on the colonized spaces and peoples as historical knowledge—knowledge produced, taught, canonized that was given new life by well-schooled colonial agents who made their way into new fields of studies.

It is this colonial transition without a break that defines the characteristics of what can only be called empire's educational project, encapsulating the process through which new governing powers sustain colonial knowledge about the colonies and the colonized people by revamping old structures and reeducate the population accordingly. Mark Bradley noted that in the immediate aftermath of World War II, U.S. policy makers knew little about Vietnam, and "relied almost exclusively on the writings of French scholars, colonial officials, and journalists in forming their judgments of the largely unfamiliar Vietnamese."[73] This impetus would undergird most of U.S. policies on nation-building of South Vietnam that I examine later. The programs designed for educational development were lathered with racial/racist assumptions about Vietnamese

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[71] Espiritu, Lowe, and Yoneyama, "Transpacific Entanglements," 181.
[72] Kothari, *A Radical History of Development Studies*, 86. She mostly focused on the context in the U.K.
[73] Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America*, 47.

backwardness and inability to self-govern, in need of re-education and scientific method of training—observation, participation under the guidance of American advisors in the U.S. as well as other sites of successful modernization such as in the Philippines, Taiwan, Hawaii.

Rehistoricizing South Vietnam Nation-building and American Aid

In conventional periodization, U.S. aid workers first arrived with a crucial mission to resettle refugees in the South. Following the Genève Accord, Vietnam split at the 17th parallel, a temporary border that was meant to be resolved within two years with a national election, allowing a 300 day-period of relocation to people from both ends. Considering this pause an opportunity to create an anticommunist nation, the U.S. government committed the U.S. Navy to assist the refugee resettlement in the Operation Passage to Freedom ("Sang phía tự do"). As Ronald Frankum Jr. reported, the exodus was also heightened by the U.S. and French propaganda.[74] This crisis-induced resettlement process, which brought nearly five thousand people a day to South Vietnam, enabled the U.S. to jump start the nation-building experiment in South Vietnam[75] by installing Ngô Đình Diệm as the first U.S.-backed President from 1955 to 1963. This event, as historian Jessica Elkind noted, "became one of the most important and defining features of early US aid to South Vietnam."[76] The historiography of South Vietnamese nation-building would trace the initial formation from this 1954 refugee resettlement until 1957 with the arrival of the first U.S. advisors

[74] Frankum, *Operation Passage to Freedom*.
[75] Elkind, *Aid Under Fire*, 26.
[76] Elkind, 26.

and academic evaluators, to Kennedy's 1960s modernization era with USAID and the second Republic, followed by Nixon's Vietnamization era after the bloody battles of 1968.

Yet, the first U.S. aid workers in South Vietnam were the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) who managed funding for the French. Viet Minh's quest for national liberation, along with other communist insurgents in the Asia-Pacific regions, convinced the U.S. that a foreseeable global Communist victory was underway.[77] Some U.S. officials, including the Secretary of State, called for military intervention, including nuclear weapons. The initial $10 million worth of military equipment, by 1953, became $350 million, and by 1954 the U.S. was paying 78 percent of French war bills.[78] Factors like the MAAG extended the historical context and made visible an intricate network of military-academic-security complex that circulated across Asia-Pacific before 1954. The South Vietnam nation-building project, in fact, tapped into the existing network of militarized educational circulation, one that emerged from the U.S. appetite for imperial knowledge on Asia after the end of World War II.

Nation-building in Vietnam was a beginning for the direct enmeshment of military-security-academic complex and its entanglement with aid industry, and the overall educational policies sponsored by civil agencies, especially USAID in Vietnam. The sprout of South Vietnam nation-building project was germinating almost a decade earlier when then self-exiled Ngô Đình Diệm traveled and lobbied for his political career amongst Japanese and American politicians.[79]

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[77] Man, *Soldiering through Empire*.

[78] "U.S. Military Advisory Effort In Vietnam: Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam, 1950-1964," 1.

[79] Morgan, "A Meeting in Tokyo." Ngô Đình Diệm has frequently been received at the American consulate-general in Hong Kong since 1946 and mingled with politicians in Japan; he was able to mobilize some serious backers in the U.S. government grooming him to replace the French puppet Bao Dai Emperor.

Diem's encounter in 1950 in Japan with Wesley Fishel, a young political science professor whose career and objectives were deeply tied to U.S. imperialism in Asia, secured him a friend and a loyal supporter. It was this friendship that brought the military-academic enterprise and the technical assistance business to Vietnam with Fishel becoming Diem's personal advisor and forming the initial model of university advisory groups that assisted South Vietnam's formation.[80] When Wesley Fishel became an assistant professor in Political Science at Michigan State University (MSU), he became Ngô Đình Diệm's closest advisor and confidant, serving as a liaison between Diem and General Lawton Collin, President Eisenhower's personal envoy to South Vienam, between 1954 and 1955.[81] From 1955 to 1962, Fishel helped found and led the Michigan State University Group (MSUG), supported by the State Department, Saigon's administration, and MSU, with funding from the International Cooperation Administration of the U.S. government (ICA). MSUG was one of many U.S. universities contracted by ICA, and the largest among the teams supported.[82] This collaboration contributed to the consolidation of USAID in 1961, expanding the militarized circulation that would bring U.S. military forces, secret agents, intelligentsia, as well as aid workers, administrators, researchers, and professors to Vietnam, and

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[80] A product of the military-security-academic industry, Fishel latched onto the mobility that afforded him in expanding his academic research onto foreign policy and experimenting on creating nation-states. He went to Japan as a student and would return there again to work for the Office of Naval intelligence during World War II as a Japanese intelligence analyst and translator. As a graduate student, Fishel remained in the Army Reserve, maintained his proximity to the State Department for his dissertation on Chinese extraterritoriality. In the early years of the Cold War, Fishel used his position as an academic to overtly aid the U.S. military's process of "using Japan as an outpost for intelligence on the revolution brewing in Asia" (Morgan, "A Meeting in Tokyo," 38). As a controversial academic-turn-nation builder-policymakers, Fishel's entire research and active career were shaped by wars and U.S. imperialism in Asia and Vietnam. His professor career began in early 1950s, soon joining other academic colleagues and policy makers in the emerging trajectory of modernization theories.

[81] Latham, "Redirecting the Revolution? The USA and the Failure of Nation-Building in South Vietnam," 27.

[82] Fishel, "The Role of the Michigan State University Group in Vietnam."

Vietnamese students, trainees, officers to the U.S. and U.S. colonies. This circulation marks the two-fold *militarized educational mobility* that would broaden the framework to examine U.S. nation-building in South Vietnam, situating such project in the larger history of U.S. Westward expansion into Asia-Pacific. The construction of South Vietnam relied heavily on the militarized mobility and the colonial solidarity across empires whose economic and political investments were at stakes in Southeast Asia in the wake of national liberation revolutions.[83]

This very first phase of nation-building (1955-1962) started with Michigan State University, the first university that received the largest aid package ($25 million) to provide institutional support to the State Department—faculty, volunteers, social scientists, and designated programs on East Lansing campus. MSU president, John Hannah, and Wesley Fishel founded MSUG with the belief that they could re-birth South Vietnam after Western model as a wealthy, just, democratic, orderly, and capable of controlling its own affairs. Consisted of "a number of American professors and specialists in public administration, police administration, and economics,"[84] MSUG helped securing South Vietnam under Diem regime, responsible for designing and reorganizing sections of civil society in administrative and pedagogical aspects.[85]

[83] It exemplifies U.S.'s strong commitment to its colonial allies. Needing both French and Japan as political and economic allies, the U.S. wanted to secure markets and raw materials for the postwar economic construction of Europe and Japan.

[84] Fishel, "The Role of the Michigan State University Group in Vietnam."

[85] The planning programs of studies and the teaching of courses at the National Institute of Administration, helping to organize the National Police Academy, assisting with the establishment of in-service training courses for public administrators and police, conducting studies of administrative organization and work methods, working out recommendations in collaboration with government officials for improvements in the administrative systems organization and methods of the government, and instituting research into administrative and economic problems. A number of civil servants are selected by the Government each year for study and training at Michigan State University in the United States. Fishel, 41.

From 1955 to 1961, MSUG Participant Program selected 179 Vietnamese students to study overseas, with 116 in the U.S. and other 63 in Southeast Asia. This training was less about higher education, and more to expose Vietnamese participants to examples of modern administrative and law enforcement. At the time, the advisors identified Vietnamese personnel in all institutional levels as lacking basic understanding of what is required to create and sustain a modern nation. This judgment followed the consensus from U.S. aid agencies advisors, which regarded Vietnamese educational systems as inadequate, backward, culturally conservative and unprepared for teaching a modern, more suitable curriculum to its people. As such, most suggestions and subsequent programs from these advisors sought to reduce Vietnamese academes and intellectual objectives to mere functional knowledge that was deemed "useful" and "necessary" for the national development. MSUG thus helped establish the National Institute of Administration (NIA) that sent students to the U.S. for advanced academic degrees and doctorates in mostly technical, science, and agricultural fields.

This experiment largely followed the "technical assistance" model in South Korea, with the deployment of U.S, American universities and other fractions of the military-security-academic industrial complex. However, MSUG's main contribution was training law enforcement and an internal security force; they were also charged with being responsible for resurrecting the much-hated French colonial guards known as *sûreté* by providing a front for CIA agents to work under their pay rank. The CIA agents, listed as professors and faculties, have channeled a large amount of aid package toward military bases, torture chambers, and trafficking hard weapons. The program ended in 1962 when professors-advisors of Diem regime wrote a series of recommendations and reports that reflected unfavorably on the administration. On that end, MSU

President John Hannah proposed to Diem that he can provide "friendlier" advisors with more positive things to say about the regime, to no avail.

However, it was not the end of the controversial U. S. universities' involvement in South Vietnam. Southern Illinois University (SIU) in the 1960s continued the legacy of MSUG after it has disintegrated, when Wesley Fishel briefly acted as head consultant in the early 1970s for a second aid package. The turn to modernization discourse under Kennedy's administration sought to build South Vietnam as a settler-colonial nation with a new emphasis on forcefully assimilating the rural and the peasantry into modern society, shifting away from conventional military tactics toward a comprehensive counterinsurgency program that integrated military action with social engineering. SIU received two substantial government contracts to work in Vietnam as advisors aiding the restructuring of Saigon's educational system. From 1961 to 1969, SIU signed several contracts with AID: Elementary Teacher Training (1961), Vocational-Technical Education Contract (1964), all within the new phase of modernization and particularly for the Strategic Hamlet program. USAID focused the largest amount of education reform aid to the objective of primary education that required standardized training for teachers and administrators. This history of USAID, particularly the assistance of SIU, would be one of the instances for USAID Vietnamese antiwar students in the U.S. in the 1970s.

Imperial Biopedagogy

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri once argued that nation-building is a "*productive* project of biopower and war"[86] as opposed to the "negative" project of annihilation. While nations can be invented or destroyed as part of a political program, Hard and Negri noted, they are necessary as

[86] Hardt and Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, 23.

elements of global order and security—a framework that Empire fabricates in order to stay in control. Echoing Achille Mbembe, the two scholars reject the notion that war is exceptional, or function as last resort after rational politics have failed to mitigate conflict, proposing that war is foundational to the politics of Empire, one that sustains violence, contains and produces new legal forms to regulate and order. Considering war as biopolitical power, nations emerged as "regime change," enforced by outside power to sustain postcolonial global reterritorialization. Hardt and Negri's framework of productive biopower helps frame this section's discussion of the nation-building project in South Vietnam.

In 1966, the American public was shaken by a series of reports[87] about how American universities provided facilities, faculties, and a front for the CIA and the State Department to build South Vietnam, fulfilling "multi-leveled interdependent economic, social, and cultural objectives vital to Washington's goals in Indochina."[88] The first publication to break the story was Ramparts, a political and literary magazine closely associated with the New Left, an early opponent against the Vietnam War. The special report made it to the issue's main cover with the headline "The University on the Make [or how MSU helped arm Madame Nhu]." With a highly sexualized and overexaggerated depiction of Madame Như—de facto First Lady of South Vietnam from 1955 to 1963—in a cheerleader's outfit for Michigan State University, Ramparts captured the attention of potential readers for one of the earliest exposés on the U.S. government conduct in South Vietnam. Despite not appearing in the report, the image of Madame Như on the cover drew on the sexist and racist trope of her as the troublesome "Dragon Lady," "diabolical sex dictatress" who controlled

[87] Ramparts, Robert Scigliano and Guy H. Fox, Technical Assistance in Vietnam, The Michigan State University Experience, Prager Special Studies, 1965.
[88] Douglass Allen, "Universities and the Vietnam War: A Case Study of a Successful Struggle," BCAS Oct 1976, 2.

the emasculated men of South Vietnamese government—a symbol of the catastrophe and high-profile misconducts by U.S. officials in Vietnam. Most unforgiveable was the complicity of the university and academics who eagerly supported the CIA and the military in exchange for funds. In short, the exposure of the U.S. failure as a moral leader in Southeast Asia was displaced onto the treacherous Vietnamese woman, and the monstrous, excessively effeminate, pathological and failing South Vietnam.

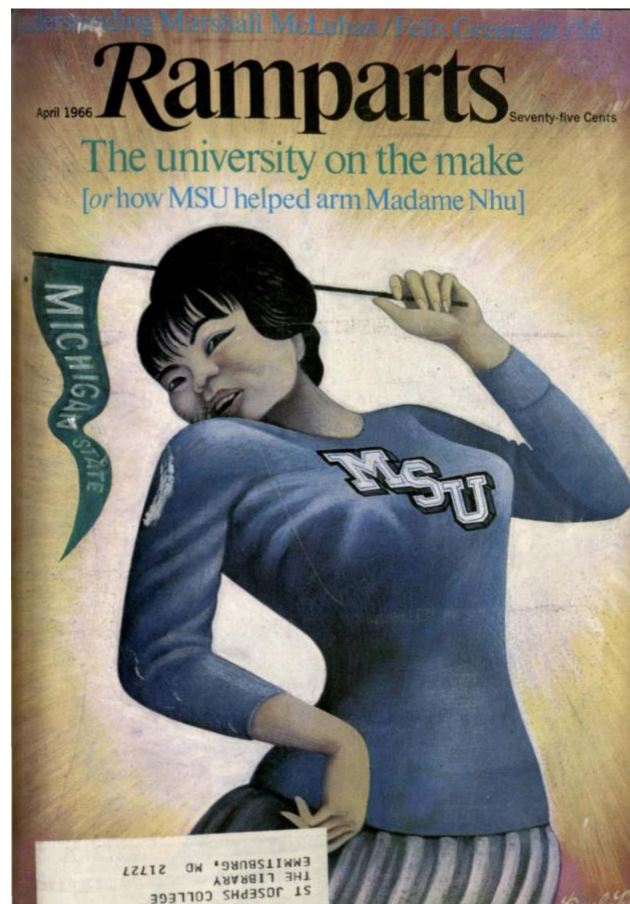

Figure 1.2. Cover of Ramparts magazine, volume 4, issue 12, April 1966

By the end of 1966, the U.S. has been meddling in Vietnamese affairs for more than a decade. In this second phase of nation-building, the number of American personnel more than

doubled, from 184,000 in 1965 to 385,000 in December 1966.[89] Moving from the initial phase of rebuilding of state institutions with the oversee of MSUG advisors, in 1961 the U.S. officially started modernization project with a heavy emphasis on the rural populations. An even more devastating project, the Strategic Hamlet, restructured rural regions, barricading the populations into heavily surveilled and administered settlements, was supported by Southern Illinois University who spearheaded the "community development" curriculum. To isolate communist guerrillas from the population, villagers were forced onto these new hubs, often at gunpoint. From 1966-1973, over 13,000 primary and secondary Hamlet schools were built; 18,000 schoolteachers were trained between 1968-1969. Sixteen million textbooks were published and distributed.[90]

It is important, I argue, to read the social restructuring programs that were not explicitly named educational reform as a part of the reeducation attempt. This way of reading allows us to understand what critical education scholars have called "overt" and "covert" curriculum. To read South Vietnam nation-building as an imperial biopedagogy project— the power to administer the humanity of racialized bodies, rooted at the core of American interventionism in Vietnam—is to reckon with how U.S. settler colonial pedagogy reinvented itself under the name of humanitarianism, pacification and modernization. In the Strategic Hamlet case, modernization is an explicit link between militarism and development that justified the forced transformation of Vietnam's indigenous culture with the "community development" curriculum. In the human experiment of South Vietnam, the backward, child-like native/Orientals from rural areas who had no prior concept of community and common society had to be reeducated into subjects that can envision themselves as citizens of a militarized nation-state. U.S. modernizers taught themselves

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[89] Ayers, *Sing a Battle Song*. "Timeline"
[90] Program & Planning Office, USIS Saigon, "United States Aid to Education in the RVN."

how to uplift Vietnamese peasants out of backward "isolation". In a lecture for the high-level, inter-agency "Modernization Institute" organized by the State Department, the CIA, and USAID, former leader of counterinsurgency efforts in the Philippines Edward Landsdale explained: "Once peasants recognized their mutual investment of labor and learned to appreciate the assistance they receive from the state, they would find their community becoming linked up closely to the nation, a real part of something bigger."[91] The governing logic of Strategic Hamlet mirrored that of Native reservations in the U.S.: farmers and villagers were relocated to more concentrated settlements for easier surveillance and social engineering. Drawing from French colonial practices, South Vietnam's earlier social experiments, and British tactics in colonial Malaya, these settlements were surrounded by barbed wire, ditches, and bamboo stakes, designed to deny the Vietcong access to the population. Under heightened social control, the hamlet residents had to carry identification at all time and report and ask permissions for their movements and visitors.[92] Three years in, the Strategic Hamlet resulted in mass starvation and famine all over the rural regions, coupled with deep seated paranoia and increased surveillance amongst the population.

Most of these attempts, however, remained mostly unknown to the American public until the Ramparts exposé, which shook American citizens and academic communities for different reasons. Those who were not aware of the deep military-academic entanglements questioned the alleged moral role of the educated, while others were outraged by their colleagues' violation of academic ethics by supporting state's political interests. The essay in *Ramparts* was "the first connection made for American students… [about] the link between the universities and the war machine [and] the complicity between the universities and a detestable foreign policy."[93] Stanley

[91] Latham, *Modernization as Ideology*, 169.
[92] Latham, 154–55.
[93] Emerson, *Winners and Losers*, 301.

Sheinbaum, former campus coordinator of MSU in South Vietnam, wrote how the project was "[a] diversion of the university away from… scholarship and teaching," "[a] failure of the academic intellectual to serve as critic, conscience, ombudsman [against] foreign policy," and finally, "[a] tragedy of Michigan State professors: we were all automatic cold warriors."[94] Sheinbaum described the advisory group's roles in South Vietnam—something that the university "ha[s] now chosen to forget"—as filled with "corruption and abject morality attending a university which puts its academic respectability on lend-lease to American foreign policy."[95]

In a later report, Martin Nicolaus advanced a different argument, less about personal guilt and academic resentment and more about the structural co-constitution of academic enterprise and militarism in U.S. foreign policy. Below is the introduction to his 1966 report on the university's complicity with state terror in South Vietnam:

> On a day in April 1960 in a small town in South Vietnam, the following insignificant event took place: an American professor interviewed the chief of the local secret police in the latter's headquarters, while… "curled up on a mat in the corner was a twenty-year-old peasant in tattered clothes. His feet were in manacles, the left side of his face was swollen, and his eye and cheek were badly bruised." … The professor, who was doing basic research under construct to the U.S. government and to the Saigon government, noted these facts but asked no further questions about the peasant. Neither … indicated that the peasant's presence disturbed them or struck them as strange. The professor's research report passes over the incident without comment.[96]

Conceptualizing this instance as a "microcosm" of a larger structure enacted by the U.S. government, Nicolaus asserted that the MSU project was a pilot model for the empire's "overseas research projects" that have been conducted all over Asia and Latin America by 1966. While the questions were urgent and the details were shocking to unassuming readers, he noted, the issues

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[94] Stanley Sheinbaum, quoted in Emerson, *Winner and Losers*, 301.
[95] "The University on the Make," 14.
[96] Nicolaus, "The Professor, the Policeman and the Peasant."

were not only about the moral deficit of some corruptible academics or the occasional cruelty of bad authorities. The roots of projects like MSU, according to him, "go back further and deeper into the 'normal,' the established and enduring life of American professors, universities, and American foreign policy in general."[97]

In this scene, the American professor—social scientist, researcher, and assigned reformer—was fulfilling his role, to survey and examine one representative of South Vietnam's institutions, collecting samples to determine if this branch is functioning properly, in accordance with his standard. The Vietnamese police chief was cooperating, giving out answers to in-depth questions, allowing his performance to be questioned and analyzed as a research subject to produce knowledge for further improvement of the reconstruction project. The two, in short, was engaging in what Michel Foucault would call a biopolitical project, or the exercise of control over bio-social population and domains of life. The researcher, under the sponsorship of universities, participated in U.S. empire's biopolitical project of "strengthening" a population deemed worthy of protection— "freedom-loving people"—against the global epidemic of communism, a disease that needed to be "contained." And yet, the ignored presence of the wounded body in the corner spoke to what Achille Mbembe considers "necropolitics," the process wherein biopower transforms into necropower, in which human population must be defined against the non-human monstrosity. The young man, tortured in suspicion of Vietcong membership, was an individual to be corrected or eradicated—against which human subjects are defined. In short, affiliation with communism is a type of "degeneration" against which the population must be protected.

[97] Nicolaus.

The association of communism with disease is rampant in Cold War rhetoric. Once Bernard Baruch coined the term Cold War in his 1947 speech, the imminent metaphor of *healthy* and *diseased* slowly emerged to regard the political situation in which the consensus strategy of the U.S. and its allied nations is "containment."[98] Third World countries in the wake of decolonization, as U.S. policymakers speculated, were more susceptible to radicalism and communism. The impoverished, they theorize, are less likely to be immune from socialist nationalist ideologies.[99] Thus U.S. interventions to build a "safe" environment required the elimination of the disease. As Achille Mbembe denotes, in a state of exception such as war, protection takes the form of eradication, where the "fictionalized notion" of the enemy of the state ensures the "normative basis of the right to kill:"[100] "Necropower [defines] the [super]sovereignty with the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not."[101] And yet, as soldiers and military leaders march on with racist assumptions about Vietnam as another "frontier" to be conquered and Vietnamese as another group of inhumane "Orientals," "gooks," the war efforts in Vietnam, despite its disguise as humane and just, were condemned by French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre as genocidal in intent and practice,[102] precisely so. The U.S.'s commitment to assist *all*

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[98] Most explicitly, as late as 1975, then California governor Ronald Reagan states: "Mankind has survived all manner of evil diseases and plagues. But can it survive Communism? When a disease like Communism hangs on as it has for over a half a century or more, it's good and then to be reminded of just how vicious it really is…We need frequent vaccination to guard against being infected, until the day when this health threat will be eliminated as we eliminate the black plague… Communism is neither an economic nor a political system. It's a form of insanity; a temporary aberration which will one day disappear from the Earth because it is contrary to human nature." Reagan et al., *Reagan, in His Own Voice*.

[99] Prashad, *The Darker Nations*; Elkind, *Aid Under Fire*; Man, *Soldiering through Empire*.

[100] Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 16.

[101] Mbembe, 26.

[102] Sartre, "On Genocide."

dictators (not without complication)[103] that came to power in South Vietnam against the Northern Viet Minh's communist revolution speaks to this logic of eradication, hidden within the promise of democratic "nation-building".

This instance points to the term "imperial biopedagogy," which treats nation building as a bio-necropolitic experiment to administer the humanity of racialized bodies, rooted at the core of American interventionism in Vietnam. Oftentimes alluded to as amendable wrongdoings and preventable power abuse in foreign policy, imperial biopedagogy takes shape through modern regime change.[104] From a population crushed by the ruins of colonialism and the threat of communism, imperial biopedagogy sought to produce a *healthy* citizenry of a democratic world––an anti-communist population that subscribes to the logic of nation-state, electoral politics, and capitalist economy. This transformation is contingent upon two fronts: first, the colonial tactic of reeducating the population in the colonies into modernized subjects; and second, a total transformation of political, social, and cultural society. Herein lies the logic of biopedagogy that cuts through the fallacy of modernization promise, itself another reiteration of settler-colonial pedagogy: it sought to transfuse an indigenous population with Western ideals, religion, epistemology, with specific plans to eradicate those deemed to be severely infected by radicalism and communism. The genocidal objective thought to be long gone—"kill the Indian, save the man"— reappeared in South Vietnam a century later, with a larger reservoir of state and non-state actors, now including professors, college-educated volunteers, and university administrators. The arrival of this academic-military enterprise helped consolidate the militarized-educational

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[103] The U.S. government supported Ngô Đình Diệm until he was deemed as unruly. CIA backed Duong Van Minh's assassination of his family. Later on, Nixon backed Tran Van Thieu despite international outcries of his tyranny.
[104] Hardt and Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, 23.

pathways, legitimize militarism as humanitarianism, and import the settler-colonial nation-state model to build Vietnam.

This (re)education process, while designed and structured by U.S. advisors, was an accumulated lesson from European colonial knowledge and U.S. own experiments in other colonial sites in Asia.[105] Imperial biopedagogy, as such, mobilized the metropolis and overseas colonies simultaneously to enhance a global hierarchy of raciality, constantly incorporating modernized subjects into its own racial management machinations. The militarized educational pathways also brought students, participant trainers, and officers from overseas to the United States. The second front is thus the metropolis. An exchange student explained that the USAID Leadership program that sponsored his cohort to the U.S. "recruited us [to] come back home as 'good' Vietnamese graduating from U.S. universities to explain U.S. policies where the South Vietnamese government could not."[106] In addition, the presence of Asian students in the U.S. fulfilled the Cold War emphasis on U.S. racial image management at home and internationally. While U.S. interventionism in Asia historically allowed for the consolidation of an American identity across racial lines, the Cold War exchange students from Asian colonies/territories assumed the figure of the foreign "model minority" to manage domestic racial politics. The presence of state-sponsored Asian exchange students, while presented as diplomatic representatives, helped to showcase the success of U.S. modernizing projects in Asia, thus displacing domestic structural inequalities into the personal failures and cultural flaws of the racialized poor. Specifically, the U.S. government needed a positive presence of respectable Vietnamese students to subdue the antiwar and other resistance movements in the U.S. in 1968.

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[105] For military involvement of Asian soldiers, see Man, *Soldiering through Empire.* USAID and MSUG sent participants to multiple sites outside the U.S., including Manilla, Taiwan, Hawaii.
[106] Ngo, personal interview, May 2020.

South Vietnamese Students and Antiwar Activism in the U.S

In the previous sections, I outline the U.S. militarized educational mobility that shaped its intervention in South Vietnam, showing the co-constitution of the Vietnam experiment and the military-security-academic complex and the regime building tactics central to U.S. foreign policy. U.S. imperialism, I contend, diverged from and yet utilized settler-colonial knowledge to intrude in Vietnam affairs, not only discursively but also materially and pedagogically. This imperial biopedagogy underlined the "modernizing project," calling attention to both the bio and necropolitical technologies of bio and necropolitical deployed in the experiment in Vietnam.

In this section, I discuss how imperial biopedagogy seeks to shape racial management in the metropolis, particularly through the transporting and showcasing of "educated subjects" from the colonies to U.S. citizens. Whereas the U.S. used education as a tactic of demilitarization and pacification to "win the heart and mind of the Vietnamese people," liberating "unfree subjects" from war-torn Vietnam by bringing them to U.S. universities manipulated the presumption of their gratefulness and docility. Performing respectable politics and the role of "educated intellectual from Vietnam," the AID students strategically organized and agitated amongst American people in an effort to demilitarize the U.S. and its heavily-funded government in South Vietnam. Here I redefine "de-militarization" from a mutual agreement to de-escalate firearms and disengage from combat to an effort by Vietnamese activists to challenge the unbalanced power relationship between the U.S. and Vietnams. It asks who gets to define militarization, what is considered "good" or "necessary" violence and what is considered savage, terror, and dangerous. As I will demonstrate through the case of Nguyễn Thái Bình, whose respectable-turn-militant antiwar politics earned him an informal charge that led to a death sentence, his political views and unauthorized "militarization" was considered a threat to the U.S.-sanctioned liberal order.

Since 1957 until 1973, the U.S. has trained more than 3,703 Vietnamese students at a cost estimated at $18 million. By 1968, there were around two thousand Vietnamese students in the U.S. Bringing more than four cohorts to study at the contracted colleges in California, USAID covered the students' airfares, tuition, and expenses up to $6,000 a year.[107] Government scholarships, from either the South Vietnam's Ministry of Education or the U.S. government, were the most secured ways for young people to study abroad. During the Vietnam War, the Saigon regime and to a certain extent the U.S. agencies strictly controlled Vietnamese citizens' mobility under the name of national security. Those who held oppositional views—non anticommunist, non-pro-government, and non-pro-America—were restricted from leaving Vietnam. Such was the story of Ngô Vĩnh Long, the first Vietnamese student to have been awarded a scholarship from Harvard University in 1964.

Ngô Vĩnh Long was 17 at the time. His visa was denied by the South Vietnamese government because of his oppositional view. By 1963, Long had joined other students in Saigon, demonstrating and protesting the government's abuse of power and violent repression of free speech. He did not start out as an activist. An intellectual by family tradition but from a humble class, Long had gained access to American contacts through tutoring the elites in Saigon and working for the Americans for a couple years. In 1956, he was sent to Quezon University in the Philippines in one of the MSUG participant training programs to learn mapmaking, before traveling to rural regions to make maps for the U.S. military. Encountering the Strategic Hamlet program and its devastating consequences, Long started to change his view about the U.S.' claims of pacification and development. Returning to Saigon, he became a vocal critic of the Saigon regime. Throughout 1962-1963, Vinh Long organized student demonstrations against the Diệm's

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[107] Welles, "7 South Vietnamese Students in U.S., Fearful, Refuse to Go Home."

regime in Saigon, which led to his 7 months exile during which CIA officials enrolled him in a student exchange program in Joplin, Missouri. Vinh Long returned to Vietnam in June 1964 and continued his activism, which led to a ban on his travel. An acquaintance, the wife of an American general, troubled by the situation in Saigon, used her personal connections to pressure the American Embassy to arrange his visa. This process took weeks, creating press buzzes around his story. Arriving in Boston on October 14th, 1964, Ngô Vĩnh Long became an instant phenomenon, as his story has been leaked to the press of the first Vietnamese student to be accepted to Harvard whose visa was blocked by the South Vietnamese government. While there, Long told the press that the U.S. will go to war with Vietnam. His comments caught the attention of antiwar scholars such as Howard Zinn and Noam Chomsky, who then organized teach-ins with him, touring different universities to educate college students and intellectuals about the war in Vietnam.

Ngô Vĩnh Long would become the earliest antiwar student to make his stance known and to be able leave Vietnam. The USAID antiwar students I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter did not make their politics known when they were chosen. The USAID Leadership exchange program, emerged out of the Participation Training Program started by MSUG and continued by USAID, only recruited students who held anticommunist views. The first cohort in 1967 was chosen entirely from the Southern Vietnamese Army (ARVN), while the second cohort in 1968 was hand selected by both the Saigon government and USAID officials through a serious screening process. They represented a renewed effort to train pro-American modernized, loyal nation builders for South Vietnam.

As such, South Vietnamese exchange students' presence in the U.S. was to enforce Cold War rhetoric. In addition to heavy surveillance by peers and USAID personnel, they received psychological tests from time to time to ensure their continued commitment. During holidays, they

would live with pro-war families to enforce their exposure to "American culture." These pedagogical moves, I argue, were aimed at producing transplants who appeared free, educated, and mobile. Unlike the anonymous Vietnamese bodies in a foreign land whose freedom awaits, these freed subjects are accessible to the U.S. public as both witnesses and evidence of a liberation given, provided by U.S. benevolence to a deserving, "freedom loving," and independent South Vietnam. In short, it is through the modernized, educated and presentable Vietnamese exchange student subjects that the U.S. manifests its credibility as the protector of the new world to its own people, and South Vietnam proves to the world its will, as well as ability, to keep up with the "right" end of history—or as Francis Fukuyama says, a history that ends with liberal democracy. Together, the two nation-states collaborated in their performance of freedom—giving and receiving—ultimately producing a notion of "freedom" as antithesis to communism (of which freedom is expressed through violent revolutions). In effect, the equation of freedom as "gift,"[108] as Mimi Thi Nguyen delineates in a different context, renders U.S. military violence as exceptional, inevitable, and just. The USAID Leadership program, as such, crystalizes the interconnection between American developmental aid and military intervention.

The students' departure from Vietnam, initially set on February 6 of 1968, was disrupted by the Tet Offensive. Upon arrival to LAX airport almost three months later, on March 23, they dispersed to different universities across the West Coast: San Diego, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Oakland, Berkeley, Seattle. The USAID 1968 cohort arrived in an America at war, with mass mobilization and student protests, which schooled them in of how American activists viewed the Vietnam War. As it turned out, the exchange program would also enable the radicalization of these students.

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[108] Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom*.

Although conceived as a site of containment and (re)education, the U.S. university also served as a *contact zone*, a site of encounter where exchange students joined antiwar and antiracist groups. From this contradictory social location, exchange students from Asia, and from Vietnam in particular, influenced the politics of "Third World consciousness." The antiracist movements of "the long 1960s" converted universities into sites of struggle, where students, scholars, and community members alike utilized campuses as strategic locations not only to demand institutional changes but also to devise and experiment with new strategies and tactics.[109] Surrounded by antiwar professors and leftist peers, the USAID students, despite having entered the U.S. under the guise of "white benevolent guidance" to learn about "civilization" and modernity, had their political awakening. California's vibrant racial justice movements drew these students in—especially in Oakland, where the Black Panther Party invited the Vietnamese students to meetings and workshops,[110] providing an environment where Vietnamese antiwar activists could learn from and contribute to broader antiracist critique. This is significant regarding the enmeshed configuration of the "Third World consciousness" that considered the presence of exchange students from Asia and Vietnam particularly.

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[109] In the East Coast, antiwar professors and researchers exposed how universities were complicit with the State, providing support for the military in exchange for state funding, leading to a severe student revolt at Columbia University. Students and faculties protested the administration's militarist and racist policies: Reserve Officers' Training Corps drills, military and CIA recruiters on campus, classified military research in the labs, as well as the institution's intended construction into a primarily black neighborhood. In the West coast, heightened racial tensions and antiwar movement created momentum in the Chicano student walk-out in East Los Angeles and the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) at San Francisco State University in March 1968. The TWLF protested U.S. imperialism in Vietnam and at home on campus, demanding access to non-Eurocentric, decolonizing histories and equal admission for professors and students of color. At UC Berkeley, the term "Asian American" was coined with the emergence of Asian American Political Alliance in light of these mobilizations.

[110] Ngo, Personal communication, May 5, 2020.

Some exchange students took part in the movement first by activating existing Vietnamese networks of student organizations and publications. While the existing organizations were mostly Catholic student groups focusing on cultural activities, there were individuals who were extremely invested in ending the war. Notably, those who had individual scholarships and private sponsors had more autonomy to collaborate with other U.S. activist groups. For example, Lê Anh Tú, who arrived in Philadelphia in 1960, worked with the American Friends Service Committee. Ngô Vĩnh Long, arriving in Boston in 1964, founded a number of organizations as well as publications to inform the public about the Vietnam War.[111] While East Coast student activities oriented primarily to the larger, predominantly white antiwar movement, the antiracist geopolitics of the West Coast shaped the antiwar radicalization of the USAID cohort. Exposures to the Black Panthers and Martin Luther King's assassination in their classrooms, and overall critical students at SFSC, for example, left lasting impressions on the emerging South Vietnamese activists. The West Coast network was in tight communication and contact across cities. Learning from others, in the earlier days, their activism involved organizing self-studied sessions about the Vietnam War, French colonialism, and U.S. racism, organizing cultural events with other racialized exchange students such as those at the Iranian Students Association, and making and distributing political zines on campus. They also had unlikely antiwar allies around them; for example, Ngô Thanh Nhàn, later a critical member of the movement, shared that the USAID personnel in charge of students in San Francisco had antiwar views and showed the students the files that USAID had kept on their

[111] His Boston-based research organization, Vietnam Resources Center, was one of the headquarters for antiwar Viet students, who were scattered around the country. In 1968, he cofounded the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars and the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* to intervene into the field of Asian studies whose predominantly white scholars remain silent about the violence of the Vietnam War. It was through this Committee that a potent antiwar network in the East Coast travels. See the interview with Ngô Vĩnh Long in Allen's retrospective article (1989).

activism, signaling the level of surveillance on the students. In the American homes that the students were visiting during holidays, they often encountered the generational difference in how American parents and their children viewed the Vietnam War. As such, their acculturation was less "effective" than USAID had hoped.

Simultaneously, the increased violence of the Vietnam War had galvanized a plethora of race-based movements on the West Coast. The politics of the American Left—including the New Left, African American radicals/intellectuals and the multi-ethnic "U.S. Third World Left"[112]—extended in part out of the decolonial, anti-imperialist projects of an emerging Third World, and particularly the Vietnamese communist insurgency. The U.S. Third World Left, a consciousness more than a well-organized movement, emerged among people of color for whom the U.S. war efforts in Vietnam compounded existing racism that entailed a disproportionate recruitment of impoverished, young men of color to fight the war—only to endured racism within the ranks. Simultaneously, Asian American racial awakening resulted from witnessing the massacre of Asian bodies and from experiencing being the surrogate "Gook" in the military. Drawing connections between the war in Vietnam and the war on the racialized poor in the U.S., antiracist activists developed this newfound identification that posits racialized Americans as a part of global peoples under U.S. domination.[113]

In 1968, the student movement on the West Coast had adopted the Third World identity. At San Francisco State College (SFSC), a collective of student groups founded Third World Liberation Front, deliberately mimicking National Liberation Front, also known as the Viet Cong. Comprising of Native American, Filipino, Black, Latino and Mexican American, and East Asian

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[112] Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left*.
[113] For an overview of the racial awakening within the Asian American movement, see Maeda, *Chains of Babylon*.

students, TWLF helped initiate and sustain one of the longest student strikes in U.S. history, pushing SFSC to open a Third World College, decolonize its European-centered history and curricula, and increase the number of students and professors of color. At this conjuncture, the Asian American movement at SJSC and University of California, Berkeley emerged. For the USAID cohort, this antiracist geopolitics of the West Coast shaped their entry into the antiwar movement. In later years, after one of their own was murdered, they would become more politically grounded in multiple radical, race-based organizations.

From 1968 to 1972, the USAID exchange students participated in the antiwar and other social movements at various levels of individual and small group appearances. In this period, Ngô Vĩnh Long was often the only Vietnamese student speaker on the antiwar campus tours, and Lê Anh Tú was always noted as a "Vietnamese woman" in flyers and literature that discussed her antiwar activities.[114] It was not until after the controversial death of Nguyễn Thái Bình and the subsequent backlash that the USAID students became more publicized, as antiwar organizations including Indochina Peace Campaign, founded by Tom Hayden and Jane Fonda, used their deportation trials to protest the U.S. war in Vietnam.

Respectable Activism

In 1972, Vietnamese international students across the U.S. joined forces to stage two big demonstrations that led to the deportation orders of the USAID students and, ultimately, to the murder of one of their own. The first involved the occupation of the Saigon consulate in New York on February 10, 1972 to protest Nixon's "Plan for Peace in Vietnam" released on January 25,

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[114] For example, in a hand-drawn flyer for March Against the War Rally and Festival, Le Anh Tu was listed among other speakers and listed as "Vietnamese woman" in parentheses. Flyer (1972, April 22). Freedom Archive. Viet Nam Collection.

1972.[115] For the Vietnamese students, Nixon's plan prioritized the U.S. neocolonial relationship with South Vietnam over true peace: "Nixon's plan misleads the American people into believing that free and democratic elections will be possible in South Vietnam if Thieu resigns," noting that the rest of Thieu's U.S.-backed army and police would be fully capable of rigging another election as seen in 1967 and 1971 (Ngo 1972). The second demonstration, dubbed the "Vietnamese Invasion" of Southern Illinois University on April 26 1972, joined a two-year protest against SIU's acceptance of USAID funds—perceived as assisting warfare in Vietnam.[116] All participants[117] in the first action were arrested, an outcome they had "hoped for."

The execution of the sit-in at the Saigon consulate was extremely well organized. Seven men and three women, nicely dressed and ready for press photos and TV interviews, entered the Saigon consulate in New York at 2:30 pm on a Thursday. Barricading themselves in the small room, the ten students came prepared. They had copies of three press statements to be released during and after the occupation: one to announce the demands and reasons for the sit-in, one to legally negotiate with the U.S. authorities, and one to update the public about the result of their sit-in upon departure. Outside, one person distributed an article on Nixon's "peace" plan to the press and interested people to raise awareness about Nixon's Vietnam policies.

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[115] This speech vilified the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam's 7-point peace proposed in 1971, a proposal that many American antiwar protestors rally behind and criticized Nixon administration for keeping hidden from the public in order to remain U.S. troops in Vietnam. Later, the Union of Vietnamese in the U.S. also support this proposal.

[116] For a detailed discussion of SIU's controversy, see Keith, A. H. (2002). *Turbulent Times*. Allan H. Keith; Jonathan Mirsky, "The Carbondale Caper," and Jim Morrell, "The Carbondale Caper: A Sequel," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* Fall 1970 issue 4, 71-79.

[117] List of participants: Trần Khánh Tuyết, Lê Anh Tú, Nguyễn Hội Chân, Doan Hong Hai, Ngô Vĩnh Long, Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Thoa, Nguyễn Hữu An, Nguyễn Thái Bình, Tran Vu Dung, Vũ Ngọc Côn, Nguyễn Tăng Huyễn.

In the first press statements, the students spelled out their demands for the release of political prisoners wrongfully captured by the Saigon regime and the dissolution of the Nguyen Van Thieu's regime and its leader, the administration that has been "the instrument of barbaric repression" in Southeast Asia. When Vietnamese authorities at the Consulate demanded that the police arrest them, the students publicized this image—of the Saigon regime relying on U.S. aid to repress its own people. The police initially was given a statement through the door's letter slot, which asked them to not interfere with the sit-in since the students were not seizing property or committing war crimes but only sitting on "a piece of our own property, which has been acquired at the cost of countless Vietnamese lives." The short but effective statement critiqued U.S. hypocrisy, linking the U.S. police to the U.S. military occupying and committing war crimes in Vietnam, linking Vietnamese sovereignty at home to the symbolic consulate sponsored by U.S. authorities. After three hours, a "secretary of the embassy" asked the police to break into the room and arrest the students. The students released their final statement, which repeated their demands and announced their future plans to agitate further so the American public can be aware.

In the end, all ten students were arrested. Publicizing their arrest in their newsletter *Thoi* Bao Ga, the students' three-hour peaceful occupation was a performance to draw attention to U.S. involvement in Vietnam:

> This is what we had hoped for. This would give us the opportunity to make the American people aware of the fact that while we were charged with "criminal trespassing" and prosecuted by American laws for simply occupying a piece of our own property, Americans who are occupying our country…are free to continue committing the same crimes.

Newspapers took pictures of the students after the barricade was breached; some described the students as "chatting together with police before they were led peacefully away."[118] Other pictures, taken by the student's own photographer showed them smiling at the camera, waving at sympathetic demonstrators outside the building, to the crowd, interacting civilly with the police. Despite being arrested and booked, none of the students were harmed. Multiple newspapers published sympathetic narratives, referring to the demonstrators as "Harvard students" who "barricaded themselves," while the police attempted to "br[eak] in with crowbars."[119] The students, used their position as educated subjects whose legal identification was bound to U.S. foreign aid to negotiate with the forged civility that the police had to perform. The students' deliberate denunciation of police brutality as one of the problems of the "barbaric" South Vietnamese regime in their statements and interviews with reporters was then deployed to call for "civility" from the NYPD. Performing respectability and protesting in a civilized manner, with informed arguments on their legal and sovereign rights, the students emerged unscathed from their encounter with the police—an experience other antiwar protesters did not share. Ultimately, their intended audiences were neither the Vietnamese nor the American authorities, but the American public. Deploying expected behavior—demure, civil, polite—the students sought to "demilitarize" U.S. authorities over them in the U.S. and Vietnam.

In an article published ten days later in *Boston After Dark* about the sit-in, Ngô Vĩnh Long declared that they were anticipating retaliation from USAID and the Saigon government. Immediately after the arrest, Saigon ordered USAID to cancel the students' scholarships, which was later overturned as the students evoked freedom of speech. Under public pressure, USAID

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[118] Pictures reprinted from Thoi-Bao Ga.
[119] "S. Vietnamese Mission Seized," *The Harvard Crimson,* February 11, 1972.

reinstated their scholarship, allowing them to finish school on the condition that they return to Vietnam immediately upon graduation.

This intimidation did not stop the students. On April 1972, eight of them continued to show up at Southern Illinois University. From Washington, Philadelphia, New York, Boston, Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Fresno, and San Diego—fifteen[120] staged a "Vietnamese invasion" to expose the policies of Vietnamization and USAID at SIU. The event was organized by SIU assistant professor Douglas Allen and Ngô Vĩnh Long, amongst other professors and activists who had been protesting SIU for violating academic ethical code by taking money from USAID—the institution that funded state terror and worked with the CIA—to build a Vietnam Center Studies staffed by the original "war criminals" who remade Vietnam into paramilitary forces. The Vietnam Center at SIU was to become a place to host future Vietnamese exchange students.

This was the first time that any Vietnamese student group directly confronted AID. As USAID students, they came as experts and witnesses of what AID had done to Vietnam. They also came at great risks of deportation and "almost certain imprisonment and torture and possible death at the hands of the Thieu regime." [121] Unable to stop the students from coming, American AID officers and Center personnel kept a low profile over the whole period. A large group of Vietnamese students at SIU were sent in as counter-protesters to disrupt the event. During the spring of 1972, there were about 70 Vietnamese students at SIU (the largest number at any US university)—only a few had relationship with the Center, but they had been carefully organized and prepared, appeared with banners and placards with right wing slogans ("Vietnam (America):

[120] Lê Anh Tú, Nguyễn Hữu An, Nguyễn Thái Bình, Trần Khánh Tuyết, David Truong, Doan Hong Hai, Tran Vu Dung, Ngô Vĩnh Long, Vũ Ngọc Côn, Vu Quang Viet, Do Hoang Khanh, and Nguyen Trieu Phu. (Allen, 1976: 11)
[121] Allen, "Universities and the Vietnam War."

Love it or Leave it"), and Saigon flag. The SIU Vietnamese, as Ngô Vĩnh Long later reported in Thoi-bao Ga May 1972 issue, were "pressured by the Saigon embassy in Washington and Americans at the AID Viet Center." The students started the event by reading a statement that exposed the role of AID in training and aiding the Saigon's police, in building prisons, and in wielding other violent measures against civilians and political prisoners. They criticized AID's plan to create a Vietnam Center at SIU under

> war criminals like Wesley Fishel, the first American 'advisor' to help shape the Saigon police into an effective tool of repression, and Milton Sacks, the originator of the 'leopard spot' relocation program!" and demanded "that the Center be dismantled and its Vietnamese staffers be sent home at once, just as we demand an immediate end to all American military, economic, and paramilitary support of the corrupt and barbaric Thieu regime.[122]

That evening, the students debated a representative of the Vietnamese students at SIU. Lê Anh Tú, a researcher for NARMIC of the American Friends Service Committee in Philadelphia, took on the challenge. The first to debate was Pham The Hung, the Vietnamese member at the AID Center, who assumed that his opponent would be two other men, Ngô Vĩnh Long and David Truong. He shouted vicious personal attacks against the men, and his crowd waved their flags in support. When Tú's turn came, she said she "would not attack her Vietnamese brother. She was saddened to see that her SIU brothers and sisters had learned so well Nixon's policy of Vietnamization, which was to turn Vietnamese against Vietnamese."[123] The audiences at that point, Allen noted, became "silent and shamed, their eyes cast downward,"[124] as Tu analyzed Nixon's policy and the situation in Vietnam. Tu's presentation, which came from her work with

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[122] Allen, 11.
[123] Allen, "Universities and the Vietnam War."
[124] Allen.

the research collective (NARMIC) to inform Congress about the war and Thieu's achievements with U.S. aid,[125] received some applause from the SIU Vietnamese.

After the rupture, the cultural evening proceeded, where revolutionary songs in Vietnamese and English were sung, and while the counter-protesters came in to disrupt once again, many stayed behind to show respect to the antiwar students. This night was one of the high notes that gave hopes to the participants—a moving experience for the small groups that were trying their best to stop a war so much bigger than them. As Tú shared with me, remembering her activism in the war as a 23 year old

> gave me a clear voice to remind American readers the roots of *their* struggle for independence. My greatest dream was to see the war ended. Even then, I was aware that I was in the privileged position of being able to speak to Americans directly and I had a duty to do that well in order to move us closer to ending the war. [126]

Paying a Blood Debt

Only a few months after, Nguyễn Thái Bình, a student who was at both events, boarded a fateful flight back to Vietnam. On July 2, 1972, Pan American Flight 841 departed from San Francisco for Saigon with scheduled stops at Honolulu and Manilla. Bình had just finished his degree in fisheries at the University of Washington and boarded this flight from Honolulu. He would land at Tan Son Nhat airport as a corpse, with five bullets in his chest, thrown out onto the tarmac "for all the world to see."[127]

The press reported that Bình had tried to hijack the plane as an "act of revenge" against the U.S., and that he had been "slain" by the captain with the help of armed passengers.[128] U.S. media

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[125] Le, Email with author, Dec 12, 2018
[126] Le, Email with author, Dec 12, 2018
[127] Koerner, *The Skies Belong to Us*, 185.
[128] "Saigon Police Holding Father of Slain Hijacker."

outlets published this version of events, primarily citing the testimony of Pan Am pilot Eugene Vaughn. According to Vaugh, Bình had held a stewardess hostage using a 10-inch knife and had communicated his demands in notes written in his own blood, ordering the pilot to change the flight destination from Saigon to Hanoi and threatening to "blow up this plane" upon arrival. Vaughn recounted attempting to negotiate with Bình and then successfully apprehending him after temporarily landing the plane on the outskirts of Tan Son Nhat airport. Pinning Bình to the ground, Vaughn ordered the flight marshal to shoot him five times on the back before tossing his body out onto the tarmac. A supposed bomb in Bình's hand turned out to be a lemon covered in foil.[129]

Few challenged the accuracy of this account. In the official public record, Nguyễn Thái Bình was a plane hijacker who received a death penalty at the hands of a hypervigilant pilot. No crime scene was ever established, nor any proper investigation undertaken, to confirm the details regarding Bình's death. Under the joint purview of the United States and South Vietnam, the case was promptly dismissed after four days. Witnesses were released to leave Saigon after only seven hours of questioning.[130]

At the time, groups among the Third World Left remembered Bình's death as evidence of his militant heroism. While major newspapers published the account of Bình's "hijacking crime," Bình's letters were reprinted in clandestine newsletters, flyers, and zines, sharing widely his tragic, premonitory declaration: "my only bomb is my human heart."[131] Together, this phrase entered the

[129] Publications that reproduced the story of "bloody note and lemon bomb" include Wood, "Kill Vietnamese Hijacker Carrying Lemon 'Bombs'"; "Air Pirate Slain on Jet in Saigon"; For the most recent publication to tell this story, see Koerner, *The Skies Belong to Us*.

[130] On July 7th, the U.S. Justice Department concluded after two days that the U.S. did not have jurisdiction over this incident—but refused to explain how it would have proceeded if having jurisdiction.

[131] New York Asian Coalition Newsletter, Vol. 1 No. 1; Franklin, "'The Only Way to Exist Is to Resist:' The Story of Thai Binh's Skyjack Attempt;" Kuba, "Death of Peace." Forward, Vol. 1,

collective memory about him. Commemorative protests and demonstrations were organized around the world, from New York to Saigon, Miami to the Bay Area.[132] In Los Angeles, Asian American activists honored Bình's death in their protest. In the annual Nisei Week Parade on August 1972, Japanese organizers including the Asian Sisters and the Yellow Brotherhood, groups primarily focused on anti-drugs organizing,[133] responded to a nationwide call against U.S. and Japanese imperialism in Asia. Joining them were two newly formed brigades, Thái Bình Brigade and the other named for another Vietnamese guerilla fighter who had been executed in Vietnam in 1964, the Văn Trỗi Anti-Imperialist Youth Brigade.[134] Together, they marched in military formation and channeled a Black Panther aesthetic, chanting about "picking up guns" and coordinating spectacular acts of protest that included flag burning, firecrackers, and high-profile banners drops. At the climax, protesters dropped a large banner from a third-floor balcony that read, "One Battle, Many Fronts. Support the Victorious Struggle of the Vietnamese People," then set off firecrackers, chanting "Thái Bình, Live like him, Dare to Struggle, Dare to Win!" Though celebratory, Bình was likened to Trỗi in his death to signify a Vietnamese heroic martyrdom, one that allowed an articulation of Asian American activist militancy.

No. 10, 8/1/1972; Peace Newsletter, August 1972; The Pentagon Paper July/August 1972, pp. 3; News & Letter, August-September 1972.

[132] [132] On the Miami demonstration, see FBI Vault, File: 100-449923 section 14b -112, MM 100-16028; for the funeral held by Vietnamese USAID students see Franklin, "'The Only Way to Exist Is to Resist:' The Story of Thai Binh's Skyjack Attempt."

[133] An anti-drug advocacy was imminent in this era because of the addiction rate amongst Japanese veterans returning after serving in the Vietnam War. See Fu, "'Serve the People and You Help Yourself': Japanese-American Anti-Drug Organizing in Los Angeles, 1969 to 1972."

[134] Ishizuka and Chang, *Serve the People*; Fu, "Keeping Close to the Ground: Politics and Coalition in Asian American Community Organizing, 1969-1977."

Some lamented his alleged hijacking as "ill-conceived" and "desperate;"[135] others described Bình's demise as the "death of peace,"[136] invoking the meaning of the young activist's name: Thái Bình means "peace" in Vietnamese. For their part, Bình's Vietnamese friends deemed his death an "assassination," the "heroic sacrifice" of a "revolutionary fighter" (Le, 1972) and his memory became an inspiration for activists, who turned their attention to consolidating the power of their antiwar activism by forming new political organizations. With the Black Panthers' help, on July 16, 1972, the Vietnamese students held a marching funeral for Bình in Glide Memorial Methodist Church in San Francisco that attracted more than eight hundred people, joined by several groups, notably Vietnamese Veteran Against the War, Asian Coalition against the War, Young Workers Liberation League, Guardian & J-Town Collective, East Bay Women for Peace, Ramparts, Committee in Solidarity with S. Vietnamese Students. [137]This march was the founding action of the Union of Vietnamese in the U.S., a forceful organization that didn't dissolve until 1993, amidst the normalization of U.S.-Vietnam relations.

[135] Allen, "Universities and the Vietnam War."
[136] Kuba, "Death of Peace."
[137] The Union of Vietnamese in the United States Commemorates Nguyen Thai Binh. Flyer. Freedom Archive. Viet Nam Collection.

Figure 1.3: Bình's funeral march in San Francisco, 1972. Source: UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press.

Yet, upon reflections years later, some still held on to their memories of him as an extremely sensitive person, who recited his own poetry and sang songs that he had composed, who became increasingly anguished by U.S. war crimes. After the SIU Invasion, in May and June 1972, just days before his departure, he sent out articles and correspondence to Allen, expressing his deep anti-imperialism. Back in Seattle, where Bình resided, he spoke at many demonstrations and teach-ins. His contributions were no longer confined to poetry or songs. There was a picture of him speaking in early June, with the word "Blood Debt" written with his own blood on a banner. By then, he knew he was going home after graduation to face almost certain imprisonment and torture.

For his academic achievement, on June 10th 1972, Bình was scheduled to give a commencement speech. Earlier outside the venue, dressed in regalia covered with antiwar slogans and the words "blood debt" etched across his chest, Bình passed out flyers to attendees. He had the same words written on a big banner in his own blood at a war rally in Seattle earlier that month. Addressing the audience, his commencement speech began:

> Today, to get a degree, many of you have been in debt of thousands of dollars for school; but for me, I have owed a debt of blood, bone, flesh of million Vietnamese since my *safe* time to study here costs the death, suffering on my people, destruction in my country – Vietnam. All of you have owed that blood debt too since the American people must bear responsibility for the magnitude of war crimes being committed by the United States government against the people in Vietnam, as well as in Indochina.

This indictment of the university prompted campus security to eject Bình from his own commencement and, upon his death, this act of protest was routinely presented as evidence of his guilt. It was in this moment that Bình made visible the hidden cost of the "gift of freedom"--an

exchange for Vietnamese people's death, suffering, and destruction. The access to mobility and education in the US, for him, was directly supported by the war at home. In other words, his potential for *life* was secured through the deaths of Vietnamese people under U.S. militarism and failed experiments of pacification.

The strongly worded message on "blood debt" foreshadowed his fate. Less than a month later, he was returned to Vietnam, even though one could argue he never really left. His critical commencement speech on graduation day—linking American student debts to the blood debts endured by Vietnamese students—rejects the protection of "life" for the educated, predicated on the disavowal of life wasted elsewhere. And if we can trust the news coverage about his hijacking plan, his death was the last and most daring performance of demonstration ever carried out: Binh used his body to pay the "blood debt" he felt he owed his nation, calling attention to the catastrophe happening in Vietnam, far away from most Americans. Failing to demilitarize the U.S. government using his civility, Binh armed himself with two lemons wrapped in foils, hoping it would be enough to redirect the plane to somewhere he could continue the fight. "My only bomb," he wrote in the open letter to peace and justice loving people in the world, "is my human heart which can explode to call for love, faith, and hope." In those last hours, he wrote two last letters, one sent to another fellow student Nguyen Huu An, telling him to keep on fighting, and one to his family telling them he will be gone.

The Body Returned

In one of the only two pictures disclosed to the public, Bình's body was not even visible: the picture provided by United Press International showed two Vietnamese men in the center who were in the process of covering up his body. In the background, there was a military jeep parking

very closely to the plane. The full version of the same photo printed in Saigon newspapers was a wide shot that showed a bigger range of the airplane, in which two Vietnamese men were seen on the slight right of the picture. This photo was a perfect indication for the situation at hand: an unseen body under the cover-up by the South Vietnamese polices, within the range of the military jeep, under the wings of a U.S airplane.

Figure 1.4: Photograph of Bình's body being covered and carried off the tarmac by Vietnamese authorities. Source: United Press International, reprinted by Vietnamese newspapers, the Cedar Rapids Gazette and with alternation by the New York Times on the front page of their July 3, 1972 issue.

In hindsight, this photo says very little: two anonymous Vietnamese men handling a corpse, identified by the caption as a student, on the tarmac. Behind them, from afar, a military jeep, in the shadow under the gigantic wings of an airplane. A violence took place prior to this picture, but one does not see the perpetrator. The dead student was covered up. A dead student, two policemen, all Vietnamese, no Americans in sight, except their war technologies. This picture is a perfect depiction of the U.S. war in Vietnam in the years after 1969: President Richard Nixon's

Vietnamization, introduced in an anticipated televised speech on November 3rd, 1969, vowed to increase training of Vietnamese soldiers to fight their own war.[138]

The picture of Nguyễn Thái Bình's death makes visible the process of Vietnamization and the infrastructure of empire, one that rests on the participation of civilian and non-state actors, U.S. military technology, and the elimination of oppositional forces. In the picture, the un-visible traces of the U.S. empire were hidden in the military jeep from afar, under the shadow of the cropped-out jet engine Boeing 747, both of which demonstrate the U.S.' pacification projects in Vietnam: U.S. aids in the form of providing equipment, vehicles, funding and training for police forces, and American personnel and advisors to assist the nation-building project in South Vietnam. Over the twenty years period (1954-1975), the "massive" amount that the U.S. provided Vietnam was $8.5 billion in economic aid, and additionally $17 billion in military aid.[139] The military jeep, manufactured and sold by U.S companies with military contract, was imported as a part of U.S. aid to equip South Vietnam police and military forces, while the commercial jet engine belonged to Pan American Airway boarded flight 841 that was transporting mostly American non-military servicemen returning from leave. The flight's scheduled stops in Hawaii, Guam, and the Philippines—all islands under U.S. control with prominent military bases mobilized in the U.S.

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[138] A "cornerstone for the Nixon's Doctrine," Vietnamization supposedly sought to "reverse" President Johnson's "Americanization" of the war, and to live up to the Doctrine's proclamation that the U.S. would only support "freedom-loving people" and allies *from afar* from then on. To appease public opposition after the 1968 Tet Offensive losses and the My Lai massacre, Vietnamization was made out to be a shift in American policies regarding the Vietnam War, while in reality it strengthened America's involvement in Vietnam: the various pacification programs integral to U.S. nation-building in South Vietnam, and larger Asia—the "Other War." As an American strategy, pacification was never as publicized as other aspects of war conflicts, such as direct military operations by U.S. Air Force or Navy bombing campaigns or big-unit war by U.S. Army and Marine Corps. Regardless, pacification and aid were the original Vietnamization, years before Nixon was in the picture, a last strategy by the French colonial administration to overcome its inevitable defeat.

[139] Dacy, *Foreign Aid, War, and Economic Development*, 20.

war with Vietnam—strongly resemble the transpacific routes of both military offense operations and later refugee rescue.[140] This biggest aircraft introduced in 1968 was also a response to the United States Air Force's study projects for large strategic transport aircraft in 1963, and hailed as "a great weapon for peace, competing with the intercontinental missiles for mankind's destiny."[141] This is what Nixon's Vietnamization strived for, but have already built up since the heyday of Indochina wars: A whole political economy exacerbated by war and neo-colonialism, vibrant and lively *from afar* while the South Vietnamese handled each other's death.

With no explanation, the death looks like an isolated incident, not the consequence of war or mass destructions. The immediate question: why is there a *student* dead on a tarmac? This seemingly *out-of-place* body, a disruption of commonsense points to an emblematic dissonance in the normalized discussion of war, one that left out almost entirely different sectors of civil society beyond the hashed-out imageries of soldiers, generals, helpless civilians, and rescued refugees. It asks us to trace the making of a *student-body* in and through war, how the death of this student in a place *he was not supposed to be* pokes holes at the map of empire, organized around the decompartmentalization of Vietnamese society and categorization of bodies. A misplacement of body, to borrow Marguerite Nguyen's words, "results (in) the disconnection from the original moment of brutal Vietnamese-American encounter but also confusion over who is witnessing what and who is accountable for what and to whom."[142] In such manufactured confusion lies the "militarized organizing logic,"[143] the necro- and bio-politics that determine which populations live

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[140] Espiritu, *Body Counts*.
[141] Statement by Juan Trippe, President of Pan American Airway, the largest customer of the manufacturer of Boeing in 1966. In Honey and Cawthorn, "Great Planes - Boeing 747."
[142] Marguerite Bich Nguyen, *America's Vietnam: The Longue Duree of U.S. Literature and Empire*. (Temple University Press, 2018), pg. 90.
[143] Shigematsu and Camacho, *Militarized Currents*, xvii.

and die where and for what purposes: South Vietnamese soldiers die in battle against Viet Cong, refugees die en route escaping to freedom, civilians die as collateral damages. These deaths, or the *prevention of* such outcomes, were the reasons the U.S. decided which sets of weapons to use in its prolonged intervention in Vietnam. The logic is that without U.S. aids, South Vietnamese would fall under communism—the antithesis of freedom, an existence marked as less desirable than death.

As such, the death of Nguyễn Thái Bình, a chosen "freed subject", throws off this script: he was supposed to *live* to tell the world about how the U.S. had given Vietnam life. Instead, his departure from the U.S. to Saigon marked the reversal journey, a *returning to death*. Executed by a hypervigilant non-military personnel on a commercial airplane, thrown out to the tarmac of Tan Son Nhat airport, symbolically, the action tells us that Americans have the authority over Vietnamese bodies, and that Vietnam was a dumping ground for bodies, a crime scene of its own making, outside of U.S. responsibility.[144] The (mis)placement of his student-body, in short, points to how U.S. empire and its participants render Vietnam as a battlefield, regardless of their professed attempt to build it up as a nation through humanitarian efforts.

Chapter 1, in part, has been submitted and accepted as an article for the Journal of International Communication, currently entitled "'Thái Bình means Peace': Remembering the South Vietnamese Exchange Students of 1968." The dissertation author was the sole author of this material.

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[144] The U.S. Justice Department concluded after two days that it did not have jurisdiction over this incident—but refused to explain how it would have proceeded otherwise. There were no legal proceedings or attempts to put on a case; Nguyễn Thái Bình's death was without a coroner's inquest, no official investigation, and no jury from the American side.

Chapter 2: Revolution 2.0: Refugee Returns

In the first volume of the first Vietnamese refugee-owned literary magazine in the United States, Văn Học Nghệ Thuật published in April 1978, Chief editor and famous South Vietnamese writer Võ Phiến asks:

> "Would Vietnamese refugees one day return? While waiting [for such return], to survive, how much do we allow ourselves to assimilate? How long will this assimilation be gradually enacted? What of our national/ethnic identity do we insist on keeping? And how…?"[145]

These questions about returning, assimilation, and preserving national/ethnic identity were pressing concerns at the time for many Vietnamese refugees whose abrupt departure from the homeland was both sudden and unexpected. This desire to return, as well as the impossibility of such task, colors a vast range of Vietnamese-language literary work that was published during the time period immediately following the war.[146] Following the normalization of diplomatic relations between the United States and Vietnam, which made returning to Vietnam no longer an impossible feat for Vietnamese refugees who once considered themselves permanent exiles, writer and literary critic Isabelle Pelaud still observed that post-1994 Vietnamese American literature is "bound by the theme of return."[147] The question arises: What do refugees and their descendants dream of returning to? How does the physical act of returning allow different imaginaries about the past, the present, and the future for Vietnamese American refugees?

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[145] Võ, "Thay Lời Phi Lộ." ["A Confession"]

[146] This theme is well echoed, especially in short forms such as poetry, short stories, proses, and personal essays printed in various Vietnamese language magazines and newspapers in the earlier years of resettlement. It is through these outlets that professional and amateur writers alike can express their immediate feelings and thoughts in a relatively fast pace, engaging in loose conversations with others, participating in a sort of public forum via submissions to magazine and letters to editors.

[147] Pelaud, "Breaking 'Laws of Origin.'"

The political project of return, as this chapter contends, is central to the study of refugee political subjectivity. Beyond hashed-out narratives of resettlement, assimilation, and multicultural inclusion into American society, this chapter focuses on refugees' political desires and activisms surrounding the question of returning. I ask: How have Vietnamese refugees and their descendants attempted to return to Vietnam, from the end of the Vietnam War to this current moment? In particular, how have these returns exemplified refugee political subjectivity, and how do they lend insight into the complexity of the Vietnamese diasporic and transnational political landscape? Most importantly, how do these processes allow us to rethink a radical politics that attends to refugee politics of war memory rather than being in opposition of it?

In asking these questions, this chapter continues the discussion on the political genealogy of Vietnamese leftism emerging out of the 1960s antiwar movement in the United States. The chapter follows the histories of violence that posit the Vietnamese diaspora not only within the well-studied context of the Vietnam War, the refugee passage, but also of extralegal militarism, political repression, and transnational political mobilizations in both the Right and the Left, which undergird the social and racial tension of the Reagan era. Revisiting the surge of anticommunist attacks in the 1980s Homeland Restoration, I continue the discussion on the precarity of South Vietnamese radicalism in the U.S., and the historical context in which it simultaneously proceeds and recedes from the 1970s. This chapter takes a materialist approach to the politicization of refugee memories, discussing not only what Viet Thanh Nguyen calls "the struggle over [refugee] memories"[148] and political ideologies, but also about what they are made of, and what people make of them. It unveils the conditions in which refugee political subjectivity in general and Vietnamese radicalism in particular takes up the nature of secrecy[149]—commenting on the complex political

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[148] Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*.
[149] Vang, *History on the Run*.

relationship between secret and erasure, two interrelated epistemological problems in the struggle for legibility.

The chapter first traces the emergence of refugee nationalist militarism as both an example of refugee political subjectivity outside of the liberal discourse of resettlement and assimilation, and a historical context mediated by U.S. racial liberalism and empire-building that disrupts other Vietnamese American political subjectivities. I then contrast it with the transnational political engagement undertaken by Vietnamese refugee descendants who return to Vietnam to politically engage with Vietnam negotiating past conflicts to redefine possibilities of Vietnamese American politics. Through a case study of VNRoots, a loosely organized collective of left-identified activists across the U.S. who organized political exposure trips to Vietnam, I examine how some second-generation Vietnamese Americans reimagine radical refugee subjectivity for themselves. I contend that, in returning to Vietnam, they imagine a capacious Vietnamese radicalism that enables a healing refugee lineage.

Return (to) South Vietnam: The Rise of Refugee Nationalist Militarism

The image of a "staunch anticommunist refugee" represents a Vietnamese diasporic cultural milieu. Often the only image of South Vietnam that shows up in the news and Vietnamese/American cultural production, this "single story" bounds Vietnamese refugees onto an anachronistic space. As the Vietnam War drifts further away from the American consciousness, with neoliberal multiculturalism in effect, the public looks the "classic example of South Vietnamese in exile" as some sort of misguided, foreign nostalgia. In this section, I resituate anticommunism and the Vietnamese diaspora in the less-examined context of extralegal militarism, political repression, and state's covert violence, demonstrating the forgotten racial politics embedded in the creation and sustenance of refugee anticommunism.

In the period immediately following the Fall of Saigon and the resettlement of the first Vietnamese refugees in the U.S., the newly formed refugee communities were mobilized by a surge of what I call nationalist refugee militarism. Nationalist refugee militarism refers to the set of movements and mobilizations that happened among South Vietnamese refugee soldiers who led, fled, and were recruited to various "homeland restoration" movements in the Vietnamese diaspora on a global scale — from Japan, Australia, Canada, to the United States — in the early 1980s, which largely fizzled out by the mid-1990s.[150] During this period, red-baiting, intimidation, and political assassinations contributed to the crushing of a group of progressive Vietnamese Americans, most of whom are also South Vietnamese refugees, who were critical of nationalist refugee militarism. While there have been many productive discussions on refugee anticommunism,[151] this section shows the ways in which it materially affects the forms and goals that politics and political actions within the Vietnamese American community can take.

Movements of returning

The conditions of return are determined almost entirely by the conditions under which one departs from a place. The struggle for refugee return, in the case of South Vietnamese, was imagined and materialized differently for different groups. The first-wave Vietnamese refugees, whose "evacuation" officially started in March 1975, left suddenly before the Fall of Saigon, "with the belief that they could and would return to South Vietnam."[152] Others, not realizing their temporary evacuation would be permanent, left family members and treasured livelihoods behind.

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[150] Nguyen, "Phuc Quoc: Vietnamese Exile Politics after the Fall of Saigon"; Nguyen, "(Re)Making the South Vietnamese Past in America," 2018.
[151] Nguyen, *Becoming Refugee American*; Le, "Better Dead Than Red: Anti-Communist Politics among Vietnamese Americans"; Dang, "The Cultural Work of Anticommunism in the San Diego Vietnamese American Community"; Valverde, *Transnationalizing Viet Nam*.
[152] Valverde, 8

Many in the South Vietnam military—soldiers, pilots, sailors, air force mechanics and ship engineers—never had a say in their own evacuation, with some characterizing their evacuation as one of misinformation, coercion, and drugged kidnapping.[153] These individuals would be amongst the 1,500 Vietnamese evacuees in Guam who fought to return to Vietnam even after the North Vietnamese takeover.[154] As Jana K. Lipman noted, and Yen Le Espiritu argued, this act of disobedience for the right to return rejects the dominant narrative of Americans rescuing Vietnamese people—rhetoric that recuperates the U.S. empire's military loss and reaffirms American exceptionalism, transforming the U.S.'s role from violent perpetrators to benevolent saviors.[155] That many people resisted being transited against their will, even after the loss of their homeland, underscores the fact that displacement is a material condition enacted through policies rather than a natural consequence of catastrophe. Their resistance to being refuged, in Ma Vang's words, debunks "the liberal rescue narrative that positioned displaced people as not belonging anywhere and unable to return."[156] Their fight to return departs from the well-mapped route assigned to refugee migration, as well as its epistemological implication that the uni-directional transition from fallen South Vietnam to the U.S. is not only necessary but also absolute.

The Vietnamese repatriate movement in Guam demonstrates that Vietnamese people possess a complex set of political interests and goals that exceed the Cold War binary which had reduced Vietnamese political actors into communist and anticommunist subjects. Motivated by affiliations to the home/land, family, or self-autonomy, their fight to return exemplifies what Lipman calls the politics of contingency, affirming the political and humanistic agency and capacity of Vietnamese people to determine their own life even in the face of seemingly

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[153] Lipman, "'Give Us a Ship,'" 11.
[154] Lipman, "'Give Us a Ship.'"
[155] Lipman; Espiritu, *Body Counts*.
[156] Vang, *History on the Run*, 180.

preordained future. Beyond the tragedies that would unfold upon their return to Vietnam, or their eventual refugee resettlement in the U.S., the actions that they took in Guam showcase a radical grasp of resistance politics—from militant strategy and civil disobedience to staging visual performances to mobilize media attention on Vietnam—that Americans did not comprehend or attribute to refugees at large. More importantly, their struggle to the bitter end refuted the hypervisible tropes of Vietnamese tragic refugees, pro-American anticommunist soldiers, and revolutionary fighters, hinting at a diverse body of politics born out of but not limited to war.

At the same time, for many Vietnamese refugee soldiers who were resettled in the U.S. up to 1981 (the second wave), their fight to return took shape in the project of Phục Quốc, Homeland Restoration. Overtly militant and oftentimes mobilized by anticommunist rhetoric, Phục Quốc leaders and recruits organized around the idea of taking back the country by force. Emerging in early 1976, the anticommunist insurgency movement, by 1983, had coalesced into the National United Front for the Liberation of Vietnam, which established a base in a secret location close to Vietnam (the jungle Lao-Thailand border) and built chapters across the U.S. to raise money for the cause.[157] Its leader, Hoàng Cơ Minh announced to a convention center in Washington D.C., packed with thousands of Vietnamese refugees, that he will take back the country. In the preceding years, the Phục Quốc dream was shared by many exile communities across the world: California, Virginia, France, Australia, and Japan.[158] This dream, Y Thien Nguyen argues, is manifested as a social movement to reconfigure a new form of exile anticommunist militarism that would succeed the pre-1975 "failed" anticommunist South Vietnamese state and its "corruptible, incompetent, and infighting" military leadership. In other words, Nguyen argues that the salience of anticommunist militarism that dominates the cultural imagination of, and about, current

[157] "Terror in Little Saigon."
[158] Nguyen, "(Re)Making the South Vietnamese Past in America," 2018.

Vietnamese American politics is carefully facilitated and enacted through this little-known refugee political movement. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the movement's goal is to restore South Vietnam and its suspended political trajectory.

Nguyen's observation is key to understanding the stake and the precarity of Vietnamese diasporic politics. Just as the communist victory/takeover in 1975 suspended the political trajectory of the South Vietnamese nation-state, the Phục Quốc movement post-1975 splintered the Vietnamese radical trajectory in the U.S. (Chapter 1). Below, I detail the significance of the movement in determining the course of Vietnamese American activism. For now, it suffices to say that this movement tried to squash all oppositional voices within the community, from independent scholars who acknowledge the new Vietnamese regime to journalists refusing to support the movement or seeking to inform the refugee communities about where donations for the Front were allocated. As a result, from 1981 to 1990, across states and cities, at least seven Vietnamese people were victims of political killings, and many others were subject to assassination attempts, reportedly executed by members and supporters of the Home Restoration movement. Most if not all of these victims were members of the growing Union of Vietnamese in the U.S. (chapter 1). All the cases remain unresolved despite the FBI's investigations and incriminating findings in the 1990s. In 2011, Tony Nguyen, a leftist Vietnamese American community organizer and filmmaker released *Enforcing the Silence,* a feature-length documentary about the murder of Dương Trọng Lâm, a young community organizer and journalist in Oakland, paving the wave for ProPublica and Frontline's 2014 investigative documentary and report *Terror in Little Saigon*. To this day, Nguyễn Thanh Tú, the surviving son of one of the victims, journalist Nguyễn Đạm Phong, is still seeking justice for his murdered father.[159]

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[159] Bùi, "Về cái chết của ký giả Nguyễn Đạm Phong."

The Homeland Restoration Movement

The Homeland Restoration (HR) movement provides insight into how nationalist refugee militarism affects the political landscape of the Vietnamese diaspora. The movement underlines an undeniable sector of refugee politics that involves an active imagination of and strategy for returning. As such, even in its problematics, the movement encapsulates the complex agency and political personhood of many refugees, rejecting the humanitarian discourse of rescue, or the liberal discourse of resettlement, assimilation, and gratitude. This refugee nationalist militarism suggests a masculinist solution to the gendered narrative of victimhood and mourning, positing themselves as agentive political and historical actors who continue to fight for their future. As Phuong Tran Nguyen notes, "Tired of seeing the world 'feel pity for the 'boat people tragedy' every April 30, the Front preferred they focus on more heroic characteristics, such as 'the endeavors of the Vietnamese people to liberate their country.'"[160] The HR movement was audacious in that it relentlessly reaffirms South Vietnam as a sovereign nation (still) at war—its independence only temporarily halted or arrested, waiting to be realized. And yet, this move violently reaffirms the gender dynamic of "revolution" and "liberation," mimicking the violence it seeks to overthrow and foreseeing a future in perpetual violence.

The Homeland Restoration Movement started gaining traction in 1976,[161] when anticommunist organizations spread the news about a planned anticommunist insurgency against the SRV. The insurgency, led by former South Vietnamese military officers who stayed behind, would liberate fallen Vietnam under communist rule. In the early phase, many organizations in the

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[160] Nguyen, "The People of the Fall: Refugee Nationalism in Little Saigon, 1975-2005," 156.

[161] The information about Homeland Restoration discussed in this section is taken from Y Thien Nguyen's self-published paper Phục Quốc, his article "Remaking South Vietnam," the report by ProPublica and Frontline. Nguyen, "Phuc Quoc: Vietnamese Exile Politics after the Fall of Saigon"; Nguyen, "(Re)Making the South Vietnamese Past in America," 2018; Thompson, "Terror in Little Saigon"; "Terror in Little Saigon."

diaspora emerged to support this initial effort. The idea of sending anticommunist cadres back for infiltration and guerrilla warfare emerged in 1977 and reached its height in 1980. The political situation in Indochina then—the 1979 Border war between the SRV and China, SRV's occupation of Cambodia, and the existing internal insurgency from South Vietnam—was believed to provide an ample opportunity to overthrow the SRV. On October 14, 1981, issue, the front page of Người Việt reads: "Vice Admiral Hoàng Cơ Minh Leads a Group Back to the Country," a claim that would solidify Minh's position as the leader of the HR movement. According to Nguyen, this movement "sparked major mobilization among the youths of the exile communities as the movement expanded across the United States, Western Europe, Australia, and Japan. Vietnamese students across the exile communities, from Brussels to USC, held conferences reaffirming the ideals of HR and addressing the need for military and revolutionary action."[162]

Led by Minh, the National United Front for the Liberation of Vietnam (Mặt Trận Quốc Gia Thống Nhất Giải Phóng Việt Nam) rapidly legitimized their presence within the Vietnamese diaspora in the U.S. through conferences, media appearances, meetings with Congress, and self-published newspapers and books. In 1986, they published a book titled *Anh Hùng Nước Tôi* (My Country's Heroes) that "traces its lineage back" to heroic figures of the Vietnamese dynastic past, early Vietnamese nationalists, South Vietnamese leaders, and soldiers. This memory work imagines and articulates a genealogy of "resistance" and "nationalist" politics that includes anticommunism as the natural successor. It is noteworthy to mention that, the figures of the dynastic past like Bà Triều, Hai Bà Trưng sisters, and colonial era like Phan Bội Châu and Phan Chu Trinh were also utilized by the SRV as ancestors embodying revolutionary and anticolonial spirit. The Front's utilization of language like "revolution," "resistance," "national liberation,"

[162] Nguyen, "(Re)Making the South Vietnamese Past in America," 73.

remarkably parallel the SRV's political language. Even Hoàng Cơ Minh donned a similar look to that of Ho Chi Minh: black pajamas, with a Vietnamese krama (long plaid scarf) loosely around his neck, emitting a down-to-earth, humble, and dignified portraiture. A journalist noted in a Mother Jones article that Minh's Front "suggests a parody of the National Liberation Front [NLF-Viet Cong]."[163] A parody or not, this mimicry suggests that political rhetoric and ideological formation are fluid, especially when framed within the construction of nationhood, sovereignty, and self-determination. This false equivalence between HR and NLF also calls into question the "revolutionary" nature of the winners' history, forcing us to ponder the precarity of power and its ethical dilemma: visibly without a leveled playing field, how does one go about differentiating between the great oppressors and the rightfully indignant oppressed?

By 1983, Hoàng Cơ Minh had come to Washington D.C. to announce his plan to reconquer Vietnam to a crowd of thousands of weeping Vietnamese refugees. The Front at that time had built chapters across the U.S. to raise money for the upcoming invasion.[164] Their base was secured in the forests of Northeast Thailand, where the recruits waited to infiltrate Vietnam. This location, however, was kept secret, partly to convince the Vietnamese diaspora that the returning day is near. In 1982, CBS News aired a "dramatic segment" on Minh's guerrillas with footage of the soldiers going through the jungle and their claim that the Front had successfully been back in Vietnam. Vietnamese journalist Nguyễn Đạm Phong, investigated the story and refuted its legitimacy—an act that he would pay for with his life. He was neither the first nor the last to be targeted by the Front's watchdogs.

In the end, the Homeland Restoration movement and the Front dissolved for multiple reasons: the failure of its military plan, the infighting within its group, the rejection of some of its

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[163] Coburn, "Terror in Saigontown, U.S.A." Quoted from Nguyen, "(Re)Making."
[164] Thompson, "Terror in Little Saigon."

reputable supporters, and the loss of the community's trust and interest in warfare as a legitimate strategy. In 1987, its leader Minh was killed, his 18 companions arrested when they tried to enter Vietnam were severely punished and jailed by the SRV. This news was reportedly kept as a secret by the Front in order to maintain its reputation and donations. By the early 1990s, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the movement fully lost its urgency.

The Destruction of Vietnamese American Progressive Movement

The Homeland Restoration movement—with its mantra of anticommunism, pro-war, and reliance on military acts—violently splintered the "progression" of various types of Vietnamese progressivism in the U.S., limiting how Vietnamese diasporic subjects can express and engage in the political sphere. Ngô Vĩnh Long, for example, self-identified as a non-Leftist progressive, started receiving intense harassment for his commentaries about Vietnam in 1975. After the Vietnam War, Long remained in the U.S. and continued to engage in political and intellectual discussions about Vietnam, advocating for normalization between Vietnam and the U.S., suggesting his acceptance of the new regime. In November 1978, at a meeting of the Association for Asian Studies at Georgetown University, Vietnamese refugees came to heckle and threaten him. On April 23, 1981, after engaging in the heated East Asian Legal Studies Forum[165] on Vietnam at Harvard University, someone threw a gasoline bomb at him. Long narrowly avoided the bomb as it shattered on the windshield of his car, injuring a policeman in charge of escorting him through a rowdy crowd of protesting Vietnamese refugees.[166] The event was attended by about 90 Vietnamese refugees who received a letter that charged that Long was a communist agent. The

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[165] Carter, "Investigate the Attack."

[166] "Vietnamese Who Supports Hanoi Angers Refugees"; Pinsky and Reyes, "Anti-Communist Terrorist Group Stalks Vietnamese."

Militant, a socialist newsweekly based in New York, noted that Long's position as a public critic of Washington's war policies made him the target of harassment and threats. [167] This was one of the first instances when the HR movement members and supporters emerged. Signed as "The Vietnamese Party to Exterminate the Communists and Restore the Nation" (VOECRN - Vietnam Diệt Cộng Hưng Quốc Đảng), it distributed a leaflet that called for "sentence[ing]… the shameless Ngô Vĩnh Long to death… but unfortunately he escaped death." [168] The other victims following this movement, however, did not. From 1981 to 1990, at least seven Vietnamese American people, five journalists and two community organizers, were killed.[169]

In 1984, investigative journalist Jack Anderson wrote about his on-air confrontation with CBS's *60 Minutes* correspondent Mike Wallace about Anderson's column on the "Vietnamese underworld," which had claimed that "some South Vietnamese generals…saved from the communists and airlifted to the United States are now operating a Mafia-like organization that is

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[167] Wang, "10th Anniversary of Vietnam Victory."

[168] Pinsky and Reyes, "Anti-Communist Terrorist Group Stalks Vietnamese."

[169] From 1981 to 1990, seven Vietnamese American people, five being journalists and community organizers, were killed: Dương Trọng Lâm, a 27-year-old community organizer in Oakland, California, founder of Vietnamese Youth Development Center and the newspaper *Cái Đình Làng* (The Village Temple) was shot and killed outside of his apartment on July 21, 1981. On August 24, 1982, Nguyễn Đạm Phong, a journalist publishing the bi-monthly newspaper *Tự Do* (Freedom) was killed after being chased and shot seven times in the driveway of his home in Houston, Texas. In San Francisco, California, on May 28, 1984, antiwar activist, President of *Hội Việt Kiều Yêu Nước tại Mỹ* (Union of Patriotic Oversea Vietnamese in the U.S.) and founder of *Thái Bình Newspaper* Nguyễn Văn Luỹ survived a gunshot outside of his home; his wife and partner in politics Phạm Thị Lưu was killed.[169] On August 7th, 1987, *Mai* magazine editor Phạm Văn Tập's office in Garden Grove, CA was set on fire. Đỗ Trọng Nhân, a layout designer for the newspaper Văn Nghệ Tiền Phong (Avant-Garde Literature and Arts) in Fairfax, Virginia was shot dead in his car on November 22, 1989. This assassination was followed by Nhân's colleague, columnist Lê Triết and his wife Đặng-Trần Thị Tuyết residing in Baileys Crossroads, Virginia, both killed by gunfire on September 22, 1990. The only non-Vietnamese victim of these attacks was physics professor Ed Cooperman at Cal State Fullerton, reportedly chairman of the U.S. Committee for Scientific Cooperation with Vietnam. Dr. Cooperman was also a member of the Committee for Justice and of the U.S.-Vietnam Friendship Association of Southern California, the likely cause of his death, but this information was rarely if ever, mentioned.

preying upon Vietnamese communities here."[170] Wallace questioned Anderson's charges, suggesting that all his Vietnamese correspondences feel that "the focus on crime in Vietnamese refugee community are distortions and ignore the fact that most Vietnamese are law-abiding, hard-working and grateful to the United States."[171] Anderson restated his viewpoint that most Vietnamese refugees are not only good citizens but indeed are victims of the "imported criminals,"[172] and afraid to talk to the police. Anderson's investigation of the Front obscured the political onslaught against the Vietnamese progressive community, glossing over the victims' identities and political life. He did not call attention to the political nature of the killings of progressive Vietnamese Americans. Similarly, studies that mentioned these murders[173] mostly reported that the victims were targeted by the Front for being trustworthy source of news for the Vietnamese communities, and for not aligning with the emerging militant anticommunist politics that was dominating the Vietnamese American communities in the early 1980s. Other studies argued that supporting the post-war normalization between Vietnam and the U.S. would land one the status of a communist agent and warrant attack. [174]

Portraits of Two Victims

Two of the targeted victims—Nguyễn Văn Lũy and Dương Trọng Lâm—represented two generations of Vietnamese American progressive politics who were antiwar and critical of foreign domination of Vietnam. Lũy, a man of the French colonial era, was antiwar and supported the

[170] Anderson, "Document Confirms Viet-Crime Story."
[171] Anderson.
[172] Anderson.
[173] Burke, *Revolutionaries For The Right*; Nguyen, "(Re)Making the South Vietnamese Past in America"; Valverde, *Transnationalizing Viet Nam*. Carney, "The Dangers of Being A Vietnamese Reporter"; Lu, "Journalism for the Brave." Kolker, "Casualties of War."
[174] Valverde, *Transnationalizing Viet Nam*, 14.

reconstruction of and normalization with socialist Vietnam. Lâm, a much younger man, also antiwar and anti-imperialist, dedicated himself to community building and aiding refugees in his neighborhood.

Nguyễn Văn Lũy (72) narrowedly survived in the series of targeted attacks that killed seven people. His wife Pham Thị Lưu (66), a devoted partner in politics, did not. Both had organized together for years around the normalization of U.S.-Vietnam relations. Naturalized in 1960, Lũy was the first Vietnamese American[175] to play a major role in the American antiwar movement. Having fled and arrived at France in 1930 to escape colonial rule in Indocchina, Lũy joined the national liberation movement[176] there. In 1940, when the French government yielded to Nazi occupation, he fled to the U.S., where he was arrested upon arrival because the police mistook him for Japanese. Ironically, due to his French fluency, he got hired as a translator to correspond with the OSS team operating in conjunction with Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh Front against the Japanese fascists in Vietnam. By 1945, as the U.S. invested in the French's recolonization of Vietnam, Luỹ quit his job in protest, which led to the denial of his application for permanent residency. With the

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[175] "Justice for Thi Luu and Van Luy"; "'Confront the Warmakers' Demonstration."

[176] Luỹ was a cook in France, potentially a part of the Parisian Association des Cuisiniers Indochinois [Indochinese Cooks' Association]. The historiography of the Vietnamese national liberation movement in France in the early 20th century considers this era "interwar France," where the emergent intellectual class consisted of students and activist, sometimes but not primarily supported by the contemporary colonial worker emigrés. According to Erica J. Peters, in 1924, there were one to two thousand Vietnamese laborers working in France, including cooks, lacqueres, sailors, servants, photograph retouchers, and other more or less legitimate jobs. Two hundred students were there, as well as around seven thousand Vietnamese troops stationed in France. The national liberation movement, as researchers such as Hue-Tam Ho-Tai, Claude Liauze, and Scott McConnel suggested, was fervent amongst students and activists finding their way toward nationalism and in some cases communism. In a seminal 1975 article, Daniel Hémery found that the colonial workers, while supporting this intellectual class, did not form sustaining coalition with one another. Peters' article on the laborers affirmed such instance. See Peters, "Resistance, Rivalries, and Restaurants."

help of the American Committee to Protect the Foreign Born and the American Civil Liberties Union, he received his green card in 1954 and citizenship in 1960.

Credited by antiwar activists as the first Vietnamese in the U.S. to oppose the war in Vietnam in the early 1960s, Lũy became a leader among progressive Vietnamese in the U.S. According to Walter Teague, a co-founder of the Committee to Aid the NLF (CANLF), on October 21, 1967, Lũy was invited to give a 5-minute speech at the "Confront the Warmakers" demonstration at the Lincoln Memorial and the Pentagon. However, his speech was cut at the three-minute mark because the organizers were concerned about "what a Vietnamese might say"—that he might be too critical of the United States. It is unclear if he continued to speak without the mic, but the latter half of his speech would come to reflect much of the rhetoric that the antiwar movement would later adopt.[177] In 1972, in light of Nguyễn Thái Bình's death, Lũy joined the 1968 USAID students to create the Union of Vietnamese in the U.S. (see chapter 1). After the war, the Union became the Association of Vietnamese in the U.S., working towards reconstruction aid to Vietnam, normal relations between the U.S. and Vietnam, providing mutual assistance in Vietnamese communities, and establishing means for Vietnamese to contribute to the reconstruction of their homeland. Luỹ passed away in Vietnam in 2003. A kindergarten in Hải Thọ, Quảng Trị province was founded in his name in 2004.

As a progressive person of younger generation, Dương Trọng Lâm arrived to the U.S. right at the height of the antiwar movement. By the time he was murdered in 1981, Lâm was well-known in the San Francisco Bay Area amongst leftists, antiwar activists, and community organizers.[178] Arriving in the U.S. in 1972 through a high school exchange program, he was already critical of

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[177] For his whole speech, see "'Confront the Warmakers' Demonstration."
[178] In 2015, leftist Vietnamese American community organizer-turned-filmmaker Tony Nguyễn produced *Enforcing the Silence*, a documentary that examines the murder of Dương Trọng Lâm.

the U.S. intervention in Vietnam in 1954, which prevented a democratic election that could have allowed Ho Chi Minh to unite the country. Lâm stayed in the U.S. after graduating in 1976, understanding that because he was studying abroad, he would be treated with suspicion by the new regime despite his progressive politics. A year later, at 23 years old, Lâm founded the Vietnamese Youth Development Center (VYDC) to serve Vietnamese refugees in Tenderloin – San Francisco's poorest neighborhood that became home to thousands of Vietnamese refugees. Lâm appeared in J.T. Takagi and Christine Choy's 1982 documentary *Bittersweet Survival: Southeast Asian Refugees in America,* one of the earliest documentaries on Southeast Asian refugees that was made in the Asian American leftist tradition. In the film, Lâm characterized the refugee resettlement process as a continuation of U.S. exploitation of Vietnamese people, pointing out how refugees as victims of war were transported into a racist, capitalist structure that pitted them against poor, unhoused Black people. He rejected the liberal narrative of rescue and America as a dream land for immigrants and refugees.

Focusing on community development and youth education, the VDYC helped refugees meet immediate needs like employment, education, counseling, and incite community involvement through activities like community arts, video production, drama, and community events. The Center was critical of "social services" and philanthropy, adamantly believing in the need to involve and train young people to become community organizers and community builders. With Lâm's vision, many young Vietnamese refugees working with him found a passion for organizing and continued his work even after Lâm's passing in 1984. One of the most notable works that come out of VDYC was its collaboration with filmmaker Spencer Nakasako who produced the well-regarded video diaries trilogy about the lives of young Cambodian and Iu Mien refugees: *a.k.a. Don Bonus*, *Kelly Loves Tony*, and *Refugee*. The VDYC has changed its name to Southeast Asian Development Center and still exists to this day.

Response from Political Activists

After the attack that seriously wounded Lũy and killed his wife, a Committee for Justice for Thị Lưu and Văn Lũy was founded in San Francisco and held a memorial with 300 participants, drawing attention to the case. The committee met with San Francisco Supervisors to pressure a vigorous investigation. The cause attracted more than 140 endorsers from different political and professional organizations. Besides organizations working directly with Vietnamese issues like Association of Vietnamese in the U.S., (U.S. and Vietnam Friendship Association, Southeast Asia Resource Center, other supporting organizations including Asian Law Caucus, Women's International League Peace and Freedom, National Conference of Black Lawyers San Francisco, Women's Peace Groups, United Furniture Workers, Patrice Lumumba Coalition, National Alliance Against Racist Repression, Union Democratic Filipinos, National Association for Black Aged, Committee for Democratic Palestine, Casa El Salvador, Friends of Nicaraguan Culture, to name a few), a number of congressmen, lawyers, professors, reverends also signed. This list suggests that there was a cross-racial and radical political network responding and mobilizing against these politically motivated attacks.

Mel Mason and Andrea González, the Socialist Workers Party candidates for U.S. president and vice-president, issued a statement condemning the May 28 attack on Lũy and Lưu:

> "The U.S. government bears responsibility for this and other attacks on patriotic Vietnamese in this country by creating an atmosphere ·in which right-wing terrorists can operate unhampered.
>
> "The politically motivated assassination of Phạm Thị Lưu and the attack on Nguyễn Văn Lũy are not just aimed against Vietnam. They are a violation of the rights of all those struggling for justice and peace in this country. They are part of the joint government-employer campaign to intimidate working people from speaking out in opposition to the policies of the U.S. rulers. [179]

[179] Wang, "Assassination Spurs Demands for Justice."

In the *Militant*, a New York-based socialist newsletter, a number of antiwar activists, civil rights, and trade union leaders underscored the significance of sanctioned right-wing attacks on Phạm Thị Lưu and Nguyễn Văn Lũy. Rev. Ben Chavis of the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, for example, called attention to "the escalation of right-wing violence," a climate engendered by the Reagan administration. Chavis considered these attacks an example of "the right-wing reactionary forces given a green light to carry out their wanton acts of violence against progressive peoples, against people's movements and people's activists." Ken Morgan, a member of the National Black Independent Political Party and cochair of its Baltimore chapter, likened this political assassination to the attacks against Malcolm X and Black people: "Black people have a stake in this. Malcolm X understood the implications between the fight against international imperialism and the struggle in the United States… As Black people we have to demand that the assassins be caught and prosecuted, and we must demand from the United States that action be taken immediately."

Others, like Tony Russo, a member of the U.S. Vietnam Friendship Association of Southern California, and Don Luce of the Southeast Asia Resource Center, characterized these attacks as a "direct result of [our] continuing war," encouraged by the U.S.' sanctions against Vietnam. Both criticized the U.S. government, and the Reagan administration in particular, for letting "right-wing terrorist groups continue their activities without interference." After recovering from the shooting, Lũy spoke at a meeting of representatives of the Vietnam Tenth Anniversary Committee in New York in 1985: "I believe very deeply that I am a victim of the Reagan

administration, not only of the right-wing Vietnamese. These mercenaries have the green light, encouragement from the government."[180]

Injustice or the Invisible Cloaks

Archival records on cross-racial grassroots mobilization against attacks on Vietnamese American progressivism are scarce. The large-scale investigation of the Front by ProPublica and Frontline relied primarily on State archives, FBI's files, and interviews with Front members. To these reporters, the Front remained cloaked by invisible protection from multiple bureaus, institutions, and State agencies. An indicted federal tax case in 1991 against the Front was dismissed, the informant for the case killed without investigation, and court documents lost or unretrieveable at federal courthouses and the Federal Records Center—these were some of the ways in which the Front avoided accountability. In the 1991 federal tax case against the Front built by the IRS, federal prosecutors, the FBI, and a police sergeant, the defense lawyers mentioned that the Front members had been given immunity through a "secret deal" with the CIA and the Department of Defense to help relocate American prisoners of war in Vietnam. The prosecutors proceeded to indict five Front officials for more than 10 years in prison. Four years after the indictment, on January 4, 1995, their lawyer filed a motion, arguing that their clients had been denied a speedy trial. U.S. District Judge James Ware dismissed the tax case, not to be opened again because the legal window had expired. ProPublica noted that the office of the current U.S. attorney in San Francisco, the Department of Defense, and the CIA would not discuss the case.

Ngô Thanh Nhàn, former USAID student and co-founder of Union of Vietnamese in the U.S., in a 2016 interview, revealed that the Front was directly linked to the FBI and CIA's plan to

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[180] Wang, "10th Anniversary of Vietnam Victory."

sabotage the emerging Vietnamese American movement. He said that his group had lost six members to the rightwing death squad from 1975 to 1985, suggesting that almost all the victims were members of USUV. After the War, USUV, which changed its name to the Association of Progressive Vietnamese in the U.S., grew its membership from less than a hundred to approximately three hundred members.

> "During the war, we only had problems with the FBI and the immigration department. We started to have [more] problems at the end of the first year of 1975… At that time, the FBI "feared" that amongst the refugees, there was Viet Cong spy. So they had a political campaign to attack us and targeted us as Communists. They implanted organized right-wing groups in the Vietnamese community."[181]

This information was later confirmed, Nhàn noted, when the group hired a former ex-CIA in Washington, D.C. to investigate all these deaths without an arrest. The agent reported that "the FBI and CIA were meeting with the top right-wing Vietnamese leaders, [who were] training at a U.S. military base."[182] It was not until the group presented the dossier to Congress with "the support of progressive Latin, Black, and Asian American groups" that they received support from former Attorney General Ramsey Clark, who brought two survivors with him to meet with FBI Director William Webster. Webster admitted that the FBI knew about the violent group and promised to stop the political assassinations of Vietnamese Americans. However, public investigations and ProPublica were unable to produce concrete information about the role of the FBI or CIA in the attacks. The cases remain unsolved today.

The Refugee Soldier & Racial Logic of Anticommunism

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[181] *Many Bridges, One River*.
[182] *Many Bridges, One River*.

Haunted by nationalist motivation and by the change in social status and living conditions, Vietnamese in the HR Movement identified primarily as "freedom fighters" and "soldiers," signaling a sustained affiliation with being a citizen of South Vietnam. As such, the movement to return rejects the U.S.' resolution of absorbing refugees into a citizenry subject, echoing what Ma Vang discusses as the "contradictory constitution of the refugee soldier" that expresses the "humanitarian (rescue and civilize) and militaristic work of empire" and calls attention to such "imperialistic designs." [183] The refugee soldier, an "impossible subject" that is produced through both the discourses of humanitarianism and militarism, ended up possessing a "troubling moral political status"[184] that needs to be erased "to foreclose unwanted legacies of a war"[185] that needs forgetting. Vang's discussion showcases the extralegal condition that the Hmong refugee soldier occupies, or the impossibility of archiving/governing such a subject, thus exemplifying the U.S. state's "ideologically convoluted work to incorporate and reject the refugee soldier figure as constitutive of but subversive to its construction."[186] Similarly, Simeon Man has shown that South Vietnamese soldiers were intricately linked to the geopolitical circulation of imperialist war and soldiering after World War II: American military training for its dominated and colonial subjects, waging wars to protect liberal democracy against the spread of communism in Asia. As I discussed in Chapter 1, the nation-building project in South Vietnam employed a network of Cold War universities to manufacture an anticommunist subjectivity that is ideologically entangled with modern nation-state sensibility, and politically embodied in militarist violence. While anticommunism was in part organic to many Vietnamese political actors, the type of social capital

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[183] Vang, *History on the Run*, 94.
[184] Ibid., 96.
[185] Ibid., 96.
[186] Ibid., 96.

and opportunity that it awards had accelerated the adoption of anticommunist politics in multiple groups across the South.[187]

According to Man, the war against communism was "the terrain upon which racial liberalism unfolded and gained traction."[188] The legitimization and solidification of anticommunism into a racial logic based on material conditions in South Vietnam was central to the U.S. empire's post-WWII restructuring of racial order. In waging wars against the "bad" Asians like the Viet Congs, the "good Asians" who willingly soldiered for the U.S. empire got sorted into the expanding U.S. racial order. As the South Vietnamese soldiers were turned *en masse* into refugees after the Fall of Saigon, this racialization continued in U.S. resettlement policies that actively selected from the very same pool that it helped create: ex-military, government personnel, American allies—those with tied to the South Vietnamese state and could demonstrate fear from communist persecution. It is noteworthy that from the start, U.S. refugee laws (and by extension, immigration policies, including deportation) have exclusively been characterized by anticommunism. Before Vietnamese "parolees" were legally recognized as refugees, the only groups that the U.S. would consider refugees and accept were "defectors" or "escapees" from various communist countries, notably from the Soviet Union and other Eastern Europe countries.[189] Conversely, association or affiliation with communism would constitute grounds for immigration restriction.[190]

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[187] Nguyen, "(Re)Making the South Vietnamese Past in America," 2018.
[188] Man, *Soldiering through Empire*, 4.
[189] Before 1950, refugee status was not defined precisely. The U.S.'s Cold War foreign policy helped solidify an international refugee regime to encourage flight from communism, shaping the refugee figure around "the person of the escape." See Carrusthers, "Between Camps: Eastern Bloc 'Escapees' and Cold War Borderlands," 912.
[190] During and after World War II, the U.S. government grew wary of "external threats of anarchism and communism," passing the Immigration Act of 1918 that authorized the detention and deportation of nonzitizens deemed as anarchists or communists under an extremely broad definition of such categories. See Sections 1 and 2 of the Immigration Act of 1918, Pub. L. 65-221

Anticommunism has also managed racial subjects inside the U.S. The 1950 McCarthy Red Scare, which racialized "communist" subjects as "un-American" and foreign, sought to eliminate them through the FBI Bureau. From 1956 until 1971, a series of Counterintelligence Programs (COINTELPRO) aimed to eradicate groups, movements, and individuals of the Left. COINTELPRO started viewing social movements in the 1960s and 1970s, from anti-Vietnam War movement to anti-segregation, social injustice as well as people who supported these movements, as enemies to be eliminated *covertly*. [191] In particular, it targeted the Communist section of the Left such as the Communist Party USA and the Socialist Workers Party. With the New Left as its major target, much effort was spent on the Students for a Democratic Society, the largest student group in the country that organized to oppose the Vietnam War and racism. In the end, COINTELPRO managed to destroy both the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement. [192]

The South Vietnamese refugee soldier who sought to return to Vietnam thus exemplified a different history of U.S. empire's racial project, reflecting its strategy not of incorporation but *covert* elimination.[193] As a paramilitary structure, secretive by design and extralegal in nature, the

(PDF), 40 Stat. 1012, 1012 (October 16, 1918). In 1938, under the name of internal security, national defense, and foreign relations, Congress required "foreigners" disseminating propaganda and ideologies categized as above be registered and identified. See Section 2 of the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938, Pub. L. 75-583, 52 Stat. 631, 632 (June 8, 1938) (codified at 22 U.S.C. 611-621). After World War II, the Internal Security Act of 1950 amended the Immigration Act of 1918 to include members of communist parties, affiliates of such groups, or noncitizens advocating the doctrines of world communisms; it also created new restrictions on naturalization, deeming those affiliated to or were members of communist organizations ineligible for naturalization. Naturalized citizens, likewise, would be subject to revocation of their naturalization order if engaging in such activities within 5 years following their naturalization. For a comprehensive summary of how U.S. immigration policies are historically anticommunist, see "Chapter 3. Immigrant Membership in Totalitarian Party. Part F - National Security and Related Ground of Inadmissibility."

[191] Marcetic, "The FBI's Secret War."

[192] Churchill and Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression*.

[193] Here we are reminded of the secret bombings of Laos and Cambodia during the Vietnam War.

Front's soldiers are similar to Hmong soldiers in the Secret War: They were enabled and aided in secret by the U.S. empire but their very existence threatened to undo the promised civility and liberalism in American society. The HR movement, while not directly linked to the U.S. government via documents on funding, was widely known to have gained audiences and legitimacy with Congress and to have links to the FBI and the CIA in their efforts to destroy the Vietnamese American progressive movement. One of the most influential supporters of the HR Movement is Richard Armitage, a former U.S. Navy officer during the Vietnam War who had worked closely with Hoàng Cơ Minh, then the Admiral of South Vietnamese Navy. During the Front's operation, Armitage admitted helping to secure the Thailand base by vouching for Minh to his Thai counterparts. [194] In the 1980s, Armitage became Assistant Secretary of Defense, and was credited as one of the architects of the Reagan Doctrine.[195]

The Reagan Doctrine emerged in the 1980s as a new strategy to continue the fight against communism in the form of providing "moral and material support"[196] for insurgent movements to overthrow Soviet-backed regimes in Third World nations. After the fall of South Vietnam in 1975, the new communist regimes in Cambodia, Angola, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Nicaragua and Afghanistan were believed to have prompted spontaneous rebellions from their citizens, which was something the United States had a moral duty to at least lend political support. As Armitage stated: "If a group is fighting a repressive regime and shares our values and our goals, then we

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[194] See "Terror in Little Saigon." ProPublica and Frontline found no evidence that any U.S. government agency financed the Front. Indeed, Armitage wrote that he had made clear to Thai officials that there was no formal program for the U.S. to provide support for Minh's military aims. Still, Armitage's help seems to have paid off: A Thai general named Sutsai Hatsadin became the Front's patron, allowing Minh to set up his guerrilla base on a remote parcel of heavily forested land in Northeast Thailand, not far from the Mekong River and the border with Laos.
[195] McManus, "U.S. Shaping Assertive Policy for Third World: 'Reagan Doctrine' Would Actively Support Rebellions Against Unfriendly Leftist Regimes."
[196] Carpenter, "U.S. Aid to Anti-Communist Rebels: The 'Reagan Doctrine' and Its Pitfalls."

have very little choice but to support them. For us, the issue is not whether freedom fighters deserve our support; the real question is what support should be offered."[197] Beyond nation-states, anticommunism signifies a cross-region, transnational network that is rooted in private sectors of rightist activism. Recent historical work around the 1980s renewal of anticommunism reveals a concurrent mysterious network of supporters and defenders outside of official government and nation-states. The HR Movement in the Vietnamese diaspora, according to Kyle Burke book *Revolutionaries for the Right: Anticommunist Internationalism and Paramilitary Warfare in the Cold War (*2018), is also a part of this movement.[198]

Over the years, Vietnamese anticommunism, which amounts to the "classic example of South Vietnamese in exile,"[199] shows up in general discussions as a marker of historical memory/fantasy that bound South Vietnamese refugees onto an anachronistic space. As the United States moves to forget the war, the liberal apathy moves to pathologize anticommunism as some sort of "Third World" remnant. This section resituates anticommunism and the Vietnamese diaspora in the less-examined context of extralegal militarism, political repression, and state's covert violence, arguing that these sites work to provide an understanding of diasporic politics in material and historically situated ways.

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[197] McManus, "U.S. Shaping Assertive Policy for Third World: 'Reagan Doctrine' Would Actively Support Rebellions Against Unfriendly Leftist Regimes."
[198] "On September 5, 1985, retired U.S. Army general John K. Singlaub, a thirty- year veteran of special operations, took the stage at an upscale hotel in Dallas, Texas… Seated behind him were the leaders of anticommunist paramilitary groups from Afghanistan, Angola, Ethiopia, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Nicaragua, surrounded by the flags of two dozen nations that had fallen under communist rule in the previous forty years. The auditorium was filled with business owners, wealthy socialites, former military and intelligence officers, aspiring mercenaries, and a legion of activists from the United States, Asia, Latin America, Africa, and Europe. They had gathered for the annual conference of the World Anti-Communist League (WACL), which drew its members from more than one hundred countries spread across five continents. Singlaub, who had recently secured the chairman- ship of the league, saw the conference as a way to unite the struggles of disparate movements and, in time, foment a global anticommunist revolution."
[199] Wang, "Politics of Return."

The Second-Generation Return

In the face of the violent attacks by the Front, the many unnamed factions within the Vietnamese American communities, and the hand of state bureaus like the FBI, and CIA, many amongst the original Vietnamese American progressive movement continued to organize. They focused on ending the U.S. embargo on Vietnam, with the purpose of taking the arms out of the community so people could freely express themselves. In the mean time, new generations of progressive Vietnamese Americans came of age in the U.S., believing in the same visions that Lâm was holding onto: commitment to build up the community.

This section examines the politics of return by political activists of the "generation after" in the Vietnamese refugee diaspora, who identify on the leftism-socialism-and communism spectrum. The larger question that I ask is: How does refugee subjectivity inform radical consciousness? But the more granular question is: How are young Vietnamese Americans' political subjectivities mediated by their parents' experiences with and recollections of the Vietnam War and by the politics of war commemoration practiced in the home and in the larger Vietnamese diaspora? We are familiar with the feminist position that the personal is the political—but what happens when the two are at odds? What does it take to reconcile the conflict between one's family history and one's political choices? How can we, then, theorize community in light of its diverse and at times conflicting politics? More importantly, how does this discussion advance our understanding of radical politics?

My methodology for this section includes many hours of informal conversations with young Vietnamese American activists, and formal oral history interviews with three activists who organized and participated in two political exposure trips back to Vietnam to learn about revolutionary history. I argue that these activists mobilize a *radical refugee subjectivity* that

simultaneously attends to their parents' refugee memory and intergenerational trauma and to their own vision of a just future. They do so through a strategy I call queer dis/inheritance (see chapter 3), rejecting the refugee baggage that is passed down onto the next generation: the intergenerational trauma and war memory that are narrated into the political view of anticommunism. In so doing, they come to know, understand, and acknowledge that which needs to be rejected. As the activists actively dis/inherit anticommunism, they are enacting a queer desire to draft their own political genealogy, a chosen political family of sort.

Building on José Muñoz's concept of queer disidentification, which posits that queer people "manage and negotiate historical trauma and systemic violence"[200] by simultaneously inserting themselves into and subverting the dominant regime to create a queer counterpublic, with queer dis/inheritance I show how second generation refugees incorporate their parents' lives and memories in order to craft their own political genealogy, even as they reject damaging narratives of refugee anticommunism. The activists' identities as refugee descendants—as inheritors of a name and a memory—are central to their political subjectivity. In short, their delineation of Vietnamese radical political subjectivity both draws from and expands radical queer politics of refusal by taking seriously the material conditions for refugee survival. It moves decisively away from the idea of intergenerational trauma as something unconsciously and inevitably inherited, and toward a solution for healing.

[200] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 161.

Some Contexts

In 2013, several Vietnamese American activists came together to start a political education exchange program in Vietnam called VN Roots, a name that "symbolized the desire to return to their roots."[201] Participating in the program were five Vietnamese American activists and organizers who belonged to various radical community advocacy and activist organizations across the country. For the second trip, which took place in December 2016, five people traveled with an activist couple who had transnational connections with Vietnam and a readymade itinerary. Both trips took seriously the studying and discussion sessions in preparation for the trip. Although diverse in terms of age, gender, class, and sexual orientations, they shared the goal of defining and advancing Vietnamese American radical politics in the diaspora. As of this writing, VN Roots has organized at least 3 trips to Vietnam, each lasting two weeks. I interviewed some participants in the first two trips. Per the participants' request for anonymity, in this section, they will be referred to as Thầy, Hải, Triều, and Giang. All the names are pseudonyms.

VN Roots is a significant case study of political organizing because of its structure, goals, strategies, and stakes. The participants' organizing experiences include working in youth empowerment, community-based engagement, workers' rights, labor unions, ant-deportation and immigration, and civil rights. VN Roots, on the other hand, is a project dedicated to long-term progressive movement-building around political identity formation and refugee lineage. As South Vietnamese soldier/refugee descendants, their engagement with the ruling regime is contentious. To the Communist regime in Vietnam, their refugee lineage marks them as potential subversives; yet to the Vietnamese refugee diaspora, their direct engagement with Vietnamese communism is

[201] Hai, interview, 2017.

nothing short of treason. To ensure safety for the participants, their participation in VN Roots was kept under the radar, producing no traces or written records outside of the core groups' selected audiences. As such, my attempt at documenting the project contributes to the larger effort of building an archive on Vietnamese American radicalism.

VN Roots is inspired and directly informed by former members of the Union of Vietnamese in the U.S., the radical traditions of the "long 1960s," the non-profit industrialization of grassroots activism[202] of the 1990s, and the rude awakening after the L.A. Riots (Ktown 1992)—events that signify the faltering of the 1960s cross-racial, Third World solidarity politics. Loan Dao observed that this context presents both a challenge and an opportunity for a "rising generation" of Southeast Asian American activists, allowing an emergence of SEAA youth activism to articulate their own political identity rooted in "refugee resistance"—a political stance that learns from both Asian American Movement (AAM) radicalism and refugee history. In her words, "*a radical refugee positionality* that holds both a critical politics of [AAM] early generation of activists and the reality of war, imprisonment, torture and starvation that inform the anti-communism of many in the SEAA community." [203]

Extending Dao's theorization, I argue that VN Roots' diasporic radicalism also lies in its refugee critique of AAM radicalism's troubling relationship with Vietnamese revolutionary politics. Particularly, inside classrooms, Asian American studies' idealized leftism has often alienated many second-generation Vietnamese Americans. Asian American studies as a field articulate its origin in the 1960s antiwar movement, as such, the political formation for Asian

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[202] Loan Dao identified this moment as "the evolution of Asian American grassroots activism into federally recognized, non-profit status, 501(c)3 social service organizations." *Generation Rising.*
[203] Dao, *Generation Rising*.

American is undergirded by an affinity to the radical tradition[204] and cross-racial solidarity with Black Power movement. Within these racial and political frameworks, Vietnamese refugees remain an outsider to both; their parents' cultural and political anticommunism remain at best in need of "rescue"[205] and at worst should be rejected. As a result, liberal narratives of U.S. failure in Vietnam, which tries to recuperate U.S. exceptional moral compass, does a disservice on Vietnamese American refugee students; as it tends to mourn the white innocence, it moves to undermine refugee existence. Vietnamese Americans often have to become their own teachers, learning about Vietnam through their family history, a task be fraught with uncertainty,[206] and in the case of VN Roots, through their exposure trips. Moreover, VN Roots, because of its desire and commitment to build Vietnamese American *radical subjectivity*, moves to access Vietnamese revolutionary politics directly without being mediated by the Asian/American Left imaginaries. While positionality suggests a response to external forces and structures of subject-formation, subjectivity is a "chosen" identification, to use the queer terminology, revealing the internal workings of desires, affect, and labor in the formation of one's agency and political choices. In other words, "political subjectivity" attests to how an individual forms their opinions, thoughts, and course of action toward a collective goal. As such, my use of political subjectivity stresses the

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[204] Chan, *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation*.
[205] Elsewhere, Phuong Tran Nguyen have written on the politics of "rescue" toward refugees as "highlight[ing] the role of gratitude as a form of social control." Nguyen, *Becoming Refugee American,* 34. Here the discussion gear toward how radical values and rhetoric are embedded into the how the field define Asian American politics as explicitly and implicitly leftist. For example, see Glenn, "The 'Four Prisons' and the Movements of Liberation: Asian American Activism from the 1960s to the 1990s;" Wu and Chen, *Asian American Studies Now: A Critical Reader*; Ishizuka and Chang, *Serve the People*; Maeda, *Chains of Babylon*.
[206] Bui, "Refugee Assets: The Political Reeducation of Personal Trauma and Family Bonds"; For a discussion on how family history transmits to the next generation, see Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory."

activation of internal political agency through external organizing rather than the convention of the "personal as political."[207]

Grafting a Political Lineage through Returning to the Past

Modeled after other "political exposure"[208] trips in which diasporic subjects travel to their homeland to learn about the country's social, political, and civil structures, VN Roots organizes two-week trips to Vietnam to learn about Vietnamese revolutionary politics, break down the history of the revolution, the building of a socialist-oriented economy, and how Vietnam healed after the war. When asked what piqued this interest, Hải shared his many frustrations at not being able to develop his own opinions of Vietnam's history despite having been active as a community organizer working with the Vietnamese community for a couple years:

> The radical movements in the U.S. [is] where I really got my politicization. Through learning U.S. history and seeing how a lot of those movements that intersected with the antiwar movement really viewed Vietnam with a very particular framework that was so different than what I grew up with. I didn't really have a space to talk about that tension between what I was learning, my political identity and my Vietnamese identity… We [left-identified Vietnamese Americans] were just trying to understand beyond 1975, the identity marker for us. We [want to] take a closer look at a part of our identity, a part that we have never been able to explore.[209]

As political activists, VN Roots members understand the lack of visible Leftist political role models in the Vietnamese community, and have sought answers for, as well as solutions to, this

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[207] In another context, the discussion on positionality and subjectivity refers to the ethics of academic research in terms of researchers versus the subjects of studies, and the inherent unequal power relationship within this process, as well as how markers of identities such as race, gender, nationality, education backgrounds, citizenship privileges intersect to complicate such power relationship. See Fisher, "Positionality, Subjectivity, and Race in Transnational and Transcultural Geographical Research."
[208] "Reconnecting to (Home)Land."
[209] Hải, interview, 2017.

absence. Hai's articulation reveals that the conflict, rather than the connection, between personal identity and political identity is what constitutes Vietnamese American leftist identity formation—a grafting of political lineage by tracing through historical disconnections. Getting connected to this history of Vietnamese politics outside of conventional discourses on refugee anticommunism, then, strengthens Hải and other leftists in their quest to learn more about Vietnam. Rather than looking at Vietnam as a lost homeland that can (and should) not be retrieved, VN Roots participants resituate Vietnam as a critical site for political education and Vietnamese people as historical actors capable of producing new knowledge about the past beyond what has been offered.

The past, as Walter Benjamin cautions, "threatens to disappear with every present."[210] Its true picture "whizzes by," leaving only "moments of recognizability"[211] to be held fast. Which is to say, historic moments like 1975 freeze up many sides, assigned political meanings to be held as historical truth. VN Roots participants' return to a historicized space was also a time-traveling event; they had hoped to encounter a history that could move, be transformed, not so much captured or recognized the way "it really was."[212] In personally engaging with the past, they "mean to take control of a memory, as it flashes in a moment of danger."[213] Here, the labor of organizing and preparing for the return is equivalent to Benjamin's historical materialism, making an attempt at "delivering tradition anew from the conformism."[214] In other words, forcing open new paths across the well-established, well-traveled routes—those named as the only ways one could walk.

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[210] Benjamin, *On The Concept of History,* V.
[211] Benjamin, V.
[212] Benjamin, VI.
[213] Benjamin, VI.
[214] Benjamin, VI.

As individuals, VN Roots participants have all returned to Vietnam to personally understand their family histories. However, the project allows the participants to get together, study, and discuss reading materials for months and travel in companionship of one another, signifying that the attempt to make sense of Vietnam past and present promotes new forms of collectivity and community. For the participants, the return is a path toward imagining a history of Vietnam beyond what they called a "pain, trauma, nation-loss" oriented discourse.

> We spent a lot of time trying to be as clear as possible about what the intention was, for us it was about, again, wanting to understand a Vietnam history… To do it in a way that again wasn't reactionary, critical but not condemning. We grew up in the diaspora community, and everything is about condemning Vietnam… So, I think just moving away from that energy, to allow ourselves some space to just learn, was a very hard thing to do. All of us were carry[ing] so much of our own family trauma and experience and feeling about the history. [215]

Moreover, this new form of collectivity is rooted in intergenerational engagement and transnational activism. VN Roots as a collective action at its scale was made possible due to the connections provided by Thầy, a former member and co-founder of USUV. When the participants wanted to have an exposure trip modeled after other Left communities in the Philippines, Korea, China, Thầy and his wife helped them set up the itineraries. Triều explained:

> The relationship between the diaspora and Vietnam [has been] severed so strongly, so I think there are very few linkages left in the diaspora. Thầy and his wife, who he met in the antiwar movement, became very strong linkage to Vietnam over the years. They would go back between Vietnam and the U.S., organizing around issues like Agent Orange, deportation…They really advocated for victims of the war, but also find the way to unite people over the issue, because a lot of Vietnamese Americans here think Agent Orange is fake, or that it's a fake campaign. They brought in American veterans, Vietnam veterans, Agent Orange victims, trying to find a ground where everyone can see the reality.[216]

The connection to Thầy lands them access to high-profile government officials and organizations. Their stay in Vietnam was funded and taken care of by government officials. In Vietnam, they

[215] Hải, interview, 2017.
[216] Triều, Interview, 2017.

traveled through multiple cities, from the North to the South, visiting official government buildings, museums, veterans and revolutionary soldiers' houses, and preserved war sites such as the Cu Chi tunnels. Every day is structured around meeting with four political representatives from Vietnam that the VN Roots participants select, which have included guerrilla fighters in the war, elders, state leaders such as Madame Nguyễn Thị Bình, Agent Orange association, the Youth League, the Women Union, and an LGBTQ project.

Binary Truths: Refugee Memory - Revolutionary Narrative

When asked about the potent issues of potential propaganda from the government of Vietnam, the participants expressed different opinions and concerns. As refugee descendants, the VN Roots participants grew up with overwhelming inherited memories of the hellish realities that their families went through. All of them expressed critical awareness about the kind of the information relayed to them, in Triều's words, "a message that the Party want to tell us."[217] Despite that, for Hải, maintaining a neutral stance and an open mind is the most important of the process: "We weren't going into it being super critical or super suspicious about what we would learn… We just want to be able to sit and talk with people."[218]

Being able to talk about Vietnam and its history had been a dream of Hải since he was a child. Growing up in San Jose,[219] he had been around Vietnamese people all his life, participating

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[217] Triều, Interview, 2017.
[218] Hải, Interview, 2017.
[219] The political climate of San Jose, California, where they grew up, was dominated by the stronghold of Homeland Restoration movement and its legacies of militarized anticommunism. Home to more than 100,000 Vietnamese residents, San Jose is the largest population of Vietnamese in the U.S. Red-baiting, anticommunist protests, and mass mobilization are dormant threats, informing the consciousness and formation of the Vietnamese American community in regards to political identity, place-making, and businesses development. (For a detailed discussion of San Jose's Vietnamese American politics in the 2000s, see Valverde, chapter 5.) Most recently, San Jose City Council passed the controversial to ban the communist Socialist Republic of

in language classes, going to temples with his family. And yet, he found it difficult to talk about the war or family history. Hải carried his questions about the war into college at UCLA, took Asian American studies classes, and became politicized. Yet, the challenge was still there: there were not many Vietnamese Americans around him who would be willing to talk about politics. Years later, after having become a community organizer and youth advocate working in Vietnam, the dream still followed him. Being able to return to Vietnam finally after more than ten years organizing towards something like VN Roots and "asked what we wanted to ask for a very long time," for him, was deeply emotional. "Coming back, we didn't realize the impact it was gonna have on us," Hải said. "It's the emotional weight of finally being able to engage with our identity in this way."[220]

Whereas Hải found exhilaration at having direct access to Vietnamese revolutionary history, for Triều and Giang, oral history lessons and embodied knowledges about the refugee experiences in their family backgrounds serve as a filter to cross-check the revolutionary messages:

> We tried to be good listeners and mindful of it, but for me personally, I think naturally because I came from the background of my dad and mom, I kept questioning internally. I hear myself defending [my parents], like what would my mom say about this, what would my dad's perspective about this.[221]

Triều grew up with her dad, formerly a Lieutenant for the Southern Army, who was sent to re-education camp for ten years. He would spend his weekends drinking beers and talking about the war. She learned about Vietnam through her former ARVN officer dad and her mom, a boat refugee. Many of her dad's brothers fought in the ARVN, went to reeducation camps, and were staunchly anticommunist—something her dad still reminds her to this day. "The communists were

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Vietnam's flag, an aggressive move given that the flag had been recognized as the "Freedom and Heritage" flag since 2003 in over 80 cities and 20 states. See Constante, "California City Bans Display of Vietnam National Flag on City Poles.". About flag controversies, see Do, "Nearly 40 Years after War's End, Flag of South Vietnam Endures."

[220] Hải, Interview, 2017.

[221] Triều, Interview, 2017.

evil," he said, "so the people wanted to fight for their country." In 1985, her parents arrived at the U.S., after trying to escape 3 to 4 times by boat but were captured every single time. They resettled in San Jose, but money was always an issue, and she grew up around poverty and gang life. Her brother and friends in Eastside San Jose "either went to jail, prison, or got shot, [it was] a lot of things."[222] For Giang, the problem was not only the revolutionary narratives that invalidated the refugees' experiences of re-education camps, but the underlying inability to acknowledge multiple truths:

> At VN Roots, I couldn't reconcile with a lot of narratives I was hearing. Some people were like "some of the reeducation camp was good. Some of them were not as bad as they [the refugees] thought." How do I hear that and also hear what my dad was saying? The binary [of refugee versus revolution] is so strong, to the point we don't even recognize each other's truth.[223]

Before VN Roots, in 2011, Giang had studied abroad in Hanoi and completed a voluntary research project at an orphanage, working with kids who were affected by Agent Orange. When she came back, no one in her family believed her. Her uncle insisted that it was "communist propaganda so that they can get sympathy from us, so we give money back to the country."[224] Giang couldn't provide a coherent analysis of how she felt about this binary, only that it has become something personally for her to process, and to be incorporated into her long-term work. Working towards becoming a therapist and healer, when she got back to the U.S., she led a workshop for Vietnamese Americans on "how damaging this binary is, not so much about the trauma of the war, but just the binary" on the mental health of refugees and refugee descendants. She shared that one of her goals is to "build this analysis into the organizing work that I do. How do we build that into a collective,

[222] Giang, Interview, 2017.
[223] Giang, Interview, 2017.
[224] Giang, Interview, 2017.

systemic, institutional [level], how to do it all the time? I'm interested in doing this healing work, and from there, how we build community."[225]

Feminist Healing as a Radical Praxis

The core group that found VN Roots also organized around feminist and queer critique, rejecting structure of masculinist hierarchy and visions around what is considered a "productive" or "worthy" cause. Between the long-term commitment of movement-building and the intentional spaces carved out to deal with the different inherited traumas, VN Roots illustrates the important and sustained role of affect and healing in political organizing. The participants' emphasis on collaboration, and personal and collective healing during the trip indicates how VN Roots redefine "political education" as a feminist and queer practice. It is reflected in how the VN Roots reimagines Vietnamese American politics against militant activism and around community building that draws from other groups' proven models.

In 1999, while organizing with the Vietnamese community in Portland, Hải met some Korean adoptee friends and learned about the exchange program they had just participated in called KEEP, abbreviation for Korean Exposure and Education Program. KEEP was created in 1994 by the New York-based radical Korean community advocate group Nodutdol, first to fourth generation Koreans whose family members live in both South and North Korea, who believe in educating Korean Americans in social justice with a critical analysis of U.S-Korean history.[226] It

[225] Giang, Interview, 2017.
[226] The KEEP program, in their words, "provides an opportunity to learn about the movements for democracy, liberation, and self-determination in Korea. Participants learn about the history and current struggles for social and economic justice, as well as the broad-based movement for peaceful unification — issues not widely discussed among Koreans in America or in United States educational institutions."

is this politically-charged mission and pedagogical approach that inspired Hải. It would take him almost ten years with nine times returning to Vietnam before he could gather a group of interested people, including scholars, professors, community organizers, from the Bay Area, Los Angeles, and New York, to start planning a trip. The casual conversations turned serious, and finally for the five years prior to 2013 when the trip finally happened, they would have meetings regularly and phone calls every two weeks to discuss reading materials, lay out what they wanted to learn, and plan how they would answer those questions. This deliberate process illustrates the participants' realistic and critical, rather than romantic, engagement with revolutionary politics.

Before going on the trip, many participants have joined another initiative by the same founders of VN Roots called Hai Ba Trung School of Organizing (HBT), started in Oakland, CA in 2011, which offers 3-day program training Vietnamese American progressives (age 18-35) to do community organizing. For many participants, HBT was the first space that they had to discuss their feelings about community politics, family trauma, and the conflicted feelings of having progressive politics. A feeling, as Triều described, "like I am betraying my parents." A HBT participant described that they finally feel like "having a Vietnamese American community of my own after many of these years feeling rejected." [227] Others whom I talked to described their experience of being in the room full of like-minded people as "coming home;" especially for queer folks who are not out to parents, sometimes HBT is the only space they have encountered that allowed them to think through all the intersecting identities, often repressed in unwelcoming space of family conservatism.

The two-week trip across multiple cities, meetings and Q&A sessions that would last for hours, exhausted the participants physically and emotionally. "A lot of emotional stuff came up,"

[227] "VietUnity: About Us."

Triều shared, "so we created room for emotional process. People being triggered, overwhelmed, but also incredible moments that were very moving as well. [It was] a whole spectrum of experience [and] we felt like it was an important moment of history."[228] In between meetings, the delegates would debrief to make sure they asked the right questions, created a consensus on what they know about the person, what they already knew, what they would challenge, and what they want to take away. After dinner, they would debrief for many hours, and wake up early the next day to prepare for the next meetings.

Return of the Revolutionary Pedagogy

VN Roots, on the surface, seems to resemble the spirit of internationalism and political traveling that were popular in the 1960s-70s era. During this time, American leftists, including activists of color, looked to revolutionary countries for inspiration to build their movements and to imagine a future beyond war and racism. Saidiya Hartman noted, for example, that African Americans crossed the Atlantic in droves to "participate in an international movement for freedom and democracy and to build a black nation."[229] During this time, international activist travelers also visited Vietnam in support of ending the U.S.' direct military involvement in the Vietnam War. In the U.S., this movement attracted antiwar activists, students, feminist organizations and individuals across racial backgrounds. Judy Wu's study on American activists participating in these travels pointed out that "the experience of travel fostered and solidified a sense of internationalism, a conviction of political solidarity, with Third World peoples and nations among

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[228] Triều, Interview, 2017.
[229] Hartman, *Lose Your Mother, 36*.

U.S. activists of varying racial backgrounds."[230] For these travelers, Vietnam provided an alternative source of knowledge outside of government-issued reports and mainstream representations of the war in the U.S. Participating in these travels allowed American activists to contemplate their radical politics and racial identities under the framework of Third World radicalism and anti-imperialism, aligning the social movements at home with the "global solidarity" movement for justice. Historian and activist Herbert Aptheker who visited North Vietnam with Staughton Lynd and one of the Chicago 7, Tom Hayden, wrote at length about his political awakening there, describing the multifaceted Vietnamese resistance as undergirded by "an acute consciousness of internationalism and… a profound sense of humanism."[231]

What is different about this moment and VN Roots' investment in learning the history of Vietnam revolutionary praxis? Does Vietnamese revolutionary politics carry the same weight that it does to its exiled people's descendants? If so, why? During the mass émigrés to Ghana, there was a small group of young African American, the "Revolutionist Returnees," who returned "home" with a "terrible yearning to be accepted."[232] Some with talents were utilized in the newly decolonized government, while others patiently stayed on. Hartman wrote of this moment, during the sixties, that it was "still possible that the [colonial] past could be left behind because it appeared as though the future, finally, had arrived." Amongst the VN Roots participants, Triều was particularly emotional about returning with VN Roots. Perhaps also with "a terrible yearning," she shared the incredible feeling "to be Viet American born, and to be welcomed back by the people of Vietnam, especially with my dad's [lieutenant] background." In the same beat, she became

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[230] Wu, "Journeys for Peace and Liberation: Third World Internationalism and Radical Orientalism during the U.S. War in Vietnam," 57.
[231] Aptheker, *Mission to Hanoi*.
[232] Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 37. About the "Revolutionist Returnees," see also Angelou, *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, 78; Magill, *Masterplots II*, 34; Schramm, *African Homecoming*, 60.

fearful of the desire that made her feel like a traitor to her family's refugee experiences. ("If he knew I went, he would disown me.") Yet, as a (queer) woman strongly identified with radical leftist identity, Triều seemed particularly enamored with "the revolutionary spirit" of Vietnam. She described the privileges of being associated with Thầy and how it gave her special access to revolutionary leaders:

> [Thầy] wasn't a part of the revolution in Vietnam, but I think he carried that to the States, and he worked in solidarity with a lot of people of color, other communities of color… In the communist-left-socialist community, everyone knows about him because he's very radical. But it was very cool having this experience [because of him]. It was such a privilege to be face to face with the revolutionary leaders of the war—there was a vast variety of people, and for them to speak to us, and see us for our work, [I am touched].[233]

Borrowing Hartman's words, perhaps she, daughter of the exiled, also "wanted to belong to a country [that has a] future."[234] Yet, Triều also sees her father in this revolutionary vision:

> I met a revolutionary leader, a 90- year old woman who describes sleeping in these Cu Chi tunnel for two weeks, come up for battle and take over Saigon. [She represents] the spirit of people's liberation, and wanting to win the war, you can't deny that. It was so true. To see it with my own eyes, to hear it, was so emotional because… My dad could say the same thing but he was on the other side. To want to die for your country in that way, and then for Vietnamese people to fight each other for essentially the same vision was very heavy to process.[235]

In Triều's testimony lies a deep desire to reclaim Vietnamese revolutionary politics for herself, narrating herself (and her father) into the genealogy of women (people) who fought for independence. A narrative that, outside of the nationalist framework of heroines and traitors, could speak to Triều's disidentification with the normative Vietnamese American identity, restricted in suffocating historical baggage, predetermining her subjectivity. Through VN Roots, Triều's

[233] Triều, Interview 2017.
[234] Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 37.
[235] Triều, Interview, 2017.

testimonies activate a non-linear and intergenerational narrative that contemplates a notion of revolutionary politics informed by but not contained within war legacies.

Refugee radical subjectivity:

This case study provides a different portrayal of Vietnamese refugee descendants and their reflection around belonging and understanding history. The issues around silencing and secrecy that they deal with concern community politics rather than personal tragedies. These activists' attempts to engage with the past derive not only from personal family history and reflection of identity but also through the actual process of traveling to, learning from, and exchanging ideas with people in Vietnam, which set them apart from conventional conceptualizations of how diasporic second-generation identity is being constituted.

In certain research in ethnic studies or Asian American studies, it is common to connect the personal with the political, exploring how family history and personal identification—or the move back into familial experiences of migration, displacement, or experience with racism—have impacted one's political imagination. While these engagements remain useful and true as pedagogical moves, they sometimes conflate political activism and identity politics, which can easily fall into unproductive corrective representation. What is radical in the case of Vietnamese refugee descendants is the move away from family into community, and the queered conceptualization of Vietnam not a lost home to return to[236] but as a site of political education, formulating "new worlds of possibility."[237] These activists are less concerned about narrating their intergenerational trauma or correcting representations. Their choice to remain under the radar

[236] In this way, their vision shares Gayatri Gopinath's discussion of "queer excavation of the past," which "does not seek to identify or mourn lost origins." See Gopinath, *Unruly Visions,* 8.
[237] Gopinath, 61.

speaks to the material conditions in which they mobilize: a deep understanding of just how much the trauma of war and losses still overwhelms Vietnamese in the diaspora.

The past that these activists engage with is not one in which refugees are voiceless and helpless, but one that gives them political momentum to build a future in the Vietnamese diaspora. These activists understand that refugeehood, in this case, is a tool for political thought in private and public matters. If anticommunism were mobilized to mold a hegemonic refugee political subjectivity in order to squash oppositional politics, then the descendants' knowledge of the other refugees and their contribution to the Vietnamese communities allow them to move forward with multiple truths and critiques. When we say the war keeps on living, as the activists remind us, it will not just mean a repressed memory that resurfaces and haunts the present, but war memories that can be politicized and transformed in contemporary U.S. political paradigms. The activists' transnational activism reveals that in fostering radical politics, they are traversing in a fluid, overcharged idea of Vietnam that can be both violent and heroic, traumatizing, and yet capable of healing. Traveling back to Vietnam is not just a spatial journey, but a temporal one, like journeying back to a revolutionary past and bringing what they can to the present, and through this process, creating an alternative timeline in which Vietnam is no longer frozen in the moment of 1975. In this way, they challenge the idea that radicalism is a simple act of defiance against a great oppressor—the simplified binary that encapsulates much of how people understand revolutionary politics. In learning about Vietnam, they move to free Vietnam from the fault lines that separate the past and the future, moving forward to a future in which being a Vietnamese radical person means possessing an ability to imagine and create a healing refugee lineage. In finding out the past for themselves, they created a political genealogy of Vietnam that can include their parents, one amongst the multiple Vietnams that has been, was, could have been, and will be.

Beyond the Binary

In the documentary *A Better Man* (2019), director Attiya Khan came back to the apartment where she was abused for two years with her real-life former abusive partner Steve to confront her past trauma.[238] This was the site of violence for Khan, who had run away twenty years ago, at the age of 18, in fear for her life. Traveling back together to the old neighborhood, she felt nauseated as the traumatic memory came back. They sat down together, and she talked freely about what she remembered happening, knowing that Steve at that moment was not the same abuser, and she no longer the girl who needed saving. Returning to the site of trauma and talking to her abuser, Khan shared, has given her tools to work toward healing. "It didn't erase my violent memories, but it did begin to bring some sense of relief from the trauma I've been carrying around."[239]

Near the end of our three-hour conversation, Triều said:

> "Being in Vietnam and learn about these narratives [makes me feel] empowered because I come from the organizing world where we have certain values that are very Left. Seeing a whole country speaking that language, I realized that I grew up with a very traumatized, sad narrative, always mourning, always regretful.
>
> My dad talks about the war every weekend drinking beer with his brothers. And then kids in VN grew up with icons, women that you celebrate, a history that is so empowering. What would I experience growing up in that system? Then you have the diaspora… like we're trapped in our own trauma.
>
> It's emotional for me because of imperialism and colonization I was stripped away from that experience. I grew up yearning for it and I didn't even know what I was yearning for. Be a part of the movement work and having to look to other communities for role models… we have our own role models from our own history, but we were severed from it. That feels emotional because now that we have access to that knowledge, I do feel more empowered and grounded. And I feel that to claim

[238] The film was an organic effort in restorative justice approach from both people, to elicit accountability from Steve, her abuser, and promote healing for Khan. After multiple monitored conversations about the past, Khan and Steve finally traveled back to the apartment they shared as high schoolers.

[239] Keeler, "Q&A: Attiya Khan."

> that I come from a lineage of women who were fighters, to be able to have revolutionary leaders with all the contradictions that they hold, were powerful."[240]

I sit with this quote for a long time, trying to figure out how to hold her rejection of refugee trauma and embrace of revolutionary rhetoric in a way that does not reduce it, again, to a binary mode of thinking. Then I remember that Triều is the same person who felt like crying every time she heard any stories that contradict what her parents had told her, who defended them in her head against the official revolutionary narrative that did not care about the lives of refugees like her parents. I too, as a descendant of the North, felt stuck in the weight of the historical trauma, and the war legacy that fell on both our shoulders—what is it that we are defending and what is it that we are fighting against every time we think about this past? I could not quite answer. Then it dawned on me, the story that Triều recounted about a meeting with a political prisoner, who was once a young person only wanting to take revenge on the French colonial system that devalued them and killed their loved ones—then ended up in prison, where they, in turn, got politicized and learned what it was that they could be fighting for.

Perhaps she found herself in this narrative and found strength in the possibility that maybe politics starts closer to the heart more than to political parties and affiliation. And that there is, like she said, "an undeniable truth" that people whom she had been taught to distrust suddenly started resembling her own life as a queer woman of color organizer against the social injustice and oppression in the U.S. Maybe it gives her comfort to think that the *desire* to belong to a lineage of revolutionary women and fighters is less an act of disloyalty to her parents' legacy, but more an origin story she grafted to honor her life journey. And that is one of those uncomfortable truths that she shared with me, as we sat there together in her apartment, tears falling down our cheeks.

[240] Triều, Interview, 2017.

At that moment, I realized I could have been her, and she could have been me, and the one thing that keeps me hopeful is that we would perhaps still, one way or another, disinherit from the narratives that has been given to us in order to find each other. *Our* desire to belong, to decide our own political genealogy, in this way, exceeds national and historical narratives, to enter the realm of queer reimagination.

And sometimes, all the time, opposite narratives can become one whole.

Onward:

When asked what they're going to do with this experience, Hải shared his thought at length:

> As I been learning myself, I tend to lean more toward a particular perspective mainly because I want to allow myself to be more open toward that perspective. At the end of the day, as my own learning continues, I might end up somewhere else, but I don't want to react to the information, I don't want to react to just learning history, so I tend to lean that way.
>
> Whatever the exchange ended down the road, for me, was to keep trying. It's not gonna be perfect, we'll figure it out as we go along but there is a growing community of people who'd love to dig a little deeper, you know. Able to ask questions, and somewhere along the way *we'll be able to have clarity for ourselves.*[241]

In this section, I discussed the political and community building work amongst Vietnamese refugee descendants, examining how their activism attends to intergenerational trauma and resists structural forgetting, while also rejecting their elders' damaging narratives of refugee anticommunism. In doing so, I explore the notion of refugee subjectivities and their political capacities—something willfully obscured by the vast ranges and forms in Vietnam War historiography. In addition, centering refugees elevates a discussion of political education and

[241] Hải, Interview, 2017.

activism that extends beyond survival politics, or the idea that marginalized people do not have political choices and desires. Finally, focusing on refugee descendants, this work presents a long-overdue examination of the activists and artists of the "generation after" who actively engage with the past to imagine a chosen future without harm.

This chapter is about an idea, the "revolutionary returns" of refugees and children of refugees to engage in their visions of democracy, justice, sovereignty, and the questions about history and future of Vietnam in relation to its "other" population in the diaspora. Despite the deeply conflictive nature of these returnings, I frame these seemingly isolated efforts by different individuals as radical, and their moments of engaging with the past as a revolutionary act. Their concerns lay with not an abstracted idea about Vietnam, fixed and knowable like a drawn map, but with Vietnamese people, stories, and the memories that continue to be fervent, circulated below the echoes of state narratives and official history. The returnees believe that Vietnam is not a space but a people who continue to hold on to their reasonings, logics, visions, and other people. The simple act of recognizing Vietnam in other people characterizes the politics that this chapter's subjects bring forth that perhaps sets them apart from other ways other Vietnamese returnees have claimed to fight for in Vietnam such as freedom of speech, freedom of expression, or human rights, the kind of activism mobilized by old political discourses. In doing so, the "revolutionary return" to Vietnam marks a critical shift in how Vietnamese refugee descendants break out of past hauntings to imagine a way to move forward.

Chapter 3: Queer Dis/inheritance and Refugee Future Work

> The monarchs that fly south will not make it back north. Each departure, then, is final. Only their children return; only the future revisits the past.
>
> —Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

The first queer story: In the first chapter of Ocean Vuong's debut novel, readers learn that his mother started hitting him when he was four. First, with her own hand, "a flash, a reckoning,"[242] right across the mouth. Then with objects laying around the house, a remote control, a box of Legos thrown at his head. Then in public, fists in the parking lot, at Six Flags after a scary ride. Almost with a weapon, a knife, when he was ten. In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous,* the refugee mother is an abusive mother and the son, a storyteller who traverses in-between moments of tender and hurt, hallucination on her past and contemplation of his present. War trauma and queer trauma, coming together like a perfect storm, creating some sorts of camaraderie, a relationship that explains the monstrosity that marks both always as outsiders. Of a normative, happy home, of the malls, the supermarkets, the school bus, of other houses in Hartford, Connecticut, of national culture.

When his mother declared while dropping green beans in the sink, "I am not a monster. I am a mother,"[243] Vuong comforted his mom by reassuring her. He makes excuses for her, just a little bit. The monstrosity, he says to us, was in the PTSD. Parents with PTSD are more likely to hit their children. Monster, after all, are "a hybrid signal, a light house: both shelter and warning at once."[244] He learns this monstrosity by name too, when his little queer body was seen wearing his mother's white dress bought from Goodwill, being named "freak, fairy, fag,"[245]—other names

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[242] Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, 5.
[243] Vuong, 13.
[244] Vuong, 13.
[245] Vuong, 14.

for monster—by the school kids. He utters: “You are a mother. You are also a monster. But so am I—which is why I can’t turn away from you.”[246] In the story, when Vuong was thirteen, he told her to stop hitting him, and she listened. “If we are lucky,” he stated, “another alphabet written in the blood, sinew, and neuron.”[247] In refugee survivance, brought onto a strange place where different kinds of violence exist, but no longer measured by bloodbath, his family’s history can be “passed on.” He doesn’t turn away, only shielding himself from the violence his mother enacted in the aftermath of war. How does memory stay when the refugees flee away from their home, Vuong’s novel asks. He then answers, like “a flood.”[248]

The second queer story: nonbinary poet Chrysanthemum Tran said to the audience at the Asian American Writer’s Workshop 2016 art show “Queerness and Our Refugee Mothers,” featuring trans-queer-nonbinary Vietnamese American artists: “I will not carry it on. This bloodline ends with me.”[249] They spoke on their decision to not have children, so that trauma does not travel forth. This seemingly private revelation is well known for followers of Tran, the first transfeminine finalist for the *Women of the World Poetry Slam* (2016) and champion of the *Rustbelt Regional Poetry Slam* with the poem “On (Not) Forgiving My Mother.”[250] In front of strangers, Tran announced, time and again, their disinheritance from the blood family that could only love them “with a fist/ and a tongue slicked with poison.”[251]

Centering “the intersection of diaspora and dysphoria,”[252] Tran’s work explores trans-queerness and mental health in relation to their mother’s PTSD, and the refugee luggage they

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[246] Vuong, 14.
[247] Vuong, 10.
[248] Vuong, 78.
[249] Tran, Poetry reading.
[250] Tran, “On (Not) Forgiving My Mother.”
[251] Tran, *A Lexicon*, 3.
[252] Tran, “About.”

refuse to carry. Their chapbook, *A Lexicon,* marks the rupture of queerness within a refugee lineage caught in the shadow of displacement. Their poems testify to the horror of living with the rampant manifestation of war memory "leak[ing] through every ceiling tile/crawling inside walls like careful mold"[253] and in a body that was too much for their own mother—a Vietnam War refugee with PTSD. *A Lexicon* is filled with visceral details of how the war burns through generations, piercing across space and time to explode at them, "sometimes a gunfire fist/ a broomstick against the back/ a volatile mouth naming me/ *Disappointment, Mistake.*"[254]

This chapter takes up the site of culture production to ponder the politics of remembrance and its queer possibilities in "imagining otherwise."[255] I begin with Vuong's fictionalized autobiography and Tran's private grief made public to contemplate the ways queerness—as mediated through temporary moments of violence literally and figuratively—tends to refugee futures over family history and memory. Vuong's and Tran's personal life and work demonstrate the complex iterations of war's impacts in people's intimate lives. As queer refugee and refugee descendant writers, both writing about their abusive refugee mothers, their works examine refugee trauma and memory in ways that question the material and ethical questions of trauma(tic) inheritance. As members of the "generation after,"[256] those who inherit trauma and consciousness that precedes their own existence, Vuong and Tran's exposure to war memory was not only through their mothers' PTSD, but also through the violence on their queer bodies. Vuong is a feminine gay boy "handsome at exactly three angles;"[257] Tran is a transfeminine nonbinary occupying the ambiguity of a gendered body. These planes of expression, as visceral markers of

[253] Tran, *A Lexicon*, 3.
[254] Tran, 3.
[255] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*; Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise*.
[256] Espiritu, *Body Counts*; Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory."
[257] Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, 10.

experiences, also chart the fundamental differences in how they chose to deal with parental abuse. While Vuong sees his mother's racialized refugeehood in the societal rejection of his queerness, Tran permanently left home.

This chapter posits that queer descendants have yet to be considered widely in the study of refugee memory and aftermaths of war. But when done so, their creative works radiate a radical possibility to rethink the ethics of remembering, to reimagine refugee lineage beyond discourses of loss and recovery, and most importantly, to reclaim refugee future outside of the capitalist heteropatriarchal framework of propertied possessive individualism. Vuong's negotiation with his mother's abuse and Tran's rejection of the refugee baggage in their poems underscores the fraught process of transmitting memory across generations, oftentimes deemed as naturalized and desired, even when it's fraught with personal purposes towards one's identity formation. But in a physical departure from family (here, the site of violence and its perpetrator), Tran's poems offer a clearer insight: when the familial bloodline is disrupted by queerness, it threatens/ is threatened to (be) undo(ne). They pose a question, unabashed: How/will the memory go on in a broken family? For this chapter, the question reads, what will be of family history without a bloodline to carry on? Or put differently, what are the forms that private memory can take beside blood relations? What is the significance of making (in)visible or (il)legible such memories? And why?

In chapter 2, I discussed the precarious radical political subjectivity of the second-generation Vietnamese refugee descendants when confronted by the violent legacy of anticommunism within our own community. This chapter examines a queer refugee subjectivity that addresses the ethical memory of others "regarding the pain of" Vietnam War refugees. To define a queer radical refugee politics, this chapter turns to visual arts and independent cultural production made by feminist and queer artists who turn the maternal relationship into a critical site

of knowledge production, history writing, and ethics of remembrance. Their engagement with uncharted family history to differently narrate national trauma, I propose, gesture toward a concept of refugee future work that engages with the emerging field of feminist memory studies and queer diaspora. In this field, memory act as a powerful site, full of "dynamic potential for transformation" that could counter "backward-looking movements"[258] and toward a just future. As trauma "offered new conceptions of time, in that it always occurs in the present, as a form of perpetual return,"[259] the Vietnamese American's discursive return to the past through engagement with refugee subject formation "mobilizes memory" to activate an imaginary of collective healing, moving towards vision of social justice. Here, Tran's poetry delineates a queer dis/inheritance—a simultaneous embodiment and refusal of the refugee baggage—that provokes me to ask: How do we practice an ethics of memory/inheritance in the ongoing reality of transnational displacement and marginalization of refugees and their lives afterward? Furthermore, what are the possibilities for refugee futures from the vantage point of radical queer politics? To answer these questions, I bring together queer theory and critical refugee studies to address the larger conceptual and ethical concerns about world-(re)making possibilities surrounding trauma and loss.

Queer Refusal and Refugee Lineage

Queer Politics of Refusal

In the last decade, queer theory has embraced the theoretical turn to refusal politics. From Lee Edelman's *No Future* to Jack Halberstam's *Queer Art of Failure*, scholars enunciated the divestment from a heteronormative capitalist society, its meaning-making function that (en)genders linear history, and its exploitative nature (re)produced as social "progress." Edelman's

[258] Altınay, *Women Mobilizing Memory*, 22.
[259] Hirsch, "Vulnerable Times," 80.

concept of "reproductive futurism"[260]—how hetero-procreation ensures hegemonic future—contributes to a consensus that queer time breaks with linear futures reserved for the nuclear family. Halberstam uses (re)productive failure to theorize queer time as "anticapitalist logics of being and acting and knowing."[261] These seductive proposals, indeed, build upon a genealogy of radicalism, which challenges *that which must be inherited* to reimagine life beyond bio-industrial-capital reproduction (Marx's base and superstructure). And yet, they reveal a lack of commitment to the material world wherein corporeal markers of difference and fugitivity are literally matters of life and death. Kara Keeling acknowledges this dilemma as she admits the need of bio-reproduction for postcolonial subjects' survival, pointing out that Edelman's antifuturism is "a (non)politics only for those for whom the future is *given.*"[262]

Keeling's critique evokes black feminists' discussion on personhood, property and inheritance as predicated upon white possessive individualism. Inheritance, the legality of passing down wealth, is enabled via the violent bio-reproduction of race, gender and sexuality. Hortense Spillers interrogated how white-patriarchal lineage emerged via the destruction of black personhood and bloodlines, wherein enslaved women' offspring became properties of—even when fathered by—white masters.[263] Whiteness and its inventions, Cheryl Harris noted, undergirded property law and legitimizing structures of settler capitalism through the bereavement imposed upon Native and nonwhite people.[264] M. Jacqui Alexander notes that the consolidation of white hetero-nationalism also manifested in newer instances of anti-immigration following the histories

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[260] Edelman, *No Future*.
[261] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 20–21.
[262] Keeling, "LOOKING FOR M--," 568.
[263] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe."
[264] Harris, "Whiteness as Property."

of Native displacement and slavery.[265] Following Lisa Lowe, she argued that the 1870 immigration restriction targeted Asian women for their supposedly sexual immorality, deeming them dangerous for white men and unfit for marriage with their male counterparts who were needed for the economy. This instance informed legal and cultural justification for excluding Asian people from citizenship until 1924.

To be given a future, then, is to inherit white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, private property—violent structures that simultaneously disavow, disappear, and recuperate (racialized m)others. These structures also limit how we can imagine the dispossessed's biopolitical survival: how can one become an inheritor beyond the racial scripts of possessive individualism[266] in the U.S.? This question troubles me as I think about the relationship between queerness, war, displacement, and refugee lineage. If to *radically, queerly "inherit" life* through queer refusal is to reject, negate, and oppose all that has been claimed and named by the global structures of command, what do we make of the many worlds supposedly ended, whose inhabitants must go on, even when their legacy and memory are of trauma and war debris? For those whose bodies have been touched by war and colonial conquest, how do we treat their "reproductive futurism" as both a politics of survival and a site fraught with biopolitical temptations? For refugees, "failure" is never symbolic: it means to die in war or get lost in the refugee passage. There will literally be no future. *How does one "carry on" such historical trauma, and still dream of radical queer politics that divest from upholding hegemonic futures?*

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[265] Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 293.
[266] Hong, *The Ruptures of American Capital*.

Trauma can constitute a productive site of knowledge, "a foundation for creating counterpublic spheres rather than evacuating them."[267] Traumatic histories, Cvetkovich noted, can be brought into and transform the public sphere, similar to the ways that Hirsch cautious against, to reiterate "military and reactionary agendas… under authoritarian regimes… in the service of destruction and vengeance."[268] Thus, for Cvetkovich, queer(ed) trauma necessarily refuses "public articulations" and "quick fix solutions"[269] of representative inclusion. Citing the Vietnam War as the type of trauma "used to reinforce nationalism," "*constructed* as a wound that must be healed in the name of unity,"[270] she urges scholars to instead focus on locations that cannot represent the nation. The Vietnam War, in her work, exists mostly as a metaphor, a peripheral reference for what *not* to talk about, an epistemological and ontological dissonance within her proposed project of privileging "unpredictable forms of politics" outside of institutions.

In Cvetkovich's imagining of a trauma-centered queer radical counterpublic, is there no place for Vietnamese American queer people? What is lost when their trauma is dissociated from national discourses of war, displacement, "refugee debt," and diasporic identity? Vietnamese American queer people's trauma exists in the nexus of rampant U.S. orientalist trans/queerphobia as well as through their families' homeland/diasporic sexual and gender politics, and especially through their parents' post-war experiences and war memory. The intersectionality of racialized queerness, diaspora, and refugeehood is rather obvious, and yet proves to be challenging for public imagination and scholarship alike. Vietnam has long occupied an abject space in U.S. consciousness, a double bind of hyper-visibility and erasure, understood exclusively as the

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[267] Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 15.
[268] Altınay, *Women Mobilizing Memory*, 21–22.
[269] Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 16.
[270] Cvetkovich, 16.

catastrophic, "exceptional" war too costly for Americans. Vietnamese people, too, are cast to the periphery, their presence rarely felt outside of moments of national (un)consciousness. Their absence and misrepresentation, in short, is a "national, cultural, international and scholarly issue that has yet to be solved."[271] (Bui 2018, 56).

Queer Radicalism and the Vietnam War

Amidst these problematics, what articulation of queer radicalism is capacious enough to tend to the material conditions of refugee dispossession, queer subjectivity, and futurity beyond unbecoming? A brief history of queer futility comes to the fore, like a reminder of the precariousness of history-making in the fight against engulfing structures of power.

An imagination of a queer radical counterpublic without space for the Vietnam War is in part negligence of its own history.[272] Non-materialist queer politics of refusal risks forgetting its roots. The genealogy of queer politics of refusal and queer radical counterpublic, as mentioned above, could be traced back to the antiwar movement in the late 1960s. At the midst of the movement in 1971, many young people would say the Vietnam War had everything to do with being gay. Naming themselves Gay Liberationists, they had imagined and created a queer radical counterpublic amongst thousands of people, in hundreds of groups, across fifty cities and fourteen

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[271] Bui, *Returns of War*, 5.
[272] Perhaps this is a point of contention around LGBT studies and queer studies around its historicization and theorization of queer history. Queer theory, as David Eng, Jack Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz argued in "What's queer about queer studies now," are not only concerning about sexual politics—the organizing rubric of lesbian and gay studies—but speak more to the broad critique that it brings into "multiple social antagonism, including race, gender, class, nationality, and religion." Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz, "What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?," 1.

states who came together to mobilize against the Vietnam War, to articulate their disinheritance of the country in which they were born into, and the generation from which they succeeded. The Gay Liberation movement was a short-lived, but fruitful and productive era amongst gay activists identified with the radical politics of the 1960s; at its peak, GLF had thousands of members in hundreds of groups spreading across the U.S.[273]

Politics of refusal was a central character, so to speak, of the Gay Liberation movement that found its political identity *within* the antiwar movement. Historian Justin Suran charted that

> Adopting a gay identity in 1969 meant more than simply affirming one's same-sex orientation by declaring oneself "a homosexual"; it meant positioning oneself in relation to a clearly articulated set of commitments and ideals associated at the time with radical politics. First and foremost, being gay in 1969, 1970, or 1971 meant being out of the closet and *against* the Vietnam War.[274]

Disavowing the long-standing homophile demand for integration into the military, the gay generation who came of age during the Vietnam War narrated their politics through the refusal to be drafted. Opposing the war, for these gay youths, signified their disinheritance from the previous generation of respectable, liberal gay men who sought inclusion into the oppressive system of the U.S. military. These young men and women rejected the notion of "responsible citizens" and instead adopted insurgent, "freaky" identities that refused to offer "aid and comfort to the war machine of imperialist Amerika,"[275] utilizing postcolonial and feminist discourses to liken militarism to "white heterosexual male fantasies of domination."[276] Gayness as sexual orientation "necessarily entailed particular political commitments and an oppositional relation to conventional

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[273] Kissack, ""Freaking Fag Revolutionaries: New York's Gay Liberation Front, 1969–1971." Some of the cities include Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and Chicago, in college towns such as Austin, Tallahassee, and Berkeley, and in London, England.
[274] Suran, "Coming Out Against the War," 463.
[275] Suran, 471.
[276] Suran, 471.

norms of masculinity”[277] especially the hypermasculinity of U.S. soldiers associated with U.S. militarism, nationalism, and imperialism.

Because of the crackdown on the Left movement in the early 1970s, along with the fact that few activists at the time offered solidarity with their fellow gay comrades,[278] even the existence of the Gay Liberation Front, historian Justin Suran and Terrence Kissack argued, is downplayed among historian of the gay movements. Neither homophile nor gay radical politics emerged after Gay Liberation as a paradigm for gay rights movement, and starting in the 1990s, the discourse of “queer” floats in its ambiguity, opening up capacious potentials for political utility to be reassessed and re-anchored in the historical relations of global and national governance.[279]

It is this capacious space of queer critique, rooted in “historical emergencies” as well as the “political terrain for… politics of identity, kinship, and belonging,”[280] that informs this chapter. This chapter makes an intervention into queer theory and Vietnamese diaspora/critical refugee studies to grapple with the question of how to radically, queerly “inherit” a *difficult* life. In asking the question of a future after (large-scale) trauma, this chapter reminds scholars of queer theory to take seriously the lives and creativity of displaced people and urges critical refugee scholarship to rethink inherited trauma beyond naturalized designations of generational legacy. Queer

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[277] Suran, 470.
[278] Kissack, ““Freaking Fag Revolutionaries: New York’s Gay Liberation Front, 1969–1971,” 113. Kissack noted that “few activists—and among them almost no men—rallied to the cause of gay liberation. Some radical feminists
such as Ti Grace-Atkinson did support the struggles of lesbians. Surprisingly, given the attitude of most Black Panther Party spokespersons, one of the only movement men to indicate support for gay liberation was Huey Newton, who, in August 1970, released a statement asking Panther Party members to confront their discomfort and hostility to gays and lesbians and to support gay liberation.”
[279] Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz, “What’s Queer about Queer Studies Now?”
[280] Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz.

dis/inheritance, as a mode of materialist strategy and cultural framework, marks a critical shift in how we understand refugee lineage and the possibilities of remembering outside of heteronormative, possessive individualist formations of familial structure. Centering refugee agency, maternal relationships, intergenerational memory, this chapter points out the paradox between inheritance and dispossession beyond masculinist discourses of gains and losses, forwarding an intricate understanding of queer(ing) legacy.

Engaging with the "refugee repertoire"[281] of Vietnamese American refugees and refugee descendants' artistic productions, I highlight a critical queer refugee consciousness, which centers refugeehood as "an enduring creative force... connec[ting] past, present, and future forms of displacement."[282] The art forms I analyze—written and spoken word, interactive art, experimental film—allow audiences and spectators to self-reflect, become witnesses, participants, and at times, subjects implicated in the narratives' critique. These artworks graft together a refugee lineage revealed through feminine affect and senses, enabling the living connection with the past to be (re)imagined, performed, and transformed toward a queer notion of healing—contributing to and extending what Yến Lê Espiritu and Lan Duong (2018) consider "feminist refugee epistemology."

The rest of this chapter maps how the artists imagine and carve new tempo-spatial realms for refugee futures. The first section looks at Trinh Mai's installation "That We Should Be Heirs" to contour what I consider refugees' abject form of dispossession and inheritance. The second section reads how the short experiment film *Nước (Water/Homeland)* of queer writer-director Quyên Nguyễn-Lê—starring a real-life refugee mother and her queer child—enacts a queer temporality for refugee lineage. Together, the works' refusal to make refugee experiences into

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[281] Bui, "The Refugee Repertoire."
[282] Nguyen, "Refugeetude." 11.

something knowable—through preserving the silence and protecting the unknown, speculating history and merging past-present-future into a sensory lineage—demonstrates what I call a queer dis/inheritance framework.

"That We Should (Have) Be(en) Heirs"

The Ethics of Remembrance

The central piece of Trinh Mai's 2019 installation is entitled "That We Should Be Heirs," sharing its name with the entire exhibition of seven mixed-media, interactive artworks. Commenting on our current immigration crisis, the project seeks to "redress the inherited anxiety, hurt, and uncertainty" that comes from family history, "...sensed and absorbed, becoming part of who we are in a slow and silent process" and find collective strength to "confront our own personal conflicts and fears."[283] In a vast white space, egg-shaped holes are punched into the wall. Some contained tiny paper scrolls bound tightly with red strings, laid under heavy rocks, stuffed with cotton and other debris. Others were sewn shut with strings dipped in water from the Pacific Ocean. The scrolls were a mixture of family letters and letters contributed by volunteers and workshop participants, buried in pockets. Trinh Mai asked audiences to write down our fears and secrets for the vaults and feel those that were sewn shut— "open wounds" with scars—in hopes that the skin-to-skin touches between human hands and the materials would create visible chemical reaction that change the piece, further and further alternating it into afterlives.

[283] Trinh, "Call to Participants."

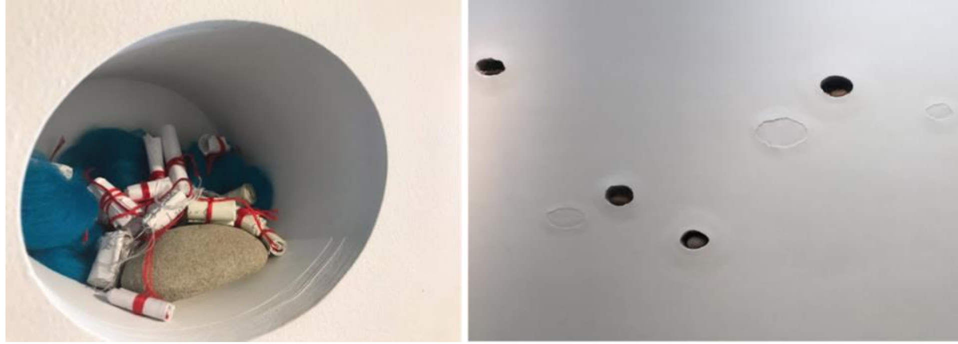

Figure 3.1: Left: Close up of one of the vaults as showcased at University of Washington. Photo courtesy of Linh Thủy Nguyễn. Right: Photo of exhibition taken by author at the San Diego Art Institute, March 2019.

This section examines Trinh Mai's art piece as a form of abject inheritance—an honoring of refugee silence that calls attention to the dispossession endured by Vietnam War refugees. I take up what Marianne Hirsch calls postmemory[284]—trauma transmitted across generations—to think about how the generation after reckons with an inheritance so ethereal, affective, fractured and deemed as non-valuable. While many scholars have engaged with the term, Bui highlights Hirsch's concern for "postmemory's performative regime,"[285] or the complicated desire of Vietnamese refugee descendants to make sense of their transferred damage via spectators' eyes to navigate cultural citizenship and belonging. Here, I argue that Trinh Mai's piece holds space for silence and secrets, reconfiguring the afterlife of war into a process of collaboration and transformation amongst both insiders and outsiders to the refugee experiences.

In one of the vaults was Trinh Mai's late grandmother's collection of letters to family left in Vietnam after the war. The letters were collected in the two decades following 1975, each filled with stories of hardship and sorrow that her grandmother wished to keep hidden. She begged her grandmother to let her keep these letters, vowing never to read them. Even after her grandmother

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[284] Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory."
[285] Bui, "The Refugee Repertoire," 113–15.

had passed away, she did not open the letters, regardless of how they "have all the answers"—to family secrets, to belonging, to displacement, to the thing descendants were "protected" from knowing by the older generation. The unknowability of refugee experiences that her grandmother wished for, this way, was a sustained silence, an abjection that Trinh Mai inherited. This silence marks the fraught space in-between knowing and feeling, sensing and becoming, showing its full "capacity to index structures of power, violence, and identity."[286]

Writing and exchanging letters, or epistolary, Marguerite Nguyen notes, is an early postwar form of diasporic Vietnamese culture, constructing an agentive, private conversation with formal structure outside of the hegemonic governance.[287] Refugees writing and sending letters across camps, for her, is a "conceptual and material act that forges connections"[288] after displacement, a reimagination of agency and authorship that Vietnamese refugees engage in. Sending letters to the homeland, Trinh Mai's grandmother, like many other refugees, maps a forged mobility that traces geographies across multiple sites outside what was imagined to be the confined spaces for Vietnamese refugees—the camp, the ethnic enclave, the scattered addresses across the country to avoid "burdening" the nation.[289] The stories she told over the years, in Vietnamese, with loved ones were simply hers to keep, the truths that refuse to be circulated into Refugee Narratives with a capital N—guided confessions interpellated for the public, institutions, organizations, nations, those that made decisions about who refugees are and what they could be. Her protected privacy, even to her descendants, quietly but powerfully challenges the regime of truth production through

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[286] Espiritu and Duong, "Feminist Refugee Epistemology."
[287] Nguyen, *America's Vietnam*, 139–40.
[288] Nguyen, 140.
[289] Bankston and Zhou, "Involuntary Migration, Context of Reception, and Social Mobility."

confession[290]—what Foucault posits as the most prevalent and powerful form of subject formation and knowledge production in Western society.

When historian Saidiya Hartman found her maternal great-great-grandmother in the Yale library archive, she was joyous until reading the slave testimony recorded: her great-great-grandmother said she remembered "not a thing" about slavery. Hartman was crushed but understood the implication. Amongst other devastating questions on "the impossibility of recovery" and unamenable "melancholy" this silence unearthed, Hartman would mourn this predestined loss, the "ruin" that was her sole inheritance. But one stood out in its hopeful nature: "Did my great-great-grandmother believe that forgetting provided the possibility of a new life?"[291] Speaking then to a white interviewer in Dixie in the age of Jim Crow, Hartman's ancestor defiantly foreclosed the possibility that her sufferings become known and circulated in spaces she could not control. She denied a public viewing, interpretation, and future hauntings of her stories; in moments like this, we are invited to think about the ethics of bearing witness and what our roles are, as (non)descendants, relational subjects, or spectators towards "the pain of others."[292]

In instances of trauma inflicted by state terror as such, or in the case of the Holocaust, the Middle Passage, Japanese internment camps, and the Vietnam War, silence has been theorized as a host of survival tactics, colored by the survivors' and their descendants' paradoxical fear between knowing and forgetting, retraumatizing and healing. Here, I read Trinh Mai's art of silence differently. In her artistic articulation, silence is not a haunted space: it speaks loudly in its form, with a shape, a face, and many, many memories—memories to be kept anonymous, inaudible, to honor a refugee woman's integrity. She offers audiences nothing: not descriptive testimonies,

[290] Foucault and Hurley, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1, Volume 1,*.
[291] Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*.
[292] Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

suffering images, or tragic lessons. Her refusal to comply with the public hunger for marginalized people's trauma does not allow audiences to be spectator, to know, to gain insights from, or to appropriate her grandmother's secrets. She heeds Hirsch's questions of ethical memory: can we "carry [refugees'] stories forward without appropriating them, without unduly calling attention to ourselves, and without, in turn, having our own stories displaced by them?"[293] She asks, can we hold and acknowledge a silence in its shape, can we remember refugees without demanding their trauma to be split open, testified, exhibited, to be consumed in our search for a common sympathy? What are other forms of remembrance beyond recording, writing down, visualizing catastrophe?

These are the questions that the feminist working group Women Mobilizing Memory were asking when they set out to develop scholarship and artistic work based in solidarity across sites of violence, to respond to past and ongoing challenges against the rise of right-wing populism all over the world, particularly in Turkey and in the U.S. In the summer of 2015, the conflict between Turkish government and the Kurdistan Workers' party broke out again. The Turkish Army's renewal of military operations led to devastating losses for civilians residing in Kurdish cities, city demolished, people disappeared. The information through media was scarce and unreliable. The feminist collective reached out to five art students from the Fine Arts program at Mardin Artuklu University for their testimonies about the onslaught they endured. The students sent back five blank pages and a handwritten note:

> We are sending you a blank page as our testimony. We were invited to send visual and written material instead. As we were debating how to contribute without being objectified, you asked us to send a scanned page ASAP. You are in a hurry but we have an emergency. Our testimony is five blank A4 pages.[294]

[293] Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," 104.
[294] The note was signed with their names as followed: Elif Kaya, Leyla Demir, Zeynep Öztap, Zarife Bitim, Nejbir Erkol

American documentary photographer Susan Meiselas and diasporic Turkish curator Işın Önol write in their reflection: "Can we read between the lines, when there are no lines?"[295] The artists' stunning "refusal to communicate in pregiven registers," as the collective contemplates, calls attention to the "failure if even the most well-intentioned at transnational solidarity."[296]

The artists' caution against the burden of authorized representation and visibility (read: "objectified") here shares Trinh Mai's ethics of representation that avoids racialized/gendered depiction of war victims as consumable spectacles. In her previous work, she sought to address the "hidden, overt injuries," "the joy and survival practices…in the domain of the everyday."[297] A praxis of feminist refugee epistemology, her arts address how "private grief and public trauma"[298] intersect through the incorporation of found objects and debris and letter writing as a medium. These materials center the quotidian life of refugees, instigating "the unspectacular(ized)" to reclaim privacy as "a gendered space expressive of ...refugee-making practices" (590). At the exhibition, Trinh Mai's call for audiences' participation to interact with the artwork expands the scope of refugee memory to include our current devastating immigration crisis. As audiences reckon their present with refugees' "past," the fault lines that divide historical periodization become unsettled. Trinh Mai's reconfiguration of temporality transforms refugees' private grief into a critical site to acknowledge war's ongoing impact, allowing audiences to emerge in a subjectless, experiential "mode of relationality" that Vinh Nguyen calls "refugeetude," to grapple with how our interpersonal lives are also shaped by "a global refugee regime that continually produces, manages… forced migration."[299]

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[295] Altınay, *Women Mobilizing Memory*, 540.
[296] Altınay, 44.
[297] Espiritu and Duong, "Feminist Refugee Epistemology," 588.
[298] Espiritu and Duong, 588.
[299] Nguyen, "Refugeetude," 112.

Abject Dispossession

The installation illuminates refugees' abject dispossession, a disavowed 'out-of-place' and untimely condition of existence wherein refugees become unprotected "bare life."[300] Rupturing the sensational depictions of refugee woundedness, Trinh Mai's gestures toward the unknown made visible *loss* (and by extension, *recovery*) as a signifier of refugee's (in)humanity. Historically, the loss of political endowments from nation-states, of spatial orientation through uncharted waters and landscapes, of social and cultural claims to personhood accumulatively define refugees as "figures of lack."[301] Refugees are considered "losses" to a global political economy burdened with counterbalancing the costs of rescue. The humanitarian model, by regarding refugees as monetary costs, precluded refugeehood as a "constitutive element" of capitalist modernity. This nascent but domineering framework and structure made refugee conditions unthinkable beyond a temporary irregularity and a resolvable crisis.

Abject dispossession also points toward the long history of U.S. race wars at home and abroad, which predetermines "lacking" as a perpetual condition for many populations. In U.S.' colonial-imperial domination of Asia, Vietnamese and other colonized peoples were always lacking—humanity, democracy, modernity, ability to self-govern. Recall the Operation Passage to Freedom (chapter 1), long before the "boat people" crisis, northern Vietnamese refugees going South in search of religious freedom in 1954 had allowed for American interventionism. Mass poverty caused by social upheavals and ecological destruction drove the poor to flee, to voluntarily renounce their humanity in exchange for a glimpse of survival hope. This refugee-inducing regime also obliged asylum-seekers to plead their cases through traumatic confessions and politicized

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[300] Agamben, *Sovereign Power and Bare Life*.
[301] Nguyen, "Refugeetude," 113.

narratives—discourses exacerbating American exceptionalism. To appear legible to nation-states and humanitarian courts, many refugees mobilize the pervasive discourse about them as inherently lacking, utterly damaged people.

For women, who acutely experience the burdens of war differently from masculine soldiers and political prisoners, abject dispossession erases the particularities (marriage status, class background, education, etc.) surrounding the course of their refugee identities. As loss is presumed to encapsulate the refugee condition, it takes on a masculine order, rendering gendered experiences of refugeehood as marginalized and exceptional to the universal trajectory. Enduring the multiple levels of gendered violence embedded in patriarchal structures of war, revolution, reeducation, surveillance, borders, camps, asylum procedures, refugee women's experiences escape the regime of knowability and the legal framework. As such, the deeply feminine nature of abject dispossession rejects being defined, fixated, and named in terms of national and institutional forms of memory and inclusion.

Recovery is almost impossible: refugeehood persists in other forms of institutionalized "lacking." Disposable jobs, racialized ghettos, imposed criminalization are rampant realities for resettled refugees.[302] Vinh Nguyen noted the impossibility of refugees' domestication, arguing that the racialized economic structures of the U.S. are incommensurable to refugee survival. The only available path for the dispossessed—becoming capitalist workers and (re)settlers—is meant to exhaust any possibilities of imagining justice beyond disavowal.[303] The abject dispossession of refugee, then, becomes a part of how the racialized, gendered, displaced body is implicated into the making of U.S. capital. Near the end of her talk, Trinh Mai displayed a piece of cotton from

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[302] Tang, *Unsettled*.
[303] Nguyen, "Refugeetude."

the vault, handpicked from a field where her father-in-law worked for many years alongside Mexican farmworkers upon arrival in America. In the previous life, he was a high-ranking official in the South Vietnam army, imprisoned in a reeducation camp before escaping as a land refugee. By the time he made it to America, he no longer had things to pass on. He landed manual jobs just to provide for his family of five, who all lived together in an apartment with another family of six.

The story Trinh Mai told perhaps served mostly as a context, an ephemera shared only in the moment. And yet, it demonstrates the double-meaning of the installation: *that we should (have) be(en) heirs*. On the one hand, she renounces the rescue narrative that erases refugees' ongoing material losses, making visible the conditions in which refugeehood was made human-less, property-less, and future-less: As refugees made to run away from faraway war-torn nations, *anything* is better than their past. Surviving, in whatever conditions, means being indebted to an abstracted freedom that they continually pay for generations to come. As they lose, they must remember they could have lost *more*. And yet, in refusing to succumb to the narrative of loss and recovery, and by inviting exhibition viewers, volunteers, and other workshop participants in the different places that her exhibit travels, "That We Should Be Heirs" produces new ways to express refugee experiences, conceiving a queer possibility of inheritance in the way communities come together to silently and privately honor refugee legacy. "Mobilizing memory," to revoke the field of feminist memory work again, here allows Trinh Mai to "build solidarity, embracing unknowing, accepting failure," to "invite *proximate and distant* others into the affective experiences"[304] of her refugee grandmother. Her legacy lives on in the minds of others, connected to their own reflections

[304] Altınay, *Women Mobilizing Memory*, 32.

on private trauma and political knowledge around immigration and refugee issues, allowing a shared resonant history.[305]

Transitioning from this queer form of remembering refugee dispossession enacted through war and displacement, I move to a queer articulation of refugee inheritance as outside of the material/reproductive logic of patriarchal property. In the next section, I provide a close reading of *Nước (Water/Homeland),* a short film by queer writer-director Quyên Nguyễn-Lê to work toward a concept of "queer refugee lineage" that delineates the interrupted futures of refugees and engenders a reconfiguration of queer time as both embodying and emptying-out warring past.

Queer Futures of Interrupted Past

Nước (Water/Homeland) is a 6-minute film that explores the intersection of being queer and a refugee descendant. The film title draws on the poetic meaning of the word "nước" in Vietnamese, meaning both "water" and "country/homeland," a familiar rumination in Vietnamese art. In it, Nguyễn-Lê asks: "How do you talk about trauma when you don't even speak the same language anymore?" This feeling of quiet alienation haunts viewers throughout the film, right from the first scene in a darkroom where a moment of playful flirtation between two queer teenagers and questions about the accepting refugee-mother quickly becomes a gut-wrenching reflection of war and intergenerational trauma. This surreal, experimental narrative fiction re-deploys iconic Vietnam War photography—Nguyễn Văn Lém's execution, the "Napalm-girl" Phan Thị Kim Phúc, carnations-on-gun-barrels Flower Power, and pictures of Vietnamese boat people crisis—not only as the "grisly spectacle of violence as an object lesson on American militarism"[306] but also as

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[305] Tang, "A Gulf Unites Us."
[306] Phu, "Diasporic Vietnamese Family Photographs, Orphan Images, and the Art of Recollection."

spatiotemporal wormholes/ time-traveling sites through which the protagonist bears witness to their mother's refugee history. Evoking a historical reality that operates within the psyche and the affect, *Nước (Water/Homeland)* is a sort of magical realism that patches together multiple timelines, traverses through various sites, spaces, and bodies to make a stream of consciousness seamlessly running through multiple iterations of history. Most strikingly, through the maternal body, Nguyễn-Lê presents a practice of history-writing that renders temporality through the mother-refugee's reproductive force, reconstructing a queer refugee future beyond unbecoming.

Knowing Mother

In the first scene, viewers are introduced to the mother-refugee through an intimate interaction between two queer teenagers in a darkroom, where the protagonist's lover breaks the moment by making a joke about the mother "watching" them. The following question about who the mother is—beyond a gaze in a picture—prompts the genderqueer protagonist to confess that they did not know much about their mother's story. "This is my mom," the gender-ambiguous protagonist murmurs, as viewers encounter a close-up of the mother's face upside down, reflection from a foot spa basin that quickly becomes dissipated when a customer puts her feet in.

In this bit of memory-scape, Nguyễn-Lê walks us through a lifetime of heartbreaks, as the mother-refugee, with her back against us, lowers her head to tend to the customer's feet in her lap. The imagery is symbolically telling, beyond Vietnamese refugee women's common sociality in the nail industry—itself a marker of complex class/social status within Vietnamese refugee communities—to make us wonder *what came before*. If *this* is the world the protagonist' mother occupies now, *what world did the mother leave behind?* Laden with confusion and re-memory, viewers follow the protagonist's mind, jumping from one realm to another, mixing between the

anamnesis and the real. The film's surreal style feels like a paper boat floating on water, yet sternly anchors to the heavy questions of unspoken loss. We then arrive at a private space, a kitchen table, to witness a mother-child conversation as they quietly eat porridge together. The mother, in deep thoughts, shares an anecdote about the porridge they were eating and a childhood memory with her own mother, and our protagonist takes it as a sign to ask about the past. "*Mẹ*, do you ever miss Vietnam?" they ask, to which she answers in Vietnamese, "Of course, but if I had stayed, I never would have had you, like I do today."

Scene changes. We are dropped back into the darkroom; the love interest breaks the memory lane: "Dude, Vietnam was such mistake." The response comes from guilt and liberal goodwill, evoking a prominent sentiment that transforms how America remembers the war, from a "good war" to a grave mishandling of power. The protagonist immediately snaps: "Vietnam is a country, not a war… We weren't there, … don't idealize the war." The lines directly quote award-winning Vietnamese American novelist lê thị diễm thúy, encapsulating the feeling widely expressed amongst cultural producers, artists, and scholars who protest the U.S. public's memory of Vietnam as solely an American tragedy. Sharing the sentiment, Nguyễn-Lê also comments on a feeling that goes beyond being forgotten: a deep loneliness when other radical queer people of color fail to recognize the complexities of the Vietnam War beyond race and the left-right binary. An introduction of a refugee woman, a mother, quickly turns into the liberal discourse of the war—something that precedes both of their existence yet litters their consciousness with fragments of repetitive, empty narratives. "Don't idealize the war" is the line of the protagonist, yet, as we shall see, they too have no ideas about the war.

In all previous chapters, I have discussed the polemic erasure of Vietnamese political subjectivities in the larger society, and to a certain extent, in the American Left. Here, *Nước*

(Water/Homeland)'s poignant commentary on the love interest's inability to perceive the humanity of the refugee mother-nail salon worker without evoking her presumed victimhood, points to the liberal guilt undergirding the U.S. Left's view of refugees—then, victims of oppressive, "puppet" U.S.-backed regimes, now, victim of capitalism. The Leftist imaginary, informed by remnants of revolutionary politics, still posits Vietnamese people in two extremes: on one spectrum, Vietnamese are victimized by U.S. superpower, and on the other, they heroically defeated U.S. imperialism. This ideological struggle for a cohesive narrative on U.S. role as a global superpower was the Cold War in Asia brought back home. The arrival of refugees in the U.S. after 1975 disrupted the bipartisan politics of "liberalism" and "conservatism," making visible the limits of the nation-state, as Vietnamese refugees entered a process of contradictory racialization that simultaneously hypervisiblized them as rescued subjects—reaffirming the U.S. as benevolent saviors—and invisiblized them into the pan-Asian "model minorities"—submissive, hardworking Asians striving to be a part of the laissez faire market. This twisted process, in a different context, reminds us of Japanese Americans whose post-internment economic success turned them into the exceptional model for meritocracy and an obstacle to be overcome by white America.

Similarly, Vietnamese refugees pose problems and solutions for the nation-state: their isolated, exceptionalized traumas must be disappeared through collective efforts in the U.S. melting pot. Through the reconfiguration of Vietnamese refugees into good immigrants, the U.S. rises again as the epitome of liberal democracy. Trapped in this double bind of hypervisibility and erasure, many Vietnamese refugees became invested in visibility and representation, especially through hyper-militaristic patriotic demonstration to maneuver their complicated status as political agents and grateful refugees. Mimi Thi Nguyen explored how Vietnamese women also participated in this manner: Alongside South Vietnamese soldiers, they performed the role of hyper-patriotic

benefactors of freedom who appreciate and, in the case of "Napalm girl" Phan Thị Kim Phúc, forgive America.

The mother-refugee in *Nước (Water/Homeland)* shows a different image of refugee subjectivity that quietly pushes back. As she silently eats porridge in the kitchen with her child one rainy day, sharing with them a favorite childhood memory about her own mother, she said in Vietnamese: "When I was young, whenever I'm sick, your grandmother would make me porridge." The protagonist—as many diasporic children who understand colloquial language but unable to speak the mother tongue—asks if she "ever missed Vietnam." The mother's answer, ("Of course, but if I had stayed, I never would have had you, like I do today"), was simple, and matter-of-fact. This answer reminds us of a line in Ocean Vuong's poem "Notebook Fragments," "Thus I exist. Thus no bombs = no family = no me" (70), a powerful assertion of a life born out of violence but persevere regardless. It is through this answer that Nguyễn-Lê marks out a queer lineage of refugee women: the mother's recognition that this lifetime is only one of many possible paths, suspended or otherwise, allows a future to start with a displacement without forever being lost. Refugee future, as such, is not ensured through capitalist success story or an inherited bloodline, but rather enacting a sensory connection patched with favorite memories of mother's special homemade food for rare occasions, passed down as an invitation to include her children's queerness. In the final scene, we would reenter this conversation, to witness Mother telling her queer child to "invite your friend next time I make porridge," a gesture that we can read as ambivalent recognition and acceptance of a queer lineage.

In Nguyễn-Lê's vision, the kitchen table is the private site from which history comes into being. Drawn from the familiar way many (immigrant/refugee) descendants learned about family history, the scene portrays one of those fleeting moments, around the dinner table, where children

of refugees would learn fragments of the past, a memory that they sometimes cannot dwell on. Here, Nguyễn-Lê's articulation of a queer refugee lineage is haunting/haunted by the omnipresent questions of trauma, manifested in the common diasporic reality of lost language, and a poignant critique of representational politics, casting doubt on the effect of traumatic testimonies and visualization. It asks: what language does trauma speak? Like Trinh Mai's agony over her grandmother's secret, how do descendants find out family history through silence? Unable to hear from their mother, the protagonist finds answer elsewhere—they fall into a dreamscape of alternative pasts, inserting themselves into each iconic war photo—not as object defined or contained by it (exploded headshot, burned naked child-body, abstract victims saved from turning gun to flower), but alternating as a witness-turned-perpetrator-turned-victim, an embodiment of Vietnamese split subjectivities.

Knowing History

The "exceptional confusion" that Marguerite Nguyen speaks of—Vietnamese's dismembered bodies and its function to obscure violence[307]—was visualized here: in a series of fast-paced transitional vignettes, the protagonist finds themselves sucked into the photos hanging in the darkroom. The replication of the Flower Power photo turns live; our protagonist stands amongst protesters in the 1967 March to Pentagon protests, watching their lover enacting activist George Harris sticking carnations in police's gun barrels drawn at protesters. Police brutality ensues, the gun shots through to the next frame, a transition that link U.S. domestic unrest to the war in Vietnam. The protagonist is now holding the gun, being both the South Vietnamese general Nguyễn Ngọc Loan and the Viet Cong prisoner Nguyễn Văn Lém being shot at, a visualization for

[307] Nguyen, *America's Vietnam*.

Nixon's Vietnamization. The protagonist jumps the civilian side, becomes photographer Nick Út as he captures the Pulitzer winning picture of the Napalm girl. This time, instead of reproducing the image of a child's bare, burnt body, Nguyễn-Lê made Nick Út the centered object from the girl's point of view. As he takes a picture, viewers become the captured subject. The sequence made visible the multiple gazes imposed upon the image of traumatic war victim and other complex subjectivity that cannot be made public. On the one hand, outsiders and witnesses from afar relying on the photographer's definitive lens, and viewers' perpetual gazes making up the defining power of photographic evidence in the course of history. On the other hand, the insiders' private memories like one of Nguyễn Văn Lém and "Napalm girl" Phan Thị Kim Phúc became irrelevant the moment they ceased to be iconic. As the photographer—posed as an object of the camera under viewer's collective gaze—takes a picture at us, we became aware of the interconnected relationship between being and viewing: we are those "who weren't there" but "idealize the war," look what we've done. The protagonist, after all the violence, becomes trapped in a womb, cannot speak, only feel—a symbol for subject formation under all too powerful historical discourses and structures of governance.

The use of iconic photograph and embodiment of split subjectivities here accelerates the Vietnamese American critiques of the visual archive of extreme violence that has structured American consciousness about the Vietnam War. [308] The scene delineates, to borrow Thy Phu's words, "the struggle to piece together incomplete stories told by images, many of which were defaced, discarded, or destroyed."[309] Without another image of their own mother, short for family

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[308] Chong, *The Oriental Obscene*; Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*; Phu, "Diasporic Vietnamese Family Photographs, Orphan Images, and the Art of Recollection."
[309] Phu, "Diasporic Vietnamese Family Photographs, Orphan Images, and the Art of Recollection." The "defaced, discarded, or destroyed" here signify a different history of visual violence: after

history, the protagonist traverses through what Marita Sturken, drawing from Freud, calls "screen memories"[310] of the Vietnam War, something that both eludes (screens out) and serves as a screen for the projection of private and collective pasts. This artistic move perhaps shares a similar sentiment with mixed-media visual artist Dinh Q. Le, who became critically acclaimed for his photomontage series, *From Hollywood to Vietnam*.[311] In it, the artist weaved purchased batches of anonymous Vietnamese civilians' photographs from second-hand stores in Vietnam together with famous Vietnam War images from Hollywood film and iconic photographs into large scale grass-mat, a traditional and intimate object of Vietnamese daily life. Using a traditional weaving technique, he literally splinters the American "screen memories" of the Vietnam War with Vietnamese redacted presence.

Nguyen-Le's protagonist, in literally switching bodies from one Vietnamese subject to another, learns the historical pain viscerally, all the while seeking to empty it out, transforming it, reauthorizing it to reclaim dignity and agency. As viewers, we don't see the protagonist occupying the Napalm girl's body, only the moment that photo was taken. The ethics of remembrance is evoked once again: how to portray a violent memory that extrapolates unspeakable violence in a way that does not freeze them, repeatedly, into a single picture frame? Nguyen-Le sought to unfreeze this moment instead, having the viewers being captured, effectively rewire the spectators outside of our relationship with viewing. How do we *know* things without viewing? Does the knowledge of the event remain the same when another image plays out on top of what we learned as truth through screen memory? Dinh Q. Le once shares his creative approach:

1975, most Southerners had to burn their own family photos to avoid evidence of collaboration with Americans or the Saigon regimes.

[310] Sturken, "The Wall, the Screen, and the Image."

[311] Lê, Miles, and Roth, *Dinh Q. Lê*.

> I do not want only to remember the victims at the most horrific moment of their lives. What were their lives like before they were taken from them, and what would they be like today if they had not died? What gives them hope, keeps their dreams and happiness? ... These are the memories that have been completely forgotten, and these are the memories I want people to start remembering.[312]

History through the Maternal Body: Refugee Future Work through a Queer Lineage

In "Dark Room Readings: Scenes of Maternal Photography," Elissa Marder provides a reading of Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, Freud, and Proust that ensembles a practice of reading and writing to delineate the maternal function of photography. One of the observations about Barthes' photo-writing is that he "presents a theory of History as a temporal field constituted by his (implicitly partly unconscious) relationship to the time that his mother was alive before him—that is, the time before his own conception and birth."[313] *Camera Lucida,* to a large extent, is Barthes' mourning the death of his mother through writing. At one point, he wrote about his encounter with a picture of his mother as a young child and *recognize* her even when such recognition is impossible. The picture of a child, that which precedes both his mother and his birth, is illegible in a linear, historical time, emerges as "an uncanny scene of '*déjà vu,'*... the photographic recurrence of that which was never seen before… a photographic maternal bear[ing] witness to an un-photographable event."[314]

I borrow Madder's reading of Barthes's private memories to read a scene in *Nước (Water/Homeland)* where the protagonist becomes a fetus. Their time-travel journey into the past, like "an impossible witness to unknowable event[s]"[315] through each iconic war photograph

[312] Le, Interview with Shoshana Wayne Gallery. https://vernissage.tv/2006/09/12/dinh-q-le-the-imaginary-country-shoshana-wayne-gallery-los-angeles-interview-part-22/
[313] Madder, "Dark Room Readings: Scenes of Maternal Photography," 249.
[314] Madder, 244.
[315] Madder, 244.

moments, lands them inside the mother's womb, "the 'utopian time' of a past before birth"[316]—an existence that is yet to come, fraught with anxiety and potentials. The refugee maternal body, here, is a site of history in the making, on the one hand, a "waiting room" of sort (to appropriate the notion of "waiting room of history").[317] Inside the womb, our protagonist struggles from their ties to the umbilical cord that simultaneously connects and constrains them into a genealogy yet to exist. In an extreme close-up of their face, we see a projection of the famous scene in Full Metal Jacket, accompanied by a distorted voice "me so horny, me so horny me love you long time."[318] Another iconic image, this time from Hollywood film—the infamous and fictionalized Saigon prostitute, reincarnation of Miss Saigon and Madame Butterfly, standing-in for Orientalist (hetero)sexual desire—is etched onto the future queer body. This imperial sexualization that precedes the protagonist, also racialized them as an Asian/American-born body; this is the danger of subject formation, this is what has been imposed onto their mother, and will await them.

The refugee maternal body here, against the reductionism of Edelman's "reproductive futurism," reflects more than a biological function of reproduction. To reiterate the mother's own words: "If I had stayed, I never would have had you, like I do today"—her becoming a mother despite the abject dispossession of refugees is a radical site to create futures after displacement. When the protagonist rips off the umbilical cord, they fall back into darkness, away from the nail-salon mother's lingering, piercing gaze. We see their mother at the nail salon scene again, turning around and looking straight at the protagonist—past them—to us, breaking the fourth wall. The silent subject becomes a see-r: like Gayatri Spivak's musing of the subaltern who unsettles Western

[316] Madder, 243.
[317] Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.
[318] Kubrick, *Full Metal Jacket*.

formula of subject formation, her unspeakablity, un-representablity[319] does not negate a consciousness; she watches us watching her all along.

When the protagonist opens their eyes, they see their mother attentively clean them up with a towel while looking at them with kind eyes and slightly nodding. The two were on a lone boat; the vast landscape around them, a dry desert. And then it rains. Throughout the overlapping of imagined realities and unvocalized understanding beyond language, none utters a sound. The protagonist has just traveled through imagined and speculative histories, to arrive here, at what must have been the silence inside their mother's memory—a quiet landscape that holds all the sound of unspeakable heartbreaks that is not passed down verbally, only felt through a connection between mother and child: the desert—the soil, a graveyard for all the boat people who did not make it to land. The "absence of water"—*mất nước*, in Vietnamese means "nation lost."

Figure 3.2: Mother and child on a boat in a desert. Courtesy of Quyen Nguyễn-Lê.

Throughout the film, this is the most important scene that depicts war trauma, displacement, and loss beyond words, a place the queer refugee descendant returns to/ arrives at through their simultaneous embodiment and rejection of iconic war memory. But then it rains. And

[319] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

water/homeland comes back in a different form, as the mother and child look toward the sky in an ambiguous emotion, toward an uncertain future. The film ends with viewers brought back to the kitchen, as the mother told her child that they can bring their girlfriend next time, signaling a queer reconfiguration of refugee temporality that will continue to exist in future memories and a life they share together, beyond bloodline.

Conclusion

In envisioning a potential queer radical politics that could attend to refugee futures, this chapter shows the various affective strategies of aesthetics and ethics of remembrance amongst refugee descendants. The artists and writers I examine differentially navigate "the things refugees carry" with special commitment to feminized concerns about gender, sexuality, and affects—intricate matters likely to be overlooked and sometimes unnamable. Situating refugee sociality through maternal relationships and women's history, this chapter contributes to feminist discourses on postmemory and the gendered legacy of the dispossessed—namely, refugee (women) and their lines of descendants. Their unknown histories, which refused to be displaced by public consumption, informed how Ocean Vuong, Chysanthemum Tran, Trinh Mai, and Quyên Nguyễn-Lê navigate war traumas and transnational dispossession while tacitly challenging corrective representation. Analyzing their work, this chapter proposes queer dis/inheritance and refugee future work as a critical framework to articulate their enactments of refugee future—tending to the hurt and the trauma, imagining a healing, but also rejecting damaging traditions./

A version of chapter 3 has been published as an article entitled "Queer Dis/Inheritance and Refugee Futures" in *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 48, no. 1–2, pp 218–35, 2020. The dissertation author was the sole author of this material.

Epilogue: Revolutionary Shuffle: Speculative Imaginary and the Future with Refugees

I conclude *Revolutionary Returns* by theorizing refugee radicalism as speculative world-building to continue the theme of *critical refugee imaginative/refugee future work* gestured toward in the last chapter. Throughout my dissertation, the Vietnamese American political actors I study have consistently worked with a deep commitment toward a just future. They have protested and fought against violent temporalities enacted under empire—imperialist wars and its overwhelming legacies that continue to shatter communities beyond their own—with an unwavering hope that a better future is there, and that a revolution can be waged, time and again, one better than the last. I turn to speculative fiction to show how Vietnamese radicalism locates the refugee experiences in this quest for the future: a vision for justice beyond their own "national family," a refusal to turn wars into a private historical past, recuperable through official recognition and masculinist memory work. Refugees are not just victims of past wars, or a normalized "state of exception" looming over humanity as we witness the surging military conflicts old and new; they also lend critical lessons to understand new problematics of military violence and to challenge the limited solutions offered by nation-states.

Abolitionist thinker and writer Walidah Imarisha, contemplating the foreseeable destructive future, poignantly asserts that "changes will occur that we cannot even begin to imagine, and the next generation will be both utterly familiar and wholly alien to their parents."[320] This assertion invites responses from a Vietnamese radical perspective, which offers speculative imaginaries of dark future centering refugee past. As my chapters delineate, Vietnamese diasporic radicalism is rooted in people's commitment to study the erased histories around their parents, to learn the historical lessons that their parents could not, and to carve new paths large enough to

[320] Imarisha, *Octavia's Brood, 10*.

hold the multiple truths destined to conflict with one another. In the sections that follow, I offer a reading of the short sci-fi story "Revolution Shuffle" by Bao Phi, an acclaimed Vietnamese refugee poet and life-long community organizer in Minneapolis. He was invited as a first-time speculative fiction writer to contribute to *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movement.* Edited by Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown, this anthology is the first of its kind to examine the affinity between radical speculative fiction and movements for social change.

The activist and the artist, Imarisha and brown notes, "seem at first to have been engaged in markedly different lifework, yet they embraced a share dream for the future."[321] The work of social justice, the poet-activist editors remind us, to fight for a world without war, without violence, without prisons, or capitalism, is engaging in speculative fiction. Trung, my interlocutor in the last chapter, on why she returned to Vietnam to learn about socialist society and its limits, explained: "Of course I know capitalism is so messed up, but I didn't know any models, any other models, to think about how to dream, even!"[322] For her, then, the journey seemingly to perhaps an equally messed-up past, is to find a new way to move forward, a new way to dream. For the Vietnamese artists, filmmakers, poets, writers whose work I engage with, their return to a traumatized past, if only to "empty it out, let it drift," they are doing so to let new meaning emerge and new forms of imagination come into being. Vietnamese radicalism, as it must stand from collective trauma, could draw from and offer insights to speculative fiction, transforming the lessons that refugees and their descendants bear with their bodies into critical imaginaries for future work. Imarisha urges us,

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[321] Imarisha, 8.
[322] Interview with Trung, December 2017.

> Art and culture themselves are time-traveling, planes of existence where the past, present, and future shift seamlessly in and out. And for those of us from communities with historic collective trauma, we must understand that each of us is already science fiction walking around on two legs. Our ancestors dreamed us up and then bent reality to create us. For adrienne and myself, as two Black women, we think of our ancestors in chains dreaming about a day when their children's children's children would be free. They had no reason to believe this was likely, but together they dreamed of freedom, and they brought us into being. We are responsible for interpreting their regrets and realizing their imaginings.

It is in this same vision that Bao Phi's "Revolution Shuffle," I argue, offers a refugee speculative imaginary toward freedom. Refugee speculative imaginary delimits the normative frameworks—humanitarianism, militarism, liberalism—that posits refugee condition as traumatized and subjectless victims to be saved, to be recovered, to be rehabilitated into a functioning society, and resituate refugee conditions as central to mechanism of power—both destructive and resistant. In the story, Bao Phi extrapolated refugee condition to symbolize a dystopian absolution for the domestic racial crisis of the U.S. empire, and a sui generis knowledge that prepare Vietnamese American activists to fight against the seemingly impossible. If the refugee condition, following critical refugee studies scholarship, is produced by large-scale destruction but recuperated to obscure its imperialist origins, its manufactured helplessness used to justify the vast militarism, then in the future, refugee speculative imaginary suggests, such condition will be enacted not only against foreign countries, but normalized and built into the mechanism of discipline, carcerality, and forced labor in domestic America. In the past, we witnessed the racial governing in the U.S. informing the violence enacted against foreign countries, then in Bao Phi's speculation, the refugee condition will be central to the futuristic racial governing following the militant fascism and overt white supremacism—conditions that we are now confronted with the Trump administration.

On the other hand, to the Vietnamese American radicals, the refugee condition is its ungovernable political subjecthood (chapter 1), incommensurable political lessons (chapter 2), and regenerative embodied knowledges (chapter 3). It is what Thi Bui calls "refugee reflex"[323]—skills of survival borne out of experiencing destruction, dislocation, incarceration, and the ability to carve out hope of freedom amidst all. This incredible force of resilience, as Eric Tang discusses in a different context, comes from the historical lessons of Vietnamese refugees' multiple displacements, and the intergenerational and cross-racial organizing work by Vietnamese American activists. The successful ecological campaign to rehabilitate East New Orlean post-Katrina, for example, came from such generative refugee knowledges, combined with its resonance (and openness) to Black New Orleanians who share a history of fighting institutionalized abandonment.[324] In the colonial spatial-temporal configuration of progress and development, or the racial logic that mark non-Europeans as obsolete, savages, pre-historic, (something Anne McClintock has called "panoptical time"[325] and Mark Rifkin has termed "settler time[326]"), refugees are reduced into anachronistic "bare life." Against such notions, refugee speculative imaginary anchors refugee memory and knowledges in refugee futurity—passed down, picked up, and utilized as a critical framework for resistance. Refugee knowledge that enables Vietnamese radicalism, then, joins other radical genealogies of ancestral knowledge to offer tools for the "dismantling of the master's house," rather than to uphold white nationalist empire.

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[323] Bui, *The Best We Could Do*.
[324] Tang, "A Gulf Unites Us."
[325] McClintock, *Imperial Leather*.
[326] Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time*.

In "Revolution Shuffle," two unnamed Vietnamese American revolutionaries schemed and collaborated on a mission to free prisoners-doubled-as-forced laborers from an internment camp. In this apocalyptic world that was imagined before the COVID-19 epidemic and revival of anti-Asian racism yet eerily resembles our current state, reality took a much darker turn: seventy percent of the American (white) population turned into zombies without explanation, destroying the country's infrastructure and throwing America into another racial capitalist crisis. As the surviving population regrouped on the East Coast, the solution was to built new giant devices housed in fortified complexes in the middle of America to draw zombies away from the coasts. The challenge: there needs to be a population to operate and maintain the giant machines, double as flesh baits for zombies. The solution: citizens of Asian and Arab descents, who became targets of racist mobs after the government classified the epidemic "as a terrorist act, without evidence"[327] and blamed it on China, North Korea, and the Middle East. Swiftly interned in camps "for their own protection,"[328] Asian and Arab Americans lost their properties, citizenship, and incarcerated without trials in work camps. Enforcing this ambiguous race-based policy are the police and military, deputized armed civilians, and new private military contractors, who also threw Pacific Islanders, Native Americans, Chicanos, and Black people resisting the orders into the camps. In less than two years, people have learned not to speak out, while new camps emerged, "thumping and belching smoke, crawling with the undead outside and the living entombed within."[329]

Bao Phi's extrapolation of the empire's apocalyptic crisis (and solution) in the story draws from a long history of capitalist wars, militarist ventures, and racist policies under the name of national security: Japanese internment, 9/11 and the War on Terror, the creation of the Department

[327] Imarisha, *Octavia's Brood*, 14.
[328] Imarisha, 14.
[329] Imarisha, 15.

of Homeland Security and the Patriot Act[330]—heightened militarized solutions enacted as solutions to a crisis that was both uncontrollable and foreseeable. The zombie apocalypse here marked a crisis of "bioterrorism," unmanageable to the racial state because because of its capacity to indiscriminately affect human bodies pervading the socially constructed prevention systems based on race and class privileges. As feminist scholars Stephanie Kane and Pauline Greenhill note, as the state of exception becomes the norm, it resulted in the militarization of public health and the loss of human rights protections—trading "basic democratic liberties for untenable and perverse illusions of safety and control."[331] In the story, the U.S. government mobilizes the militarized responses oftentimes reserved for "foreign" populations, combined with the carceral state's long-standing treatment of Black chattel subjects[332] as a solution for the new social order under bioterrorism: an interned/internal refugee condition. Turning citizens into essentially stateless people under the guise of saving them from insurgents, confining them inside extralegal camps, the U.S. government in Bao Phi's story has mobilized the blueprint of what Yen Le Espiritu termed militarized refuge(es) to absolve its great failures. Militarized refuge(es) refers to the U.S. empire's mutually co-constitutive project of militarism-as-humanitarianism, which absorbs the refugees it produces as evidences for its exceptionalism. Just as the U.S. empire and its preferred national body recast the imperialist, catastrophic Vietnam War as a tragedy for white soldiers, the zombie apocalypse was treated as a problem for white citizens while Asian and Arabs became scapegoated

[330] The USA PATRIOT Act was passed by the U.S. Congress after 9/11, which increased the government powers to obtain information about citizens without warrants or notification; Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act (USA PATRIOT Act), Public Law 107-56, 115 Stat. 272 (October 26, 2001
[331] Kane and Greenhill, "A Feminist Perspective on Bioterror."
[332] Childs, *Slaves of the State*.

as an ensemble of enemy-terrorist-political prisoner-forced laborers, all refugeed inside the newly erected work camps.

The refugee condition, per Giorgio Agamben, is marked by the ontology of the work camps, born out of a state of exception and martial law, interconnected by racism, colonialism, and biopolitics—"management technology best suited to the production of naked life."[333] Naked life, or bare life, following Judith Butler, is "a condition to which all human beings can be reducible through a suspension of their ontological status as subjects."[334] In Phi's story, the woman character laments the compromised position of the interned and their perceived lack of political agency:

> Try as she might, she couldn't blame the prisoners. She had met a couple of activists who could not understand why the incarcerated were so, to their eyes, submissive. Obedient. But she knew that the truth was complicated. *If not the camps, where could they go*?[335]

For these activists, the interned were regarded as an oppressed people, but intact in their capacity to resist or organize against their inhumane conditions. This line of thinking, Bao Phi suggests, shows that these activists still function within a liberal framework of citizenship's rights—able to negotiate with powers as a part of the social contract between citizenry subjects and the state that governs them. They failed to realize that the people in the camp were no longer protected by any nation-states, or that the U.S. nation-state is no longer bound by its logic of liberal democracy. In other words, their frame of reference for political activism could not quite break out of the nation-state framework, one that was no longer compatible with the landscape of apocalyptic America; or more accurately, one that was never adequate historically to deal with war refugees. As an alternative to such framework, Bao Phi draws from the historical knowledge about

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[333] Ek, "Giorgio Agamben and the Spatialities of the Camp: An Introduction," 368.
[334] Ek, 368.
[335] Imarisha, *Octavia's Brood*, 15.

refugeehood of the two characters, both established as Vietnamese Americans since the beginning of the story—through familiar signifiers of Vietnameseness to unassuming readers like phở and nail salon:

> A week ago, many miles from where they stood, they had sat at a campfire splitting a cup of instant ramen with some strips of beef jerky thrown in. White trash phở, they called it. This was when she told him her plan. The light of the fire flickered high in the canopy of trees above as she watched him carefully to see his reaction.
>
> "For the ones that follow us, where do we take them?"[336]

It is in this conversation that Bao Phi sketches out the internal statelessness of the new refugee condition, mapped through a new American racial landscape, now divided into white occupied regions, remnants of multicultural America, and a hodgepodge of Native territories: a new nation-state of Texas in the South in conflict with Mexico; an occupied North occupied by white hunters and survivalist; a racially mixed East Coast region, protected inside a wall; an Alaska that is "the largest American territory completely free of the epidemic, faraway when the epidemic hit;"[337] a closed-off Hawai'i from those in proximity with zombies; and indigenous territories of New Aztland and the other united Native folks in the Southwest, potentially sympathetic but "got their hands full shoring up against raiders and zombies."[338]

> She paused for a moment. "Maybe they'd let in one or two of us. But an entire group of Asian and Arab refugees recently busted out of a federal labor camp? They'd probably get threatened with drone bombing for agreeing to help any of us."[339]

As all options were closing in, the man reluctantly asked about the possibility of an original return: "How about back to the homeland? Somewhere in Asia?"[340] to which the woman "laughed,

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[336] Imarisha, 15.
[337] Imarisha, *Octavia's Brood*, 16.
[338] Imarisha, 16.
[339] Ibid.
[340] Imarisha, *Octavia's Brood*, 16.

long and hard."[341] In this dystopian future, where statelessness is derived from within the racial line, returning to the original homeland seems like a self-deportation. The "homeland," in this situation, was not the place one was dislocated from; as such, the project of returning does not quite hold a political and sentimental meaning for repatriates. If anything, it is an escape to nowhere.

The two Vietnamese American radicals quietly contemplate the refugees' place in the world that had made them one, not once dwelling on the undue victimization or unbelievable injustice, entirely focused on strategies to break free. As descendants of Vietnamese refugees, they must have learned the historical lesson of their people' tragic unbecoming and the limited response strategies that no longer work—performing gratitude, loyalty, and refugee exceptionalism does not appeal to a nation without conscience about the violence it wages, and aligning with rightwing white nationalists is not feasible. Above all, they must have remembered the Vietnamese refugee's utmost desire for *self-determination*, something many of them were willing to go to war for, like the readiness of those who lay low in the midst of some Thailand jungles for a chance to take back their country, or the motivation of those in New Orleans to rebuild their wrecked homes against the government's intentional negligence and the neoliberal restructuring of their neighborhoods into an industrial wasteland.[342] The woman character offers her solution: The middle of America, "infested with zombies," the most dangerous place in the world." In this place that "no one wanted to be," they both see a potential homeland that they could build—not as settlers but as community builders who would reclaim their own place against the ruling small warlords, the thug fiefdoms, "the remains of the Minutemen and other batshit-crazy racist militias."[343]

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[341] Imarisha, 16.
[342] Tang, "A Gulf Unites Us."
[343] Bao Phi, "Revolution Shuffle."

In Bao Phi's refugee speculative imaginary, refugees' self-determination is in tandem with Indigenous self-determination—the latter seemingly achieved in the possibility that the epidemic posed, something the former could aspire to, an aspiration for solidarity of some sorts. Evident in the story's narrative is the acknowledgment and recognition of Native territories—Alaska, Hawai'i, the Southwest—as sovereigns achieved through years in the struggle, a potential route that the characters seem to insist that refugees must explore. As refugees, confined in forced camps, no longer physically and figuratively occupy the positions of (re)settlers on Native land, and land becomes inhabitable beyond the settler state's governance, what are the structures for grievances and reparation? Against the emerging concerns about Asian/American settlers of Hawai'i and the absolutions of white settler colonialism through the presence of refugees as complicit settlers,[344] Bao Phi sketches out an imaginative, but illuminating, set of material conditions that contextualize non-settler ethics to land ownership, as well as the future of land itself. Bao Phi draws this contemplation about refugee-settler-indigenous from his real-life political and cultural work. He reflects on his experience as a refugee living in Minneapolis and the contested politics of home:

> …I think about home, and homeland. And what does that mean as a Vietnamese refugee in a space filled with mostly Native Americans... I will never be from here. Native Americans had the land taken away from them, and we are living on it – *here* is stolen from them. I don't have an answer. I can just name it as honestly as possible.
>
> The places we are forced from, the place is forced upon us. The poems we sing too late but that we desperately need, still.[345]

Bao Phi's poetry has been recognized as a form of activism that expands the scope of Asian American radicalism with his focus on the multi-ethnic groups of Southeast Asian, Himalayan,

[344] Le, *Unsettled Solidarities*; Gandhi, "Historicizing the Transpacific Settler Colonial Condition."
[345] Phi, "SHORE: Minneapolis ESSAY by Bao Phi."

Tibetan, and Arab Americans.[346] His capacious concept of "refugeography," the experiental and spatial geography embedded in refugee experience, as Vinh Nguyen muses, charts through the racial landscape of the U.S. to name the political concerns that he insists are central to refugeehood, from racialization, police brutality, anti-Asian racism, to imperialism, foreign wars, and forced migration.[347] In "Revolution Shuffle," again, we see this powerful assertion of refugee radical subjectivity into the future of American politics, "one that begins with the figure of the refugee"[348] and beyond. Only this time, refugee radical subjectivity, in contrast to Nguyen's suggestion, "ends there," in the refugee condition, which was made of sufferings but unleashed tremendous power. It ends t/here like a full circle: in the fight toward freedom and liberation for people subjected to bare life, Vietnamese American radicals would charge into the uncertain future with all the historical memory and knowledges about Vietnamese modes of resistance: the revolutionaries, the subversives, the repatriates, the insurgents, the refugees, the soldiers, the activists—all who have stood against impossible power, fought, and won, and lost, and persevered. As the final sentences read: "Then they strode down the hill together, rifles in hand, straight for the prison camp. Toward a war that just might turn into something like a revolution,"[349] readers are left hopeful at the possibilities of a future for and with refugees. In this way, Bao Phi's speculative imaginary of the refugee condition in this story illustrates Agamben's proclamation that the refugee is "the sole category in which it is possible today to perceive the forms and limits of a political community to come."[350] Bao Phi's refugee future work, as such, sings to us the poems we desperately need, just in time.

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[346] Greg Choy, quoted in Nguyen, "Refugeography in 'Post-Racial' America." p. 180
[347] Nguyen.
[348] Nguyen, 157.
[349] Bao Phi, "Revolution Shuffle."
[350] Agamben, quoted in Nguyen, "Refugeography in 'Post-Racial' America," p. 172.

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