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Le, Tieu-Khe

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“The line between life and death in the high seas is very thin, almost invisible”:
Diasporic Vietnamese Remembrance

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of
the requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Asian American Studies

by

Tiêu-Khê Lê

2015

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2015

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

“The line between life and death in the high seas is very thin, almost invisible”:
Diasporic Vietnamese Remembrance

By

Tiêu-Khê Lê

Master of Arts in Asian American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2015

Professor Thu-huong Nguyen-vo, Chair

This project investigates the ways in which Vietnamese American modes of remembering support, unsettle, resist, refuse, and/or shape dominant western narratives that consolidate the Vietnam War, and the Vietnamese diaspora, into a single story of a masculine, militaristic, heteropatriarchial, and completed struggle between North and U.S.-backed South Vietnam. The first section explores how the design, construction, and everyday interactions with two Vietnam War monuments in Orange County, California’s Little Saigon intervenes in the two monuments’ attempts at consolidating western empire with Vietnamese bodily representation. The second section examines An-My Le’s photography series, *Small Wars*, which centers on how circulation of media footage and film shape western narrative of the Vietnam War. Queer readings, theories of heterotopic space, ethnography, landscape theory, and transhistoricism are some guiding frameworks to this thesis.

The Thesis of Tieu-Khe Le is approved.

Victor Bascara

Kyungwon Hong

Thu-huong Nguyen-vo, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2015

DEDICATION

to anyone who has found themselves lost at sea.

for giving me a beginning, always and forever—to my family.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	
I. Introduction	1
II. “Mister, I’ll Make a Man Out of You”: Memory, Monuments, and Masculinity	11
III. Seeing is Believing: Photography and Film in the Vietnam War Narrative	33
IV. Conclusion	53
V. Works Cited	55

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I. Introduction: “The line between life and death in the high seas is very thin, almost invisible”¹

When I was 24 years old, my father told me that while he was in Saigon, he worked as a photographer for the Associated Press. He was in his early 20s. As a result of childhood polio, one of his legs grew in shorter than his other, and he was therefore unable to fight in battle. As a photojournalist he wore combat gear, as close as he could get to being a soldier. He claims to have been there, next to Nick Ut, during the napalm attack that made his friend famous—he took similar photos, he said, but his angle just wasn’t good enough. According to him, the Associated Press paid him more if he could capture a photo of a Viet Cong soldier and a South Vietnamese in one frame—up to \$100 USD. His job post ended in the early morning of April 28, 1975, when he and his newspaper friends pooled money together to bribe the captain of a small boat to sail to Malaysia. They were caught by U.S. marines and sent to Guam. There, soldiers confiscated his belongings, which included his camera and several rolls of film. He never saw his equipment again.

I have no reason to distrust my dad’s account of his experiences in Vietnam, despite his predilection for exaggeration that contributed to my anxiety as a child. It is hard for me to imagine what it must have been like to live in a constant state of war— although I live at a time in which the U.S. wages war abroad and at home. When I press my dad for specifics about what I have wanted to know, about his childhood in Quang Nam, the boat journey itself, or his friends and community in Saigon, he is reluctant to satiate my curiosity. My mother can grow downright

¹ Deepa Bharath, “Memorial to Boat People Who Died to Be Dedicated Saturday.” *The Orange County*

The quote is from the aforementioned article; Rosemead, California doctor Song Hong Le says it. Le’s remark that there was little distinction between life and death speaks to many themes in this thesis, especially in regards to invisibilized memories and temporal looping.

hostile at my questions. “Why do you want to know about how much I’ve suffered?” she has asked me more than once. I have often wondered what those last rolls of film, taken by U.S. soldiers, would have told me if we had them today, and if that could help me to feel whole.

It is with a childhood saturated in silence and a continued effort to grapple with the reverberations of war trauma across time and space that I come to write this paper. Orange County, Little Saigon, has been a site for so much community building and economic stability for my parents and a place of so much shame for me. I felt a sense of embarrassment when trying to convince my dad that it was not legal to set fire to books in front of Truong Van Tran’s Hitek store,² which was shut down amid protests for his display of Ho Chi Minh’s portrait back in 1999, and chagrin when I could not succinctly describe what my parents did for a living. I write this as a practice to re-think my own notions of memory, community, resistance, and mourning—all of which, I have come to realize, were static in my understanding of them.

In Vietnamese, the word *nho* translates into “remember,” but it also means, “to miss.” The phrase, “I miss you,” then, describes a feeling of loss, but also the act that replaces this absence. “Because you are not here, all I can do is remember you.” My research is premised on the multiple ways in which the Vietnam War is historicized and narrated across nationalist projects, with a special interest in exploring the complex relationship between and departures of personal and collective memories for and by members of the Vietnamese American community that make a consolidated history of the Vietnam War impossible. How has Orange County, Little Saigon’s community navigated collective memory that support, unsettle, resist, refuse, and/or shape dominant western narratives of the Vietnam War? How does the demand for physical and

² See Mai Tran, “Book-Burning Scheduled in Little Saigon,” *Los Angeles Times*, 28 April 2000 <<http://articles.latimes.com/2000/apr/28/local/me-24341>>. My father is cited as a coordinator of this book-burning event.

ontological fixity produce erasures, and how can these places of erasure be a space for simultaneous and multiple possibilities? The purpose of this project is to intervene in continual attempts to fix the war, and the Vietnamese diaspora, into a single story that narrates a masculine, militaristic, heteropatriarchal, and completed struggle between North and U.S.-backed South Vietnam.

Methodology

Because this project strives to look at modes of healing and remembrance beyond western knowledge productions that favor visibility as knowability, I choose to utilize a cultural studies framework to nuance and unsettle the ways in which the Vietnamese American community, and the Vietnam War, have been understood by western media. “‘Mister, I’ll Make a Man Out of You’: Memory, Monuments, and Masculinity” is a close reading of the construction, design, and spatio-temporal location of two monuments in Orange County’s Little Saigon as a means of considering the Vietnamese American community beyond the dichotomy of anti-communist/communist sympathizers, which in the end western media writes between the lines of other binaristic modes of understanding; for example, conservative/liberal, first/second generation, etc.

The two monuments, the Vietnam War Memorial and the Boat People Monument, are two commemorations that include or even center the Vietnamese body as a part of the recuperative process post-Vietnam War. On the one hand, these monuments seem to be a mere repetition of older Vietnam War monuments but with the addition of a Vietnamese body, thus appearing to speak to U.S. empire’s rescripting of the Vietnam War as a success story in order to perpetuate its efforts to expand and build. However, close readings of both monuments using

queer theory and theories on space and time reveal how this attempt at consolidation of the Vietnamese diasporic experience into the single story of a justified and ended war is not possible. Beyond disproving any one story of the Vietnam War, I hope to also begin to think of how personal engagement with public narrative allow for multiple narratives to occur concurrently across time and space.

The next chapter, “Seeing is Believing: Photography and Film in the Vietnam War Narrative,” continues this effort of manifold possibilities and temporalities by closely analyzing a collection of photos by An-My Le called *Small Wars*. Through landscape, representation, re-enactment, and documentarian form, Le questions how she came to understand the Vietnam War through western media coverage and war films versus her own lived experience as a child in Vietnam, again, looking to how personal engagement with public space disrupts collective narrative. Through this collection, Le hopes to think through the past, present, and future of war, and does so by accessing her own memories, following Vietnam War re-enactors, and visiting the site of preparations for the Iraq War. By selecting photos from each of the three series that comprise the collection, I hope to further demonstrate other ways of thinking about Vietnam War commemoration, and how different modes of remembrance enfold the personal with the collective.

Literature Review

This paper also endeavors to extend the conversation beyond the binaristic depiction of the diasporic Vietnamese population as either anti-Communist or Communist sympathizers. In recent years, Vietnamese Americans have made newspaper headlines, mostly associated with anti-Communist protests. “Passions of Vietnam War Are Revived in Little Saigon,” a 1999 *New*

York Times article reads, describing a “normally sleepy” community turning out in droves to protest a Ho Chi Minh poster hung in a strip mall shop.³ In 2009, Vietnamese American protestors once again made headlines for defacing and causing the closure of an art exhibit that contained Communist symbols.⁴ Most recently, Vietnamese Americans have been of particular interest to Orange County newspapers after Garden Grove voters elected liberal politician Bao Nguyen as mayor in 2015, a gradual move up that happened as his city “kept living up to its Garbage Grove nickname.”⁵ Many scholars attempt to nuance Orange County’s Vietnamese American community, often doing so from a policy-oriented, quantitative approach.⁶ *Vietnamese in Orange County*, co-edited by Tram Le, Linda Trinh Vo, and Thuy Vo Dang, attempts to de-homogenize the Vietnamese American community in Orange County by looking at Vietnamese in Orange County who arrived before 1975, as well as breaking down the differing lines of ethnic, religious, and ideological backgrounds.⁷ Their work centers on Vietnamese Americans themselves, a perspective I take into account for this paper.

In order to deepen my understanding of the Vietnamese American community, I look to Purnima Mankekar, whose *Unsettling India* engages with the ways in which affect, temporality, and transnationalism circulate to create an understanding of India and what she calls

³ Don Terry, “Passions of Vietnam War Are Revived in Little Saigon,” *New York Times*, 11 February 1999 <<http://www.nytimes.com/1999/02/11/us/passions-of-vietnam-war-are-revived-in-little-saigon.html>>.

⁴ Louis Sahagun and My-Thuan Tran, “Vietnamese Americans protest art exhibit in Santa Ana,” *Los Angeles Times*, 18 January 2009 <<http://articles.latimes.com/2009/jan/18/local/me-vietart18>>.

⁵ Gustavo Arellano, “Bao Nguyen Is Garden Grove’s History-Making Mayor in More Ways Than His Ethnicity,” *OC Weekly*, 25 November 2004

<http://blogs.ocweekly.com/navelgazing/2014/11/bao_nguyen_garden_grove_mayor_little_saigon.php>.

⁶ See Nhu-Ngọc T. Ông and David S. Meyer, “Protest and Political Incorporation: Vietnamese American Protests in Orange County, California, 1975–2001,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 3, no. 1 (2008), 78-107.

⁷ Thuy Vo Dang, Linda Trinh Võ, and Trâm Lê. *Vietnamese in Orange County*. Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2015.

“Indianness.” Inspired by her endeavors to trouble how communities are defined and understood as fixed identities, I apply Mankekar’s concept of “unsettling” as an epistemological shifting from diaspora and displacement as “intrinsically out of place because they belong elsewhere” and “authentically located” in a “proper place.”⁸ Unsettling has been essential to this project as I think through the many moving facets of the Vietnamese/American experience.

Many scholars have been interested in the formation of the Little Saigon community in Orange County. Most of the literature looks at the voting and business practices of Vietnamese Americans in relation to retaining a sense of “homeland,” but Linda Trinh Vo’s “Constructing a Vietnamese American Community” and Christian Collet and Hiroko Furuya’s “Enclave, Place, Or Nation?” are useful in thinking of the Vietnamese American community beyond policy and identity politics. The authors track the circulating and intersecting elements that led to the formation of Little Saigon, which spans parts of Garden Grove, Westminster, and Santa Ana. The authors of these texts look to dispelling the notion that the community is homogenous, Vo noting that different structural resources, socioeconomic status, and perception of Vietnamese Americans as a “model minority” aided in allowing the community to form with relatively few setbacks.⁹ Furuya and Collet’s essay explore the formation of Little Saigon as a confluence of transnational business interest and diasporic recuperation of space in the aftermath of loss of “homeland.” The first chapter continues this trajectory of thinking of the diasporic Vietnamese community in terms of healing and recovery. Both texts are useful in thinking through how a confluence and exchange of ideas and politics shape the Vietnamese American community, and

⁸ Purnima Mankekar, *Unsettling India: Affect, Temporality, Transnationality*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015) 29.

⁹ See Linda Trinh Võ, “Constructing a Vietnamese American Community: Economic and Political Transformation in Little Saigon, Orange County.” *Amerasia Journal* 34.3 (2008): 84-109.

help inform the practice of thinking about the Vietnamese American community beyond the limitations of Cold War politics.

The Vietnam War has been extremely well documented by U.S. media, and while the saturation of photos and footage gives the Vietnam War an appearance of accuracy and unlimited access to the public, I center on how these images are produced, framed, and circulated. Part of this circulation and access informs the films of the '80s and early '90s, many of which were made by or informed by white men who were on the ground in Vietnam as soldiers or journalists.¹⁰

Ann Laura Stoler and Michel-Rolph Trouillot propose alternative ways of looking at epistemology and the archive. Rather than looking to the archive as a *source* of knowledge, both look at the archive as a process of knowledge production. Stoler and Trouillot investigate how the “colonial order of things” affects the way viewers approach the archive, and that a turn to archive-as-process rather than archive-as-source reflects a politics of knowledge. Indeed, Mary Louise Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes* approaches knowledge production in a similar way, arguing that scientific observation and “natural history” produce the conditions of colonization and ownership, and contribute to an overdeterminance of visibility.

Frank Proschan’s scholarship engages in French colonization in Southeast Asia in his work, focusing specifically on how the French empire sought to discipline the Vietnamese body first by enforcing gender norms, and also by constructing deviance. I engage with the works of Stoler, Trouillot, Proschan, and Pratt in my brief analysis of postcards distributed by the French which contained photos from French Indochina, which often featured photographs of the Indochinese, to talk about masculinist ways of remembering and visualizing the Vietnam War. I

¹⁰ For example, characters from *Apocalypse Now* and *Full Metal Jacket* are based on war correspondent Michael Herr’s accounts in *Dispatches*.

continue to use these texts as a framework in thinking about documentary, media, and film in relation to the war in relation to An My Le's photographs, which appear to be documentary images but are in fact re-enactments and representations that draw attention to western perceptions of war memory and expectations of Vietnam War images.

Close readings of two Vietnam War monuments, both located in Westminister, California, help to elucidate the ways I am looking at space, place, and memory. Marita Sturken's *Tangled Memories* explores the ways in which Washington, D.C.'s Vietnam Veterans Memorial shapes cultural memory of the Vietnam War, looking deeply into how memorials are sites of historical contestation and formation. Yen Le Espiritu's *Body Counts* examines through a crucial refugee studies lens the relationship between U.S. empire and the shaping of Vietnamese American identities. The fourth chapter has been particularly formative to the framework of this project, as Espiritu "critically juxtapose[s] private loss with public commemoration" to rethink diasporic Vietnamese commemorations as "critical disruptions to the hegemonic American discourse on the war and its refugees" rather than a mere replication of these discourses.¹¹ Espiritu also examines the significance of the design and construction of monuments in Vietnamese American communities across the nation, including the Vietnam War Memorial in Westminister. She also looks to the public and private remembrances of her uncle, Colonel Ho Ngoc Can, and her aunt's desire to separate his death from recuperation for collective loss and ARVN veterans' invocations of his image and memory to "gain postwar public recognition."¹² Pursuing Espiritu's studies on how monuments and memories are mediated by contested collective and private memories of the Vietnam War from within and outside of the Vietnamese diasporic community,

¹¹ Yen Le Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014.) 137.

¹² *Ibid*, 136-7.

I look to theories of space and queerness to think about the monuments and the community beyond the “American Dream” loving, “good refugee” narrative.

Hegemonic narratives about the Vietnam War depends on linear temporality that places the past as “pre-modern” and “backward,” an idea Walter Benjamin articulates in *Illuminations*. Yen Le Espiritu applies Benjamin’s ideas to think of historical narratives mapping places such as Vietnam as “pre-modern” to contrast with and bolster the image of the U.S. as a land of modernity. In both *Body Counts* and the essay “*We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose Syndrome*,” Espiritu explains that the “good refugee” narrative supports this temporal paradigm because the diasporic Vietnamese subject is assumed to have been saved by the West, and brought to the U.S. to achieve the American Dream. Indeed, the representations of figures in both the Boat People memorial and the Vietnamese War Memorial, which highly depend on visual representations of suffering and militarism, respectively, seem to corroborate these claims. To think how the diasporic subject navigates space and time in non-linear paradigms, I look to Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau, who write extensively about political significance of moving within space. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau refers to “tactics,” everyday practices of resistance. Lefebvre surmises in *The Production of Space* that subjects must navigate and organize themselves within the sanctioned parameters of the nation-state, which creates spaces to manage and define subjects. As I observe the ways in which the Vietnamese American community interacts and maneuvers around the two monuments, de Certeau and Lefebvre will provide a way to look at how these everyday actions serve to resist and unsettle dominant understanding of the Vietnam War as an ended struggle of (white) good versus Communist evil.

Elizabethada Wright’s work advances theories of heterotopic space put forth by Michel Foucault by considering and centering race and memory. Wright’s essay, “Rhetorical Spaces in

Memorial Places,” considers the cemetery as a heterotopic location wherein forgotten memories are able to thrive, change, and move. This essay will guide my analysis on the Boat People Memorial’s location within the Westminster Memorial Cemetery, a particular place that allows for Vietnam War memories to exist outside of a linear temporal framework, and for a multitude of different memory-practices to occur without disturbance from media or protest.

Likewise to the cemetery as a heterotopic space, An My Le’s *Small Wars* enlists the landscape as a location to engage with spaces of meaning and non-meaning. I place Wright’s argument in conversation with Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes* and John Zarobell’s *Empire of Landscape*, which discuss how landscapes are constructed as neutral spaces in order to justify the colonization of those spaces. With the help of Damian Sutton’s *Cinema, Photography, and Memory*, I analyze how Le’s photos utilize the landscape to expose the ways in which the viewer (which includes herself) infuses meaning and expectation onto the image of the landscape. Lastly, because Le reveals the landscape to be only a representation of Vietnam, Le looks to the possibilities of landscape to be the site of multiple representations, meanings, memories, and narratives.

My analysis of the Vietnam War Memorial, which is located across from Westminster’s city hall, utilizes queer theories that specifically unsettle the ways in which historical memory and nationalisms related to the Vietnam War are gendered and heteronormative. I place in conversation Frank Proschan’s essays on French colonial control over the Vietnamese body through the construction and regulation of gender and Sergio De La Mora’s *Cinemachismo*, which looks at Mexican film from 1950 to 2004, deconstructing representations of masculinity and sexuality through modes of Munoz’s theory of disidentification. With the ideas brought to the fore by De La Mora, Proschan, and Munoz, I think about the possibilities of narrative and

memory that depart from the hegemonic narratives which seek to further discipline heteronormative and masculinist understandings through Vietnam War history-telling.

I hope that through these two chapters, I continue to nuance the ways in which the diasporic Vietnamese in Orange County's Little Saigon community is understood, and to continue the work of scholars who are interested in de-homogenizing the group of people who locate themselves there. Additionally, I practice ways in which memory can hold multitudes of complexities, accounts, and narratives.

II. "Mister, I'll Make a Man Out of You"¹³: Memory, Monuments, and Masculinity

After years of contestation over funding, location, and design, the city of Westminster finally revealed the Vietnam War Memorial sculpture to the public in April 2003. The bronze sculpture is situated in Sid Goldstein Freedom Park, at the end of a street called "All American Way," facing Westminster's city hall and police department. The sculpture is of two elevated, larger-than-life soldiers wearing fatigues and helmets, facing away from each other and looking into the distance. One soldier stands in front of a U.S. flag. He carries his helmet in one hand, and his rifle in the other. The shorter soldier, standing in front of the South Vietnamese flag, still bears his helmet. He slings his rifle behind his shoulder as if still poised to fight. Artist Tuan Nguyen says that this contrast in stance is deliberate. "I tried to show that for the American the

¹³ Lyric from the 1998 Disney movie *Mulan*, a film set in ancient imperial China, about a Chinese woman of marriageable age who pretends to be a man to take her father's place in war. Disney goes through great visual endeavors to animate an *un*queer, hypermasculine Asian male body (through the troop leader Shang). The film is rife with queer possibilities, but is also a film about imperialism and war—themes that are central to this chapter.

war is ending and he's ready to [leave], but for the South Vietnamese the war is still going on," he told the *LA Times* in 2003.¹⁴



Figure 1. Vietnam War Memorial in Westminster. Photo by Joshua Sudock.¹⁵

The location of one of the densest diasporic Vietnamese populations, Orange County's Little Saigon is a confluence of national and transnational politics. Hiroko Furuya and Christian Collet study the formation of Orange County's Little Saigon in their essay, "Enclave, Place, or Nation?" in which they describe it as "connected to two strands of history—one in Vietnam, the other in the United States—shaped 'from above' by the dynamics of geopolitics and global economics."¹⁶ This popular portrayal of Little Saigon often limits the view of the Vietnamese American community—and the Vietnamese diaspora in general—as lacking agency. However,

¹⁴ Vivian LeTran. "Vietnam War Memorial Stirs Memories." *Los Angeles Times*, 28 Apr. 2003. Web. 28 Apr. 2015.

¹⁵ Joshua Sudock. Digital image of Vietnam War Memorial in Westminster, CA. *OCRegister* <<http://www.ocreger.com/articles/vietnam-691435-veterans-war.html>>.

¹⁶ Christian Collet and Hiroko Furuya. "Enclave, Place, or Nation? Defining Little Saigon in the Midst of Incorporation, Transnationalism, and Long Distance Activism." *Amerasia Journal* 36.3 (2010): 1-27.

Furuya and Collet not only reveal the socioeconomic factors that led to the designation and naming of the business district, but they also begin to engage the national and transnational political implications (and replications) of its existence. The March 2009 Vietnamese American-led campaign to recall San Jose councilmember Madison Nguyen “for not supporting Little Saigon as the name of a proposed business district”¹⁷ exposes the significance of “Little Saigon” as a representation of this diasporic community. That “Saigon” no longer exists on any official map also brings to light the restorative importance of the name. This chapter extends this contemplation of Little Saigon as a place of recovery in the face of multiple losses before and after 1975. My research is also a practice in moving the conversation of Orange County’s Vietnamese American community beyond its popular perception as only conservative, aging anti-Communists—but rather as a community that moves, shifts, changes, and navigates its traumas and measures of recuperation in ways that complicate both the Vietnamese American community and the Vietnam War narrative.

Because monuments and memorials are built to honor a past at the very same time they rewrite history,¹⁸ I choose to focus on two monuments built and displayed in Little Saigon to commemorate the Vietnam War. In many ways, the Vietnam War Memorial sculpture, described in the introductory paragraph, as well as the Boat People Memorial sculpture, emerge at a particular moment in U.S. empire-building, both appearing to uphold a western hegemonic narrative that casts the Vietnam War as justified, masculine, militaristic, heteropatriarchal, and finished. They appear to consolidate the Vietnamese diasporic experience into a singular

¹⁷ *Ibid*

¹⁸ Marita Sturken. *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

narrative that upholds U.S. empire and legitimizes continued war, through representations of Vietnamese masculinity mirroring that of white masculinity, as well as representations of the nuclear family; however, a closer and more rigorous look into the conditions under which the Vietnam War Memorial was designed and constructed, and attentiveness to the Boat People Memorial's spatial context within a cemetery, demonstrate the constraints and possibilities of public and private remembrance, reparation, and mourning for Westminister's Vietnamese American community. The goal of these close readings is to reveal the ways in which singular narrative renders impossibilities that in turn produce multiple potentials for ways to rethink war, memory, and recovery. In order to outline singular narrative, I will briefly track the strategies of the French to establish imperial masculinity to justify and perpetuate violence on the Indochinese/Vietnamese body, and then I will make a case for how these methods carry over into the U.S. empire's intervention in Vietnam. I will then move into analysis of the design and spatio-temporal location of the Vietnam War Memorial in order to engage the ways that the statue seems to uphold dominant narrative, the demand for bodily representation in war memory, and the ways in which this monument unsettles them. I conclude this chapter with an analysis of the Boat People Memorial, looking into the ways in which the cemetery space holds the door for both memorial and Vietnam War memory itself open to multiple and simultaneous possibilities, commemorations, and temporalities.

Imperial Masculinity and the Vietnamese Body

The French colonial empire relied heavily on visibility and the body to stress imperial dominance, asserting white heterosexual masculinity by queering the Vietnamese/Indochinese body as both powerless and threatening. Colonials often sent postcards to friends and loved ones

in France. These mementos often contained photographs of the colony with simple descriptions, such as “opium smokers.”¹⁹ These photographs became a part of the colonial process through which both Indochinese women and men were hypersexualized as deviant or depicted as contained (dead) threats. Several photos display Indochinese men reclining and smoking from pipes, constructing an image of a lazy, unproductive (non-producing) opium-smoker. Others contain photos of public executions; soldiers sent postcards to France containing images of the severed heads of indigenous resisters.²⁰ That the focus of these colonial postcards is the sexual embodiment of the Indochinese, and particularly male, speaks to the French empire’s need to establish power through western constructions of the masculine. Frank Proschan writes on French colonial constructions of Vietnamese genders, arguing that “these competing constructions of Vietnamese sexes/genders and sexualities were typically conceived in opposition to the ‘normal’ sexual and moral order ascribed to civilized Frenchmen” but they also “reflected (or, more often, refracted) and constituted evolving French metropolitan notions of their own sexes/genders and sexualities.”²¹ Thus, French discourse on Vietnamese genders and sexualities also constructed and regulated French genders and sexualities in the empire’s interest in establishing its power abroad. In another essay, Proschan also investigates French colonial discourse of “syphilis, opiomania, and pederasty” during French rule, arguing that the circulation of such rhetoric not only justified colonialism, but that it also had material and violent

¹⁹ “Hanoi Opium Smoker.” *Flickr*. <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/13476480@N07/4402011321/>>.

²⁰ *Vietnam - A Television History*. PBS, 2004.

²¹ Frank Proschan, “Eunuch Mandarins, Soldats Mamzelles, Effeminate Boys, and Graceless Women: French Colonial Constructions of Vietnamese Genders.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 8, no. 4 (2002): 435-467.

consequences for Vietnamese bodies.²² Taken together, Proschan's texts and the photos on postcards point to the native body as a site for asserting control. The endeavors to queer these bodies through sexual and gender regulation points to French anxiety over the loss of western masculinity power. These narratives of hypersexualization, emasculation, and death continue from French colonialism into U.S. militarism in Vietnam after the dissolution of the French empire. Of particular interest for this essay are the portrayals of Vietnamese bodies in film, especially taking into consideration that the films are from the perspectives of combatants and participants trying to make sense of U.S. military failure in Vietnam.

A brief look at a scene in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* shows the parallels between the tropes of the Indochinese male body during the French empire and U.S. military presence.²³ The film is based on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the story of a British sailor named Marlowe who sails along the Congo River in colonial Africa to find Kurtz, a purported prolific exemplary ivory trader. On his voyage, the sailor witnesses violence and chaos and ultimately finds that Kurtz is also violent and morally corrupt. Similarly, *Apocalypse Now* is premised on U.S. Army Captain Benjamin Willard's mission to Southeast Asia to find and capture Kurtz, a colonel in the Special Forces who has abandoned his duties to head a troop of indigenous village people in Cambodia. Thus, Coppola's film applies the lens of European colonialism to engage in a discussion about U.S. imperialism.

One scene from the film most saliently demonstrates this connection between European colonialism and U.S. imperialism. When Willard and his troops finally arrive at Kurtz's camp, they encounter canoes filled with small indigenous bodies, painted white and covered only with

²² Frank Proschan, "'Syphilis, Opiomania, and Pederasty': Colonial Constructions of Vietnamese (And French) Social Diseases." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11.4 (2002): 610-36.

²³ Francis Ford Coppola, *Apocalypse Now*. Omni-Zoetrope, 1979.

loincloths. The soldiers move slowly, unsure of what to do, until suddenly the nameless character played by Dennis Hopper emerges from the crowd of Indochinese on land and commands the Americans to ring their siren. When they do so, the Indochinese men and women scatter in all directions, shifting away from their initial portrayal as threatening. The Americans approach to dock and the man introduces himself as a civilian and photographer. As he shakes the soldiers' hands, a lifeless Indochinese man, hanging from a tree, drifts into the frame. He is wearing a long-sleeved military shirt and nothing else. His body slowly rotates from the rope but finally stops in a frontal shot, drawing attention to his sexual organs—he is dead and desexualized. The image is remarkably similar to the French colonial postcards.

Neda Atanasoski further articulates the connection between Conrad's novel and *Apocalypse Now* as narratives as managing "the fading of certain lifeworlds and the emergence of new ones that had crumbled."²⁴ She continues by saying that "the post-Vietnam ethical dilemma of how to portray the nation's encounter with its own heart of darkness, which played out largely in the realm of visual culture, can be read as an attempt to grapple with questions about how a nation maintains or loses its faith in its own ideals when it encounters their destructive and deadly force."²⁵ Thus, the production and distribution of the highly visual media of film, photographs, and postcards, all serve to manage and mediate the anxieties of imperialism and "post-war" failure.

In the essay, "The 'We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose' Syndrome,'" Yen Le Espiritu tracks mainstream news outlets writing about the end of the Vietnam War twenty-five years after the U.S.-backed South Vietnamese government fell. Espiritu tracks the shift of popular narratives

²⁴ Neda Atanasoski. *Humanitarian Violence: The U.S. Deployment of Diversity*. Difference Incorporated. (University of Minnesota Press, 2013) 76.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

about the Vietnam War through time, starting in the immediate aftermath of the war, when the American public welcomed neither returning American soldier nor incoming refugees into the U.S., and the U.S. public's unpopular opinion of the U.S. government.²⁶ Veterans, the majority of whom were required to fight by law, returned only to be ignored, facing a nation who would rather forget that the Vietnam War ever happened. Espiritu's essay delineates how dominant narrative shifts over time, soon enlisting the very subjects it has ignored in order for the nation-state to regain its strength. In the 1980s, the U.S. looked toward invading the Middle East for economic resources; however, it had to transform the Vietnam War narrative from failure to success by restoring a "lost masculinity" through changing war discourse. Espiritu explains the relationship between masculinity and war narrative:

"The defeat in Vietnam battered U.S. masculinity, signifying, in Melani McAlister's words, 'failure of will, sexual failure, and . . . military failure.' A revitalization of U.S. masculinity thus necessarily involves the recuperation of its veterans' masculinity."²⁷

A brief look at U.S. film productions dealing with the Vietnam War demonstrates these attempts to restore western masculinity in the context of post-military failure. In popular films such as *Apocalypse Now* and *Full Metal Jacket*, Vietnamese women are either faceless villagers (their visages obscured beneath conical hats) or hypervisible as prostitutes. Vietnamese men are similarly anonymous, depicted as expendable replications of one another or as already dead (hanging from trees, bodies strewn across jungle landscapes). Together, the image of the disindividualized and incapable Vietnamese male body and the hypersexualized image of the

²⁶ Yen Le Espiritu. "'The 'We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose' Syndrome: U.S. Press Coverage of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the 'Fall of Saigon,'" *American Quarterly* 58.2 (2006), 329-352.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Vietnamese female body contributes to the overall construction of Vietnam and the Vietnam War as a “journey backward in time to an anachronistic moment of prehistory,”²⁸ restoring imperial masculinity by justifying U.S. military presence there. This dependence on the representations of the body as a restorative mechanism in the aftermath of collective loss will be a useful lens through which to read the Vietnam War Memorial.

Vietnam War Memorial

In a 2002 interview with the Los Angeles Times, Westminster City Councilman Frank Fry, Jr. calls the construction of the Westminster Vietnam War Memorial sculpture a symbol “to unite the Vietnamese and American communities.”²⁹ Indeed, a perfunctory treatment of the Vietnam War Memorial sculpture seems to validate dominant U.S. narrative of the Vietnam War as a justified, masculine, militaristic, heteropatriarchal, and ended story—accessorized with a minor addition of a Vietnamese American body. However, a deeper reading and queer critique exposes how design and bodily representation nuance this singular narrative.

The sculpture’s location in both time and space and visual representations of the male soldiers are integral to understanding how the Vietnamese body has been enlisted to perpetuate western heteropatriarchic hegemony. First, the post-war atmosphere called for the physical representations of active male bodies fighting in war. Briefly tracking the lineage of public monuments commemorating the Vietnam War corroborates that male bodily representation is an act of recuperation. A monument designed by Chinese American artist Maya Ying Lin was unveiled in Washington D.C.’s National Mall in 1982. Reflective black walls engraved with the

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Vivian LeTran, "Vietnam War Memorial Gives Alliance Its Due." *Los Angeles Times*. 21 Sept. 2002.

names of fallen U.S. Vietnam veterans form a wide “V”. Its “modernist, nonrepresentational” designed displeased many veterans “who argued that they were not ‘represented’” in Lin’s design.³⁰ Veterans’ organizations collectively funded a more “traditional” approach. The newer sculpture, designed by Frederick Hart, is of three young soldiers, standing among the natural green of the National Mall. The three figures fit in the multicultural, neoliberal discourse emerging in the 80s: the man in the center is white, flanked by a Latino and Black man on either side.³¹ Thus, the organizations of veterans resolved the issues they had with Lin’s design by funding one with physical representations of male bodies actively fighting in war. It is in this way that Westminister’s Vietnam War Memorial continues this lineage of an insistence on visibility through bodily representation, which seems to repeat, with ethnic difference added, the project of western imperial masculinity established in the previous section of this chapter. The presence of a Vietnamese male combatant complicates U.S. dominant discourse of Vietnam War history as experienced only by white male American bodies, reminding the public of the Vietnamese men who also fought on the “same side” as the U.S. troops. The shorter, Vietnamese soldier is also wearing the same uniform as the American one, shifting away from the savior/victim narratives that frame the U.S. military as heroes saving the weak and Vietnamese from themselves.

Taking the memorial sculpture’s context in time and space into account quickly troubles this narrative. In *Body Counts*, Yen Le Espiritu gives a detailed account of the numerous stumbling blocks the Vietnamese American community faced before the sculpture’s ultimate

³⁰ Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 1996.)

³¹ Michael Carden, “Restoration Complete for Vietnam War Memorial Statue.” <http://www.army.mil/article/42036/>.

unveiling. Espiritu explains that the community could not obtain public funding and that non-Vietnamese residents opposed the project; their disputes that the proposed location in the city's civic center "would be 'too visible' there and that a 'private' memorial was inappropriate for any city property."³² As the author also notes, this critique clearly exposes the constraints of community remembrance for the Vietnamese American community. Local government pushed the sculpture away from the city center and into the end of a street in a small park adjacent to an empty parking lot, which the Vietnamese American community had to raise extra funds to level to make suitable for construction.³³ This decision, and the financial responsibility placed on the Vietnamese American community, reflects the ways that various hegemonic forces of power and narrative decenter and render invisible the Vietnamese diasporic experience. It also demonstrates the continued contestation of war memory for the U.S. and Vietnamese Americans.

Before Tuan Nguyen's unveiled design, for years the wider Westminster community debated over the form the memorial would take. Previous designs that drew debate were ones that showed only a U.S. flag, or were of the same two soldiers "shaking hands on a battlefield."³⁴ Espiritu notes that "some residents wanted to remove the South Vietnamese figure altogether; others suggested that it might be more appropriate to replace the Vietnamese soldier with a refugee family."³⁵ This prolonged debate over memory and representation reveals the impossibility of consolidating the Vietnamese diasporic experience into a single story. Thus,

³² Yen Le Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014.) 111. Emphasis is the author's.

³³ Mai Tran, "Uncovering Controversy." *Los Angeles Times*. 30 Sept. 2000.

³⁴ Vivian LeTran, Vietnam War Memorial Gives Alliance Its Due." *Los Angeles Times*. 21 Sept. 2002.

³⁵ Espiritu, *Body Counts*, 111.

Tuan Nguyen's message that "the war is still going on" for the South Vietnamese is subtle, the subversive cues legible only to those who are looking for it.

The placid, seemingly resting expressions of the soldiers also speaks to its location in time and space. Unlike the Three Soldiers Memorial, which is installed closer to the ground and whose subjects appear to be looking for an enemy, the two men in the Westminster monument are elevated and looking out into the horizon. In the Three Soldiers Memorial, the men's hands are tense, ready to take action, while from a distance and by comparison the soldiers in the Westminster monument appear to be at rest—despite the fact, as established in this chapter's introduction, that this is not true for the representation of the Vietnamese soldier. The monument is located across from Westminster's city hall and police department, across from institutions of regulation and discipline. Institutional surveillance, as Gramsci argues in his explanation of cultural hegemony,³⁶ regulates how remembrance and commemoration occurs. The soldiers who appear at rest also corroborate the construction of the Vietnam War narrative as completed, since the statues appear to be finished with battle. Lastly, I argue that, in a small way, having soldiers who appear to be at rest in a public space across from such a governing entity as a police station works to remove the relationship between the police and violence by subtly disarticulating the relationship between governance and force.

The bodily representation of a muscular Vietnamese soldier seems to depart from the emasculated or dead renderings from the French colonial and Vietnam War film-era. However, a queer critique of the monument will be useful in complicating this reading of the sculpture as a wholesale taking back of Vietnamese masculinity, especially when taking into consideration that the representations of the Vietnamese male body and the white American soldier's body must be

³⁶ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971).

side-by-side within this particular space and time. The wider Westminster's community's objections to having only a Vietnamese soldier necessitates the presence of a white body. A Vietnamese soldier standing alone would be too ambiguous; standing independently, he would not have needed U.S. intervention to strive for "freedom and democracy" written about on the plaque beneath his feet. Such a possibility for alternate representation would not corroborate the "good refugee" story. At the same time, the Vietnamese community would likely not welcome a statue of a white soldier standing alone, as it would go against their stakes in gaining visibility in American memory of the Vietnam War. Thus, the two must remain together.

A queer critique of the statue serves as another way to reveal how the sculpture fails to capture what dominant narrative attempts to construct, particularly in terms of heteropatriarchy. Western colonial and war-legitimizing narratives render the Vietnamese male body queer against western ideals of masculinity and heteropatriarchy. This is a primary tactic of Orientalism—to construct a subject that necessitates subjugation.³⁷ Many scholars have written extensively on the queer and queered depictions of Asian male bodies in the western imaginary, and I have identified how the Indochinese and Vietnamese male body has been queered through French imperialism and U.S. militarism. I argue here that in the recent trend of multicultural, neoliberal discourse, western narratives have endeavored to *un*queer the Asian male body, restoring Asian masculinity in war depictions and portrayals under western heteropatriarchy. This part of my paper analyzes how the process of unqueering necessitates a queer referent within the narrative. By reading the monument as a "buddy narrative," I explore how queerness emerges within this representation. As mentioned earlier, the Vietnam War sculpture must have both white and Vietnamese male soldiers standing together for mutual ends of maintaining national

³⁷ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*. (1st Vintage Books edition. New York: Vintage, 1979.)

identifications. To guide this argument, José Esteban Muñoz’s use of disidentification and Sergio de la Mora’s analysis of the homoeroticism of the “buddy film” narrative in Mexican film will both be integral. Muñoz deploys disidentification as a process that “scrambles and reconstructs the coded message of a cultural text in a fashion that exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations... to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications.”³⁸ De la Mora’s reading of the “buddy film” is itself a disidentification, since he sees films that center two close-knit friends and a third-party woman who “facilitate[s] and block[s] the physical and affective ties between men” as a queer possibility.³⁹ De la Mora applies disidentification to look at how homoeroticism is embedded in the “buddy film,” thus complicating the efforts of such films to uphold Mexican nationalism (and transnationalism) and masculinity. Using this framework, I look to how the Vietnamese American male body is enlisted to restore and restructure national masculinities with the interest of maintaining western hegemony and empire—but that in order to do so, queering must also occur.

As de la Mora looks at Pedro Infante, a Mexican actor during the “Golden Age” of his country’s cinema, he argues that

“...Infante’s buddy movies provide the occasion for examining how male homosocial and homoerotic relations fit into the specific constructions of masculinities in Mexican popular culture. They provide ways to understand how masculinist and misogynist agendas underpin the celebratory, and often homoerotically infused, relations between cuates (buddies). Infante’s

³⁸ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1999.)

³⁹ Sergio de la Mora. *Cinemachismo: Masculinities and Sexuality in Mexican Film*. (University of Texas Press. Kindle Edition, 2009, (Kindle Locations 1619-1620).

buddy movies provide a prime example of the textual and narrative strategies used to stage differing national virilities.”⁴⁰

The Vietnam War memorial statue can also be read as a recovery and construction of “national virilities” through homosociality. Just like the “buddy movie” narrative, I assert that given its spatio-temporal location, the white male soldier and the Vietnamese male soldier must stand together in order to convey this specific message. However, this queer critique only becomes salient when reading the statue as an attempt to regain white heteropatriarchy; other readings yield different possibilities for subversion and memory.

When read at face value, the Vietnam War Memorial, with its physical representation within a specific time and space for the ends of perpetuating empire, erases other participants in Vietnam War history, such as women and non-combatants, who continue to be invisible in these dominant discourses. However, revisiting that the sculpture is located within a park may be effective in re-thinking the sculpture outside the constraints of victimhood and oppression for the Vietnamese American community.

While it is true that the monument serves as a space for annual commemoration ceremonies, year-round it is a park with a small playground where neighborhood children go; that mothers often accompany them is also significant in re-thinking the space. Henri Lefebvre’s work looks into the production of space that organizes society through spatial coding; subjects are told how to interact within the parameters of the nation-state.⁴¹ Lefebvre “state-imposed normality makes permanent transgression inevitable,” speaking to opposition being embedded

⁴⁰ de la Mora. *Kindle Locations* 604-607.

⁴¹ Henri Lefebvre. *The Production of Space*. (1 edition. Oxford, OX, UK; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1992.)

within systems of power.⁴² It fits, then, that the attempt to incorporate the Vietnamese male body into U.S. empire through a reclamation of masculinity contains the very tools of its undoing.

Michel de Certeau also considers movement within the city as constructing “the city itself as an immense social experience of lacking a place—an experience that is, to be sure, broken up into countless tiny deportations (displacements and walks)...”⁴³ The interactions of the women and children juxtaposed against the immobile statues of the white and Vietnamese soldier nicely illustrates the limitations of this singular narrative, but also the potential for movement within the spaces of the impossible (namely, those who have been written out of common Vietnam War discourse). Lastly, this reflects the continued, day-to-day life of the community and serves as a symbol of latter generations still navigating the war. Once again revisiting Tuan Nguyen’s messaging, “for the South Vietnamese the war is still going on,” it is important to note that while the soldiers stand in proximity to one another, they do not face each other, symbolizing the departures of perspective. Thus, while the statue appears to represent imperial masculinity with ethnic difference and a consolidation of the Vietnamese diasporic experience into a pro-U.S. memory, a close reading of context and construction elucidates the ways in which the monument departs from such dominant narrative.

Boat People Memorial

The figures that compose the Boat People Memorial face the sunset. There are four of them, cast in bronze—a standing man holds up an elderly woman, and in front of them, a woman cradling a baby lurches forward from the ground. She reaches an arm out toward something

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Michel de Certeau. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Third Edition edition. (University of California Press, 1984) 3.

invisible in the distance. All are wearing tattered clothing and bear expressions of extreme fatigue or distress. Together, they float upon a body of water shaped like a sideways eye, intended to be an abstraction of a boat. Surrounding the path toward the figures are large rocks with the names of six thousand deceased Vietnamese boat people on them. Upon first glance, the representations of figures in the Boat People memorial seem to corroborate the “good refugee” narrative, which places the post-war diasporic Vietnamese into a linear temporal framework of starting as desperate and destitute and progressing to economic assimilation.⁴⁴ They appear to be a (nuclear) family, struggling together, reaching out toward something, perhaps someone who will save them. Additionally, the depiction of a family seems to meet the demands for bodily representation as a recuperative measure after continued loss post-Vietnam War. However, thinking about its location within a cemetery shifts such an easy read of the monument. Contemplating the cemetery as a heterotopic space for Vietnamese Americans in Orange County, as Elizabethada Wright does for Black Americans in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, reveals the ways in which multiple narratives and temporalities can exist simultaneously within a space. I will look closely at community interactions in the cemetery that encompasses the monument to further unsettle the alternative ways in which the diasporic Vietnamese community remembers and commemorates the Vietnam War.

The memorial, unveiled on April 25, 2009, is located in the Asian Garden of Peaceful Eternity in Westminster Memorial Park. It took ten years for Tran Ai Cam and Thai Tu Hap to collect their own funds for the project, as they did not seek or accept money from the public or the families of those named on the stones. Despite the possible leverage they could have as co-owners of the Vietnamese publication *Saigon Times*, their refusal of public funding

⁴⁴ Espiritu, “The ‘We-Win-Even-When-We-Lose’ Syndrome”, 331.

circumvented disputes over its design and location. As Wright notes, “While many public monuments are doomed because they cannot gain public consensus on many of the elements of this process, cemetery monuments need far less approval, even with the close monitoring of the cemetery officials.”⁴⁵ The monument rests in a corner facing west and away from any convenient entrance; the cemetery sets a somber tone as visitors pass through. Of particular interest to this section is the cemetery as a heterotopic space of life, death, public, private, past, present, and future.



Figure 2. Boat People Memorial. Photo by Codobai.⁴⁶

Walking toward the monument and perusing the lists is exhausting, seeing name after Vietnamese name. However, the list is far from comprehensive. In an interview with the OC

⁴⁵ Elizabethada A. Wright, “Rhetorical Spaces in Memorial Places: The Cemetery as a Rhetorical Memory Place/Space.” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 35.4 (2005) 61.

⁴⁶ Codobai, Digital image of the Boat People Memorial, created by Vivi Võ-Hùng-Kiệt. WikiCommons, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Boat_People_Memorial,_Westminster,_CA.jpg>.

Register in 2009, Tran Ai Cam, who co-funded the project with her husband, Thai Tu Hap, says that the number is much higher. “Thousands perished in the sea, entire families were wiped out. We don’t know anything about them.”⁴⁷ Here, Tran demonstrates the attempt to hold a space for memory while admitting to the impossibility of closure. I will look at the cemetery and community interactions in and around the monument as sites for multiple and simultaneous memories: the combination of being in a space of death and ending, and an open door of possibilities.

While the cemetery and memorial are sites that seem to regulate and substantiate temporal notions of linear time, looking at these spaces as heterotopias complicates these views, especially in relation to ended war and finality of death. In her study of the cemetery as a rhetorical space, Elizabethada Wright draws on Foucault’s notion of heterotopia, a site located within society that is “simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted,”⁴⁸ to describe the cemetery. For Wright, the cemetery “confuses the symbolic and physical to allow memories forgotten in other locations to survive”⁴⁹ and can do so because of its appearance as a “stable” place located “everywhere” across the U.S.⁵⁰ Cemeteries are often referred to as a “final resting place,” which substantiates this idea of stability and ending, but they are different from public monuments because they are “erected without public consent for a private need.”⁵¹ How does this perspective change when a public monument is placed within the cemetery? And what are the implications of a space for the socially dead?

⁴⁷ Deepa Bharath, “Memorial to Boat People Who Died to Be Dedicated Saturday.” *The Orange County Register*. 21 August 2013 <<http://www.ocregister.com/news/people-126699-boat-memorial.html>>.

⁴⁸ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces.” *Diacritics* (1986).

⁴⁹ Wright, Elizabetha. “Rhetorical Spaces in Memorial Places.”

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 58.

⁵¹ *Ibid*

Upon my first visit to the Westminster Memorial Park, I found the sheer number of Vietnamese names commemorated on the tombstones to be jarring. Wright specifically looks at tombstones as denoting a definitive end to life. Similar to the project of the tombstone, Thu-Huong Nguyen-Vo looks at the photographic image as seeming to capture a moment in time—the image itself signals a moment that has ended. However, by drawing upon the work of Damian Sutton, she looks at photography as a transhistoric act; it “compels interpretation and reinterpretation thereby looping past, present, and future”⁵² in an effort to remember what has been, or is in danger of, being forgotten. That these tombstones demarcate the dates of birth and death of many first-generation Vietnamese Americans places an emphasis on lifespan that had continued in the aftermath of 1975, a reminder that lives continued after the “end of the war.” A close observation of the private mourning/memory practices within the cemetery further elucidates and extends the notion of transhistoricity of the cemetery.

Throughout my visits to the Westminster cemetery, I witnessed several acts of private mourning. On one visit, one lone man sat, his back leaned at the back of one tombstone to face another. He shared an iced coffee and a small meal there. A family came on the second day and hauled out a giant cluster of cherry blossom branches with red envelopes hanging from them. The mother and father cleaned the tombstone, brushing leaves off the top and throwing out old flowers. While their two small boys zoomed around and the father maintained an eye over them, the mother pulled out a cigarette and faced the tombstone, plumes of that smoke mixing with the thin smoke trails of incense. There were also traces of private ceremonies in the offerings left to the deceased. Some had *banh bao*, a few had plastic cups of *café sua da* from Lee’s Sandwiches located around the corner. On the Sunday before Tet, in the midst of all the Tet decorations, I

⁵² Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong, “Iterant Remains: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Mediating the Necropolitical Event.” *Chorégraphies Suspendues : Residual, Disrupted Choreographies* (2014) 92.

saw one small balloon heart by a grave; Valentine's Day had been the day before. These examples illustrate the ways in which mourning, in a way, continues the life of the deceased as mourners choose material offerings to place at the tombstones. Additionally, offering meals and tending gardens are acts often gendered as feminine; that both men and women perform these duties disrupts the masculinist, patriarchal narratives that the Westminster War Memorial seem to push.

More importantly, these frequent and everyday acts of remembering resist the notion that community remembrance of war is only possible through public acts of commemoration (for example, "Black April" ceremonies held in front of the Vietnam War Memorial). This is what de Certeau calls an "oppositional practice of everyday life," a close look at how seemingly mundane tactics are modes of resistance. The observations I have just described demonstrate the ways in which tombstones and mourning practices disrupt dominant and singular narrative of Vietnam War memory. One of my visits to Westminster Memorial Park fell a week before Tet. In front of many tombstones bearing Vietnamese surnames were bright yellow flowers in pots wrapped in red cellophane. Placed on each rock that surrounds the Boat People Memorial were offerings: two digestive biscuits, a thick, puffy rice cracker roll, a small peach, and a tangerine. The biscuits were teeming with ants, but the fruit was still too fresh to attract them; thus, someone regularly tends the area. This memorial becomes a site for mourning loss not during or after, *per se*, but *of* the Vietnam War. The simultaneous existence of tombstones as a site for mourning loss after 1975 (the supposed end to the war) and an entire section of the cemetery celebrating Tet unsettle narratives that place mourning, recovery, and celebration as separate from one another. Moreover, it is also often assumed that "boat people" became "lost at sea" only in 1975, their stories ending in either death or (eventual) landing in the U.S. However, for many, there was no

aftermath of war, but only the continuation of it. In the years following 1975, the new Vietnamese government sent many who remained in defined as dangers or dissenters to reeducation camps; Vietnam's war with China resulted in the expulsion of the ethnic Chinese population; and still today, there are Vietnamese refugees still living in camps in the Philippines as non-citizens of either Vietnam or the Philippines. These are just a few examples that complicate the temporal framing of the past, present, and future of the Vietnam War.

To rethink the cemetery space, I return to Wright's essay, which centers on the discovery of an "African Burying Ground" in a town in New Hampshire as a way to rethink the cemetery as a heterotopic space. City workers found the gravesite when replacing the piping in their sewage system. The gravesite forced Portsmouth to face its past, halting its attempt to shape the future. It literally showed that the past cannot stay buried.⁵³ The bodies submerged underneath the ground "reminds this New England town that it was complicit with slavery" despite the "monument[s] honoring the town's Union dead from the Civil War."⁵⁴ Thinking of the Westminster cemetery, I argue that it is both the absence of visible bodies within the cemetery and the space itself as a perceived space of conclusion that allows for multiple narratives to exist within its walls. It is in this way that Westminster Memorial Park's Boat People monument exceeds singular narrative. Within the cemetery space, which loops temporalities and thus disrupts notions of progress so essential to the refugee/American Dream narrative, the woman represented in the monument is not reaching out toward a helping hand or utopic future. Nor does this memorial necessarily commemorate a singular event in the past, since the listed names are of those who may have survived a boat journey but died later, and that those recorded are

⁵³ It's also worth noting that city workers discovered the graves when the city was trying to update its sewage pipes. Two types of waste management took place, here; the upgrade in piping took precedence for the city.

⁵⁴ Wright, 68.

from any number of boat journeys that occurred in the years following 1975. Looking at the older woman, whose hand touches her chest and whose eyes are closed, and at the baby, whose head lolls back slightly, it is hard to tell if they are closer to survival or death, in a way gesturing toward the precarious position of the Vietnamese diasporic subject within the refugee framework. It is thus because of the heterotopic cemetery space that the Boat People Memorial fails to maintain a singular narrative and thus fails to further consolidate U.S. empire with the ethnic difference of a Vietnamese subject.

III. Seeing is Believing: Photography and Film in the Vietnam War Narrative

“Growing up in Vietnam, the war was not that dramatic. War was a part of our life,” photographer An-My Le says of her childhood. “I didn’t ever realize how frightening the war was until I was actually in the United States [...] looking at the news and looking at the footage. That’s when I realized how scary it was.”⁵⁵ Le’s *Small Wars* began as a rotating exhibition and in 2005 was released as a photography book comprises three black and white series: “Viet Nam,” “Small Wars,” and “29 Palms.”⁵⁶ They are unified thematically by Le’s interest in “the memory of war at large, the history, consequences, and preparation for war”⁵⁷ and visually by representations of landscape and what I will term “documentarian feeling”—Le’s photos seem to be action photos whose sole purpose is to capture a single moment, but upon further examination, they also seem filmic and staged. The first series in the collection, “Viet Nam” contains images taken from visits that Le was able to make between 1994-1997, after Vietnam

⁵⁵ San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, “An-My Lê on her series “Small Wars.”” Youtube, 8 November 2010 < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mH8SybHPUKE>>.

⁵⁶ Richard Woodward, *An-My Le: Small Wars* (Aperture, 2005).

⁵⁷ Musea Stad Antwerpen, “Small Wars, An-My Lê.” Youtube, 11 June 2014 < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NKF-tqj5Ko>>.

opened its borders. “Small Wars,” the series after which the collection is named, comprises images of Vietnam War re-enactments that groups of white men in Virginia and North Carolina perform as a leisure activity. The last series is “29 Palms,” and depicts soldiers preparing for the Iraq War in a military desert training site in California.

The first chapter of this project aimed to trouble the ways in which the Vietnam War broadly, and the Vietnamese American community in Orange County, California’s Little Saigon in particular, remember, are re-membered, and are narrated into visibility. Continuing to think through how the impossibility of any one narrative of the Vietnam War despite the U.S. empire’s continued efforts to consolidate a message of the war as a successful, completed struggle of young military men regulating chaos and saving the innocent and savage Other, I look to Le’s representations of landscape, bodies, and documentarian feeling to disrupt notions of authentic and static memory. Interviews with the artist provide context to her photos, and a comparative analysis of documentary/media footage against Le’s own work will help to articulate my argument.

“Documentary Feeling”

In the first chapter, I briefly overviewed how the distribution, exchange, and display of postcard images shaped discourse and justification for French colonial rule in Indochina. From the naked, costumed, laboring, reclining, and dead, these colonial postcards focused on the Indochinese body, a tactic used by the French to gender, de/sexualize, and categorize the Indochinese as ultimately justifiably colonized.

The importance of visuality continued from French Indochina rule to U.S. intervention in the Vietnam conflict. Building on the first chapter, I would like to think through other modes in

which visibility is overdetermined as an understood and neutral source of knowledge. Many have engaged with the question of how the circulation of images and media shapes the West's knowledge of the Vietnam War. In the second chapter of *Humanitarian Violence*, Neda Atanasoski discusses the ways in which U.S. press coverage of the Vietnam War has shaped western understanding of Vietnam as a "locus of misery" that in turn became proof of the U.S.'s "democratic potential."⁵⁸ U.S. media's unprecedented access to the war zone provided the western world with "condensed articulations of U.S. brutality in Vietnam" that "developed America's humanitarian gaze... [allowing] U.S. audiences to experience outrage for having caused the suffering of Vietnamese" at the same time "affirming the ability of U.S. citizens to distinguish right from wrong."⁵⁹ By examining mainstream media coverage of the Vietnam War over the span of 25 years, Yen Le Espiritu also examines this discursive turn from U.S. failure to success. Espiritu notes how journalists depicted U.S. soldiers as "lost boys," thus placing U.S. combatants as young men unwittingly leaving the "territory of modernity" in which the "moral domain of innocence" originates, and into Vietnam, a "journey backward in time to an anachronistic moment of prehistory."⁶⁰

The first series, "Viet Nam," is the result of three years' worth of trips that Le took after Viet Nam opened its doors to travelers in 1994. Le explains that upon her initial return, she found herself grappling her memories of the Vietnam she left with the one to which she returned almost twenty years later. That this series—and all three—are in black and white lend the quality of "going backward in time"; by removing color she removes the contemporary feeling of the image. They look strikingly similar to images published in newspapers (in black and white for

⁵⁸ Atanasoski, 74.

⁵⁹ *ibid*, 29

⁶⁰ Espiritu, *Body Counts*, 335.

cheap and suited for mass consumption). Le plays with this deliberately to unsettle what western audiences take for granted as documentarian observation, and western expectation for Vietnam photos to represent something about the Vietnam War.



Figure 3 "Untitled, Ho Chi Minh City, 1995." Photo by An-My Le.⁶¹

"Untitled, Ho Chi Minh City, 1995" demonstrates this presumed anachronism in western texts about Vietnam. Here, a group of Vietnamese people stare up into the sky wearing special glasses. Behind them are large propaganda posters. One of these posters is a graphic illustrating what good citizens do—on one side is a factory and on the other, an agricultural scene. Next to this poster is one with an illustration of Ho Chi Minh, with the Communist trademark hammer and sickle to his right and the Communist star on his left. These Cold War-era displays, in addition to the greyscale color scheme, trick the audience into believing that this is a photo from that era. In an interview with Baltimore Museum of Art, curator Ann Shafer tells Le that her

⁶¹ An-My Le, "Untitled, Ho Chi Minh City, 1995." *An-My Le*. < <http://www.anmyle.com/Vietnam/10>>.

initial reaction to the photo was that it was of “a nuclear test on Bikini Atoll.”⁶² She adds, “[My mind] went ‘war’ immediately, of course,” thus expressing her expectation, based on both the visual cues and the title of the series, that this photo was taken in the Cold War era. It is only the year 1995 on a poster off to the side, behind one of the bystanders’ heads that gives away that this is a contemporary photo. Though the lettering of the year is large, it is still easy to miss. This photo thus disrupts western expectations of a war photo, especially in relation to the Vietnam War.



Figure 4. "Untitled, Ho Chi Minh City, 1998." Photo by An-My Le.⁶³

Another photo that uses the tactic of “documentary feeling” to unsettle the relationship between visuality and memory is “Untitled, Ho Chi Minh City, 1998.” The photo contains

⁶² Baltimore Museum of Art, “BMA Artist Talk with Photographer and 2012 MacArthur Foundation ‘Genius Grant’ Winner An-My Lê.” Youtube, 27 November 2013 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sQICL-8aidI>>.

⁶³ An-My Le, “Untitled, Ho Chi Minh City, 1998.” *An-My Le*. <<http://www.anmyle.com/Vietnam/14>>.

mostly light gray sky; the ground, with people strolling, sitting, and selling across it, factors in just under a quarter from the bottom of the frame. The sky is predominately empty, save for what appears to be a dozen or so airplanes moving at various speeds and locations across the sky. Smoke obscures the trees that line the horizon, further adding to a sense of ominousness that pervades the image. At first glance, this photo easily looks like one taken during the Vietnam War era. It could be, for example, a bomb raid of a Vietnamese village suspected to be hiding Viet Cong combatants. However, Le reveals in an interview that the picture is set in a park where kite-flying was a popular past-time, and that the smoke emerging from the ground is not from bombs hitting the ground, but trash burning—a common practice in industrializing Vietnam. Le's explanation exposes the viewer's expectation based on visual cues and Vietnam War legacy.



Figure 5: Screenshot from "Vietnam: A Television History." Footage from an air raid.

The circulation of media and film related to the Vietnam War inform the visual signals that cue the western viewer to think of the Vietnam War. For example, this photo is strikingly

similar to recorded footage edited for the PBS documentary, *Vietnam: A Television History*. In one segment, the documentary shows film reels of “Operation: Rolling Thunder,” a bombing campaign that started in 1965 and lasted for three years. In these scenes, fighter planes zoom overhead as Vietnamese villagers run into huts and tunnels while plumes of smoke rise around them. Given this and other similar imagery, which also influence the “realist” Vietnam War-era films (as I will explain in further detail), what strikes the western viewer first is not a placid park scene at all, but rather a scene of violence captured on camera.

Le’s travels to Vietnam over this time period were an endeavor to imagine and “make tangible... ideas of what it would have been like to have [an uninterrupted] childhood in Vietnam,” exposing a challenge the artist had in reconciling the Vietnam of her childhood with the Vietnam of her return.⁶⁴ Le grapples with these ideas, shaped partly by memory, and partly by circulating anecdotes within her family, and seeing a contemporary, industrializing Vietnam twenty years after she had left it. One of the most salient depictions of this struggle to reconcile two seemingly conflicting ideas of Vietnam is the untitled last image in the series, taken in Ho Chi Minh City in 1995. In it, two fishing boats sail on a river toward a horizon obscured by gigantic billboards that mostly advertise technology corporations such as Nokia and Sanyo. Le articulates the tension between her past and her contemporary encounters with Vietnam in this last photo.

⁶⁴ Baltimore Museum of Art, Youtube.



Figure 6. "Untitled, Ho Chi Minh City, 1995." Photo by An-My Le.⁶⁵

Another way in which the artist accesses simultaneously the space of fantasy and the space of memory is through the landscape. Although at the time Le did not consider herself a landscape photographer, in interviews she describes herself as feeling compelled to take panoramic photos as a means of accessing both her memories of Vietnam and her imagination of continued life in Vietnam. Most of the photos preceding this image are of landscapes taken along the Mekong Delta and in villages. The next series, "Small Wars," further elucidates the ways in which the artist thinks about landscape, fantasy, and memory, and the ways in which these are represented and produced in the circulations of media and film.

Depictions of innocent American boys sent off to a land of moral chaos and disorder also emerge in Vietnam War-era films. *Apocalypse Now*, *Full Metal Jacket*, and *Platoon* are just

⁶⁵ An-My Le, "Untitled, Ho Chi Minh City, 1995." Digital image. *Art21.org* <<http://www.art21.org/images/an-my-1%C3%AA/untitled-ho-chi-minh-city-1995>>.

some examples of this popular genre of film, and all three center on the stories of young men who are corrupted in Vietnam as they must decide to leave a brethren behind to die or feel conflicted about purchasing the services of a Vietnamese sex worker. Gaylyn Studlar and David Desser's 1988 essay "Never Having to Say You're Sorry" analyzes the *Rambo* film series as an "ideological battle which seeks to rewrite, to rehabilitate, controversial symbols" in decade following the "end" of the Vietnam War.⁶⁶ As a "comic-book" type action film, the plot of *Rambo* is admittedly exaggerated and preposterous: Local law enforcement in Hope, Oregon, wrongfully targets guerilla warfare expert and Vietnam veteran John Rambo. Rambo subsequently spends the entire movie escaping their grip by blowing up cars, dodging bullets whilst climbing across cliff sides, and running in camouflage through the Oregon forest. Nevertheless, the authors note that *Rambo* and other films about the Vietnam War attempt to displace veterans' blame through what they term "victimization"⁶⁷ while they try to "deliver its audience from the anxiety of the [Reagan-era] present" through "primitive masculine power."⁶⁸ It is also worth noting that the authors point to two waves of Vietnam War films: the "right-wing revisionism" of films like *Rambo*, and the "ostensibly more realistic" films such as *Full Metal Jacket* and *Apocalypse Now*, the latter of which I will discuss in closer detail later in this chapter. Even though these two camps of film feel very different, Studlar and Desser say that they are both dependent on victimization as a strategy of recuperation.

⁶⁶ Gaylyn Studlar and David Desser. "Never Having to Say You're Sorry: Rambo's Rewriting of the Vietnam War". *Film Quarterly* 42.1 (1988): 9.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 11

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 15



Figure 7. "Rescue." Photo by An-My Le.⁶⁹

Although An-My Le does not explicitly critique U.S. involvement in Vietnam in *Small Wars*, scrutinizing the importance of film and image in the process of memory making comes in handy when looking at Le's photographs. The photos in "Small Wars" contain deliberate references to both the unprecedented U.S. media access to the war, as well as to Vietnam War-era films such as *Apocalypse Now* and *Full Metal Jacket*. These representations not only depict a chaotic and unpredictable war environment, but also reveal a need for the western world to mediate national anxieties in the aftermath of U.S. defeat. "Rescue," one of the first photographs in the series, is of a jet landing in the "jungle." A soldier hangs lifelessly out a fighter jet while other soldiers survey the scene from the ground, send commands into walkie-talkies, and point rifles at invisible enemies. White smoke engulfs the scene, adding a dramatic quality to the

⁶⁹ An-My Le, "Rescue." Digital image. *PBS*. <<http://www.pbs.org/art21/images/an-my-le/C3%AA/small-wars-rescue-1999-2002>>.

photo. It is evocative of several scenes in *Apocalypse Now*. The smoky atmosphere is reminiscent of a famous scene in the film, when Sergeant Kilgore, pacing between bright yellow clouds of napalm billowing around him, famously declares to his fellow soldiers, “I love the smell of napalm in the morning.”⁷⁰ Le’s photo also echoes another famous scene in the film, when soldiers’ jets interrupt a placid Vietnamese village by peppering a barrage of bombs on it. They blast “The Ride of the Valkyries” on the stereo as this happens.”⁷¹

This scene is not so different from archival footage of U.S. troops’ bomb raids. The segment of *Vietnam: A Television History* titled “LBJ Goes to War” opens with a scene from inside a helicopter as it sends a rain of bullets and bombs down a village. The camera closes in on the pilot, who smiles and says to a fellow soldier, “I saw you splatter one right in the back with a rocket.”⁷² His cavalier delivery reflects what veterans say in testimonials throughout the documentary; for them, disengaging from thinking about the targets was a way for them to survive the emotional and physical hardship of life in deployment. The coping strategies of these two images are so similar that one could easily be exchanged for the other; the re-enactment can stand in for the archive, and vice-versa.



Figure 8. Screenshot of an air raid scene from *Apocalypse Now*.

⁷⁰ *Apocalypse Now*, dir. Francis Ford Coppola. *Apocalypse Now*. American Zoetrope, 1979.

⁷¹ *ibid.*

⁷² “Vietnam: A Television History.” PBS documentary (American Experience) 2004.



Figure 9. Screencap of an air raid from "Vietnam: A Television History."

“Rescue” encapsulates this convolution of reality and fantasy because it is simultaneously realistic and staged. That the photo is in black and white lends to its “documentarian feeling,” as if it were a snapshot taken by a journalist on the scene and sold to the Associated Press. No one faces the camera; aside from the “dead” soldier, all the men face either the left or right of the frame, making the viewer assume that there is more action off the frame than in it. A closer inspection of the scene quickly dispels that this is a snapshot taken during the Vietnam War. With the spiky pine needles that surround the jet and the men, it becomes clear that the scene is not set in the jungles of Vietnam. Thus, Le exposes the authenticity of the landscape itself as part of the series.

Landscape, Imperialism, and War

Le utilizes landscape to challenge multiple ways in which visuality implies impartiality. Just as documentary-style reporting seems to be told by a neutral camera, so has landscape been understood as an unbiased, straightforward representation of nature. In *Empire of Landscape*, John Zarobell argues that the production and circulation of landscape images helped legitimize the French empire’s colonial venture into Algeria. For Zarobell, landscapes are part of the Orientalist art production that “functions to secure the colonizer’s control over space” because it

appears “universal (it is everywhere) and authoritative (it is impossible to deny).”⁷³ Landscapes appear to be merely depictions of empty, natural space where colonization seems not only simple, but justified. Such depictions of nature, then, have served to legitimize violent military presence by the western world. Similarly, Mary Louise Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes* calls the white European male as the “seeing-man,” “whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess.”⁷⁴ The results of this power through perception produced “natural history,” a type of knowledge production that relies heavily on observations as a source of truth.



Figure 10 "Sniper I." Photo by An-My Le.⁷⁵

Perhaps more importantly, Pratt says that the European archive and everything it attempts to manage and control through bordering and erasure, “provides valuable raw material on which

⁷³ John Zarobell, *Empire of Landscape: Space and Ideology in French Colonial Algeria* (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press: 2010) 1.

⁷⁴ Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 2008) 9.

⁷⁵ An-My Le, “Sniper I.” Digital image. *PBS*. <<http://www.pbs.org/art21/images/an-my-l%C3%AA/small-wars-sniper-i-1999-2002>>.

to exercise a decolonizing creativity.”⁷⁶ By utilizing the sites of management and control in knowledge production and memory-making of the Vietnam War, Le subverts the narratives they have been intended to accomplish. One such example is *Sniper I, 1999-2002*. The photo frames a scene of Le around the bend of a grassy mound of tall grass and brush, pointing a rifle at American soldiers who are running toward the camera in the distance. She wears plain black clothes and faces away from the camera. This image was borne out of Le’s fascination with the Viet Cong “sniper girl” depicted in such films as Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket*.⁷⁷ In this film, U.S. military men search for Viet Cong snipers who have injured and killed members of their troop. The scenes in which the sniping occurs shows only the sniper’s hand and rifle. The camera clearly reflects the perspective of the soldiers trying to find the sniper; as the lens zooms into the location where the shots are being fired, the scene goes out of focus so that a sniper’s face is never seen. Toward the end of the movie, it is revealed to both audience and Joker, who is the main character, that there is only one sniper, and that she is a teenage girl. Almost as suddenly as she is exposed, she is killed. Le’s photo takes this reference and re-scripts it so that the viewer takes in the image from the sniper’s perspective. The diagonal lines created by the landscape, the plain black clothes against gray grass and brush, and her proximity to the foreground in relation to the soldiers in the distance all draw the eye toward Le as the focal point of the photo. Because she faces away from the camera, focusing her rifle on the oncoming soldiers, the viewer sees the scene from her perspective, identifying with Le rather than those whom she is poised to shoot. Le borrows from these popular films, which center the perspectives of U.S. military servicemen, but introduces a way to shift and highlight the perspectives in which these narratives have been constructed.

⁷⁶ *ibid*, 8.

⁷⁷ Baltimore Museum of Art interview, Youtube.

That she is a woman in control of the photo is another way in which she unsettles the ways in which the Vietnam War has been narrated to western audiences. “Small Wars” revisits themes from the previous chapter pertaining to how militarism and masculinity shape Vietnam War memory; the men literally re-enact Vietnam War battles, and make it a mission to be as accurate as possible, down to the glasses and watches they wear.⁷⁸ In another photo, Le sits on a tree trunk next to a white male re-enactor. She holds a pen and writing pad; she is speaking as he leans in to listen to what looks to be a plan devised by her. This photo also departs from the nostalgic references from which it draws. In *Apocalypse Now*, the women are invisible villagers or hypervisible as sexualized commodifications. Famous media images of women and girls include the weeping witnesses and victims of the My Lai massacre, and the naked, running “Napalm girl;” at front at center is their victimhood. The focal point of Le’s photo is this interaction in which she is in control of the situation. The soldier must listen to the plan that she has written. It is in this way that Le turns dominant narrative slightly precisely to draw attention to how such narratives are a construct.

Temporality

Delving deeper into an analysis of Le’s use of landscape in “Small Wars,” I turn to theories on memory, the camera, and temporality. This second series opens with a close-up of “Explosion,” enlarged to span across two pages and featured in smaller scale format a few pages later. The photograph depicts a forest at night, with trees lit from underneath by an explosion to the ground, to the left of the frame. Arcs of light shoot out from thin streams from the locus of the explosion, which is off-center. While the landscape in the photograph is vast, it is difficult for the eye to focus on any one part of the image—the imperfect framing again gives the appearance

⁷⁸ *ibid*

of the photo having been taken quickly, in a moment of surprise explosive violence. Le says that for her, “Explosion” was the closest representation to her own memory of the war, related to her experiences of waking up to the sound of explosions at night, and the feeling of anticipation for the next burst of noise. Indeed, the contrast between the blurry, busy lights emanating from the ground against the otherwise placid landscape is striking.



Figure 11 "Explosion." Photo by An-My Le.⁷⁹

In *Cinema, Photography, and Memory*, Damian Sutton explores the ways in which a photograph is an event that “invokes the subject, such as a call to arms to a person or people.”⁸⁰ Sutton’s perspectives on photography easily reflect those put forth by such writers as Ann Laura Stoler and Michel-Rolph Trouillot, who propose alternative ways of looking at epistemology and

⁷⁹ An-My Le. “Explosion.” Digital image. *Art21.org* <<http://www.art21.org/images/an-my-1%C3%AA/small-wars-explosion-1999-2002>>.

⁸⁰ Damian Sutton. *Photography, Cinema, Memory: The Crystal Image of Time*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009) 12.

the archive. Rather than looking to the archive as a *source* of knowledge, both look at the archive as a process in knowledge production. Sutton, Stoler, and Trouillot investigate how the “colonial order of things”⁸¹ affects the way in which the viewer perceives the archive; this argument is similar also to Mary-Louise Pratt’s supposition that the act of observation is entirely subjective. “Photography’s scientific value ensured that it would be essential to the creation of knowledge, that it ‘had the duty of being knowledge’s memory,’” Sutton states.⁸² These authors all shift the understanding of photographs as moments that are fixed and therefore objective.

Two photos in the “Small Wars” series, “Tall Grass II, 1999-2002” and “Tall Grass I, 1999-2002” appear as a diptych in the book. Both are from a perspective that is close to the ground in a field of tall, wheat-like grass. A blurred figure is at the top right of the photo, reflecting the blurred image of a tall stalk of grass on the left. “Tall Grass I” is almost an identical photo, except the figure is crisp and defined, the focal point of the photo. As in “Explosion,” these two photos also contain a sense of anticipation. From this angle, it appears as if the viewer is participating in an ambush, and the target of the ambush is an American soldier. Moreover, this pair of photos are similar to the “Sniper Girl” photos in that Le rescripts a popular image of the Vietnam War, where the perspective is usually written from an angle of someone waiting in ambush to attack a Vietnamese. Additionally, the diptych is sequenced to feature “Tall Grass II” first and “Tall Grass I” second; thus, disrupting temporal sequencing and causing the viewer to “animate” the photo differently.

⁸¹ Ann Stoler, “Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance.” *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 83.

⁸² Sutton, 13.



Figure 12 "Tall Grass II." Photo by An-My Le.⁸³

At first glance, An-My Le's photos seem to have been taken in an unexpected and fleeting moment; however, as Le describes her photographic process, she offers another way to look how these images disrupt temporalities that privilege time as a past, present, and future progression. For example, by utilizing an exposure of fifteen minutes, Le was able to achieve the long streaks of bright light in the "Explosion" photo; the photograph represents not one moment, but layers of moments. Furthermore, all of Le's photos in this series were taken with a large-format camera, a cumbersome mechanism that makes the act of taking a photo laborious and time-consuming; there is no such thing as a quick photo for any image in this collection. Thus, Le says that her photos are calculated by necessity. Thinking of Damian Sutton's notion of

⁸³ Le, An-My. *Tall Grass II*. Digital image. *Landscape Stories*. < http://www.landscapestories.net/issue-13/lc_13-019-an-my-le-small-wars>.

photography as an event, it is worthwhile to think of this and all of Le's photos, then, as a consolidation of several moments captured into one frame.

Taken as a whole, this collection of three series unsettles time, and war, as a progression of past, present, and future. As mentioned earlier, "Viet Nam" is the artist's struggle to come to terms with the Vietnam of her memory and the Vietnam she returned some two decades later. "Small Wars" is also a "return" to Vietnam, but from the U.S. national memory that Le learned and internalized. The last of the series is "29 Palms," and depicts U.S. soldiers preparing for battle in the Iraq War of 2003. The lengths the military went in order to create an "authentic" Iraq fascinated Le. "Security and Stabilization Operations, Graffiti" is a photo of displays of inelegant, rushed messages spray painted across two buildings. The operations officers set the scene with the notes, "Good Saddam" and "Free Saddam," all written in capital letters. While engaging in the relationship between the Vietnam War and other explicit military interventions of the U.S. is beyond the scope of this essay, it is worth noting here these cursory endeavors to maintain a sense of authenticity. That 29 Palms is used for the preparation of war has a two-fold significance as related to my argument. First, as a site of military training, 29 Palms is itself a "small war," waged on a smaller scale in order to make the war more manageable. Second, that 29 Palms served as a substitute for both Vietnam and Iraq also reflects the endeavor to shift from thinking of the Vietnam War as having an "aftermath" and instead think through the ways in which war continued after 1975.

When asked by PBS's Art21 interviewers if people ever mistake her work for documentary, Le answers that although photographing the "real world" is also dealing with a sense of reality, that her photographs "escape the facts—the factual aspect of what's being represented." She continues that she approaches her work by looking into what she can suggest

in a photo, focusing in on “what was not in what I saw, not in the situation itself.”⁸⁴ Le’s landscapes in “Small Wars” and “29 Palms” are not “real;” they act as stand-ins for Vietnam for re-enactments and pre-enactors. Le specifically points to films about the Vietnam War, in both the U.S. and highly restricted pre-1994 Vietnam, as utilizing different countries (such as the Philippines and Thailand) as representing the jungles and villages of Vietnam so vital to the scenes. Moreover, not only did 29 Palms act as Vietnam for troops in the 60s and 70s, but it also became Iraq for troops being deployed there. At the same time landscapes are thus only representations, audiences perceive such imagery as completely “natural” sites commonly as neutral spaces for observation. Thus, in her photographs, landscapes become a place full of meaning and non-meaning. This contemplation on absences as a source of multiple possibilities is useful for thinking through war and memory.

In *Silencing the Past*, Michel-Rolph Trouillot re-examines archives that construct the Haitian Revolution as an “unthinkable history”⁸⁵ and therefore impossible to have been true. Because the story of a successful slave uprising threatened hegemonic power structures that control through narrative,⁸⁶ writers and historians of the late 18th and 19th centuries wrote it as a “non-event,” contending that the Haitian Revolution was “unthinkable even as it happened” because most contemporaries refused to “understand that ongoing revolution in its own terms.”⁸⁷ Trouillot argues that instead of taking the archives as fixed notions of what was and what was not, to look instead at the significance of erasures and absences. Elizabethada Wright makes a similar case about absence in “Memorial Places.” Wright redefines the cemetery, assumed to be

⁸⁴ An-My Le. Interview by Art21.org <<http://www.art21.org/texts/an-my-lê/interview-an-my-lê-war-and-aesthetics>>.

⁸⁵ Michel-Rolph Trouillot. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. (Boston : Beacon Press, 2015) 72.

⁸⁶ Not only through narrative, but also through physical violence.

⁸⁷ Trouillot, 73

a place of conclusion and completion, as a heterotopic space wherein forgotten and rejected memories are able to flourish and continue. In the first chapter, the Boat People Memorial's existence within the Westminster Memorial Cemetery circulates past, present, and future to complicate linear notions of temporality so essential to the U.S.'s "resolution" of the Vietnam War. For Le, the landscapes she encounters become a (non)location that holds all of the complexities, forgotten and re-membered, of the Vietnam War.

IV. Conclusion

Since the day my father gave me one of my first glimpses into his life in Vietnam, my mother has become more forthcoming as well, but her absence in this short narrative thread speaks to the spectral presence of her silence in my life. Over the years, I have contemplated the various localities in time and space where each of us was never meant to survive or exist—my father's redirected boat journey, my mother's intentions to leave or return, and all of us navigating the terms of life in a set of systems meant to quantify the worthiness of living. My parents do not carry the mementos of their childhood. The GIs in Guam confiscated my dad's last photos in Vietnam, and my mother could not bring anything but essentials with her on the helicopter flight to her first refugee camp.

Despite my past regrets at having nothing tangible to tell or know my parent's lives, I am learning to let go. I instead think to moments in my own life with them. When my dad coordinates book burnings to "display... hatred of the communists;"⁸⁸ when my mother corrects the vocabulary in modern Vietnamese tourism videos broadcast on local television; when they carpool with friends to events while clutching the red-striped yellow flag of the Vietnam they

⁸⁸ Mai Tran, "Book-Burning Scheduled in Little Saigon."

left, my parents are remembering. I did not recognize these acts as anything because they did not reflect the stories I learned in textbooks. Like the others in the Vietnamese diaspora that I write about, their memories refuse the neat narrations and rescriptings of U.S. history. There are images, dates, names, dreams, words, and nightmares that I will never be able to put to words, but when I loosen my grip on tangibility and look again, there is so much more. And then there is me, and my three siblings—embodiments of the fragments of my parents’ pasts, existences that were never meant to be. As I work toward the conclusion of this paper, I also know that there is a continued legacy of being “lost at sea”—from the Middle Passage to Southeast Asia to Cuba, the precarious migrations of Myanmar’s Rohingya to Syria and beyond. Imperialism’s violence, trauma, displacements, and forgetting endure still. I hope that through my work, I can hold even a small space for all these pieces to move and grow and resist and unsettle.

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