Thinking With and Beyond "Vietnam": 50 Years after the US Wars in Southeast Asia

CHRISTINA HUGHES
Macalester College
KARÍN AGUILAR-SAN JUAN
Macalester College

What does it mean to think both with and beyond "Vietnam" at the fifty-year anniversary of the war's end?

Publishing a call for papers that began as an invitation to those interested in reflecting on the meaning of the war's many afterlives at the fifty-year anniversary, this Special Forum first recognizes the imperfect phrasing of the question itself and the many stakes of the period of US military intervention that are quickly revealed in its formulation. For those who fell on either side of the war or who were unwillingly caught up in the machinations of imperial and national ambition, the 2025 calendar year marks the semicentennial of what has been varyingly referred to as the "Fall of Saigon," "Black April" (Tháng tư đen), "Liberation Day" (Ngày giải phóng), and a number of other monikers that reflect the contested nature of the implications of the war's outcome and ongoing meaning for our political present. April 30th marks a punctuated point in a war that some believe ended two years prior, with the negotiation of the Paris Peace Accords in 1973, and others believe never ended if one considers what happened in Viet Nam as just a chapter in the ongoing operation of the US war machine. Moreover "Vietnam" refers to both a time and space that defies demarcation. As an era, "Vietnam" gestures to a domestic culture and counterculture, a specific configuration of the global political economy, a particular moment in Third World decolonial resistance, and much more. As a space, "Vietnam" represents a contingent geopolitical-historical formation whose subjects across time have shared kinship, intimacies, and intergenerational bonds spanning imperial–state borders, but whose entangled histories just as much reveal the contradictions within liberation

struggles in the name of the nation state. As such our use of "Vietnam" is necessarily and purposely on unstable ground.

This Special Forum arrives during the 2025 anniversary from many routes, some institutionally formal, others alternatively navigated "in the break"[1] of the Western humanistic tradition. Seeing the fifty-year benchmark in advance of this publication as a significant moment that calls for deeper attention, Shelley Fisher Fishkin, one of the *Journal of Transnational American Studies*'s cofounders, invited Karín Aguilar-San Juan (one of the coeditors of this volume) to edit a special forum on the theme, after which Karín brought on Christina Hughes (fellow coeditor), a colleague focusing on critical refugee studies at Macalester College and recently hired in the Sociology Department. In the two years that we knew one another before collaborating on this Special Forum we noticed a few timely parallels. Karín's research in urban sociology at Brown University led to the publication of the 2009 monograph *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America* that compared how refugee communities—formed in Orange County, California and Boston, Massachusetts—made an imprint for themselves in the United States with and against a nation navigating "globalization in an age of neoliberalism."[2] As a college undergraduate at the time of its publication who had been born and raised in Orange County's Little Saigon to two "first-wave" refugee parents, Christina—while looking to locate things she felt to be true but did not see described in the field's canonical texts—had not yet found *Little Saigons* and was instead navigating the same literatures and discourses in urban sociology and the sociology of race and immigration that had very fairly turned Karín off from the discipline's mainstream. Eventually routed to *Little Saigons*'s anti-imperial analysis, much needed in the wake of a post-9/11 USA, Christina found it provided a vital anchor point and shoreline. Years later and over the course of collaborating on this Special Forum, Karín gave Christina a framed photograph Karín had taken while doing fieldwork in Orange County; Christina immediately identified the picture of a bicycle and a pay phone on the side of a building as located outside Phước Lộc Thọ, where her parents had once rented a shop near the food court, and situated as having been photographed at a time when they likely still worked there. The eventual recognition that we had probably crossed paths at some point, perhaps many times, without knowing, illustrates several aspects that have implicitly shaped this Special Forum. Namely, that history and memory are a spiral of elisions, ellipses, and echoes that do not and cannot exist in linear time; that ancestry precedes recognition; and that intellectual and political work is always underfoot. From this route, the Special Forum's offering lies in its inter/cross/transdisciplinary provocations, bringing into deeper conversation the fields of transnational American studies, critical ethnic studies, critical refugee studies, and other adjacent fields.

In her 2004 Presidential Address to the American Studies Association on the "transnational turn" in the field, Shelley Fisher Fishkin stated that "the goal of American studies scholarship is not exporting and championing an arrogant, pro-

American nationalism but understanding the multiple meanings of America and American culture in all their complexity."[3] After 9/11 and the US invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, Fishkin declared that it was the duty of American studies to correct reductive visions of the US by turning to the transnational as a space of inquiry to locate the US nation state within its many global circulations and boomerangs. The contributions to this Special Forum consider several of the questions posed by Fishkin as the promise of a transnational approach: how our negotiation of the boundaries and meanings of place (i.e., "nation," "citizenship," "belonging") is always a process in and of itself, especially through public commemoration, how the perceived binaries of domestic/foreign and national/international actually elide the way they are mutually constitutive, how we might relationally map perspectives from "outside" the US to those produced from "within" it, and what "the historical roots of [these] multidirectional flows of people, ideas, and goods and the social, political, linguistic, cultural, and economic crossroads generated in the process" might be.[4]

The Special Forum's contributors locate themselves within this shifting transnational terrain, finding generative spaces from which to articulate interventions that make clear why multivocality is imperative to the difficult project of collective memory in the wake of this war, and to other collective meaning-making done in response to the compounded violences of colonialism, militarism, capitalism, cisheteropatriarchy, and ecological wastelanding. While emphasizing a transnational lens, we as coeditors also invited contributors interested in engaging with critical ethnic studies and critical refugee studies, intending to center "Indigenous," "minority," and "refugee" discourses even as we made an effort to disavow the state apparatuses that define and construct these categories precisely for the purposes of surveillance, exploitation, punishment, and disposal.

The first set of essays in the Special Forum directly take up commemoration events, activities, and offerings related to the fifty-year anniversary to examine questions of what it means to ethically engage with war memory—what is demanded, who is owed, what is lost, and what remains. Recognizing that dominant commemorative narratives often ignore or subsume Hmong and other minority ethnic and Indigenous perspectives also caught up in the war's machinery, we open the Special Forum with Kong Pheng Pha and Ma Vang's **"War's Returns: Refugee Archiving, Living, Refusing"** to elaborate on how Hmong refugee knowledge and queer ways of living and being work to challenge the imperial archive of the covert Secret War. Reflecting on their visit to Hmong Museum in Saint Paul, Minnesota, for the fifty-year anniversary, Kong Pheng Pha and Ma Vang contemplate the museum's practice to never actively collect items for its archive in order to emphasize storytelling and cultural workshops, all the while still having items predominantly donated to it from white Americans, wherein the origin and background of the objects often remain unknown or unclear. Placing this curious relationship between these returned items alongside contemporary deportations of Hmong Americans, they contend that people who have been forcibly returned to Laos through deportation reflect the systematic ways the nation still relies

on covertness and obfuscation to represent a decontextualized history of the war to serve its imperial interests. Drawing on the concept of countercommemoration, they discuss the power of Hmong performances like Transforming Generation's 2024 Drag ON Talent Program and programming done by Hmong Museum as examples of the "living archive" and "living as refusal" during a time of both queer and trans persecution and refugee deportation, thereby articulating a useful framework from which to understand how, despite being formally redacted from official state narratives and territories, Hmong people creatively refuse their erasure every day.

Ly Thuy Nguyen's essay, **"Postwar, Relational, and Other Memories,"** blends experiments in style and form to present multiscalar perspectives on memory and forgetting through excavations of differential relationships outside/against/in deference to the Vietnam War as a national liberation project. Utilizing a filmic structure to introduce vignettes of "other memories" by the silenced, Nguyen highlights the limits of visual culture and political memory shaped by imperial and national political orders. Readers are invited to travel with Nguyen through a "country of memory," materialized through multiple state narratives, personal experiences, representational images, and activists' histories/absences—full of contradictions where these manifold national narratives come up against the experiences of the wartime and postwar generation in Viet Nam and in the US. Through reading Mai Huyền Chi's recent documentary *50 years of forgetting* particularly closely, the essay delineates the complex relationship to silence among Vietnamese war survivors as it also interweaves with Nguyen's own postwar and diasporic experiences. Arranged in proses that offer "bursts of remembering," the essay draws on Third World radical traditions to "enunciate toward a relational memory" that "[insists] on beauty and solidarity with the suffered against the structural destruction of landscapes, bodies, worlds."

Heidi Amin-Hong and Keva X. Bui's **"Ecologies of Memory: Memorializing Militarized Environments of the Vietnam War"** revisits the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC as a representation of the nation's enduring relationship with the war in Viet Nam as an open scar on both the collective psyche and landscape. Theorizing an aesthetic relationship between refugee memory and more-than-human witnessing that recognizes how nonhuman kin have also been caught in militarism's crosshairs, Amin-Hong and Bui propose ecological forms of memory through three incomplete aesthetic inquiries into how militarized environments themselves have been memorialized by the Missing Piece Project Collective and artists Tiffany Chung and Binh Danh. In contrast to the hard granite of the national memorial, Chung's and Danh's aesthetic engagements in each of their own ways attend to the ephemeral and biomaterial relationship between refugee memory and the landscape. "Theorizing ecologies of memory invites a consideration of how memorials and practices of remembrance can articulate memory as horizontal and communal within and across human and nonhuman environments, developing modes of more-than-human witnessing that might reveal the reverberations of militarism across natural and terrestrial worlds," they write. When "land becomes a metaphor for the capacity to heal and

recuperate the nation," the essay asks how such more-than-human engagements and witnessings can offer avenues for intergenerational and multispecies kinships to form "rhizomatic" structures of interrelation capable of unsettling the militarized landscape.

Karín Aguilar-San Juan's **"Thinking With and Beyond the Vietnam Antiwar Movement: An Interview with Frank Joyce, Rebel for Peace"** analyzes an interview conducted with Frank Joyce, a white social movement figure of the 1960s and 70s who was a peer of Tom Hayden. Born only a few years apart in Royal Oak, Michigan, both attended Dondero High School but Joyce stayed in the greater Detroit area, where he pursued a steady and less visible path of union organizing (including decades with the United Auto Workers), antiracist organizing and educating at the grassroots (including founding People Against Racism), and antiwar activism (including organizing large protests around the country and traveling to Viet Nam). Hayden was a key organizer of the delegations of US peace activists invited to Hanoi from 1965 to the end of the war, and in 1970, Joyce was one of those two hundred travelers whom Hayden connected to the Provisional Revolutionary Government. Having participated firsthand as an invited delegate in the April 30, 2025 commemorative events for "Reunification and Liberation" in Viet Nam, Joyce, now on the National Council of Elders, offers an example of firsthand involvement and continuous reflection in relation to the Vietnam antiwar movement, where Joyce considers how the antiwar generation's turn away from the movement collided with the rise of neoconservatism's continuation of the United States's "culture of violence."

The remaining three essays of the Special Forum move beyond any specific commemorative event, monument, or creative work to pose questions about how the "Vietnam War" can be productively located and connected across other geographies, periodizations, and discourses. Engaging with Global Indigeneity, Khoi Nguyen's **"Beyond Kinh(ship): The Making of Vietnamese Settler Refugeeism through Land and Dispossession"** asks how the resettlement of intranational refugees in the Mekong Delta after the division of Viet Nam along the 17th parallel in 1954 offers another key date from which to understand the ambivalent position of South Vietnamese refugees, who are often described as having emerged in the wake of 1975's regime turnover with the passage of the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act less than one month later. Ethnic Kinh collectively participated in the nation-building project when displacing other Indigenous and ethnic minorities well before 1975. Looking to the case of the Cái Sắn Canal developed under Ngô Đình Diệm's land reforms and drawing on Leanne Simpson's (2014) "land as pedagogy,"[5] Nguyen uses maps, photos, and autoethnographic field notes to develop a method of "reading the land," turning to "land as a way of seeing, knowing, and being in good relations." Tracing the dispossession of Khmer from the area to develop the concept of "Vietnamese settler refugeeism" and taking time to reflect on his own positionality upon being in Viet Nam near the fifty-year anniversary, Nguyen's contribution lies in his resistance to "the 'discovery narrative' embedded within academic discourse, which often overtheorizes

the geopolitical economy and the jurisprudential parameters of refugees," instead "examining the relationship between the displaced population and the land that received them … to confront the discomforts, contradictions, and abundance that extend beyond settler epistemology."

Bringing the Black Radical Tradition into deeper conversation with critical refugee studies, Christina Hughes's **"The Refugee Carceral Condition under Racial Capitalism: Histories of Intracommunity Policing across French Indochina, Cold War Southeast Asia, and the US Resettlement Contexts"** begins by citing contemporary examples that have emerged within the refugee diaspora of Southeast Asian police officers, tracing a genealogy of "refugee cops" as they emerged vis-à-vis increased criminalization of growing Southeast Asian communities in the resettlement context. Looking to how the French colonial regime cultivated an indigène police and prison guard cadre and how USAID subsequently consulted with South Vietnam to restructure and modernize its National Police during the war, the genealogy shows how the "refugee carceral condition" as it emerged in the resettlement context had traveled a transpacific circuit between Southeast Asia and the United States over the *longue durée* of colonial racial capitalism from land dispossession into neoliberal globalization. Southeast Asian cops, from this view, emerged from racial capitalism's ongoing reliance on the confinement and operation of sites that normalize "bare life" to securitize racialized space, not only against "enemy" insurgents but also against resident civilians who increasingly emerged as objects of state surveillance and social control with the rise of the administrative state. Closing by turning to the writings of Cedric Robinson and H. L. T. Quan to help imagine old and new refugee ways of living and being free beyond carceral imperialism and "state addiction," the essay ends by taking up the notion of preserving the ontological totality as has been elaborated in the Black Radical Tradition, considering how an embrace of refugee ontological wholeness might work to dematerialize and divest from the global prison-border apparatus.

Considering the legacies of the war vis-à-vis the COVID-19 pandemic, Long Bui's **"The Vietnam Corona-Quagmire: Rescripting Forever Wars in a Time of Chronic Crisis"** closes the Special Forum by demonstrating how Cold War specters showed up in "'Vietnam-sized' language" mobilized against COVID-19 and other perceived bio-political threats in the long shadow of war's "end" well into the twenty-first century. Denaturalizing infectious diseases and reframing them as emerging within a set of discursive relations, Bui conceptualizes the pandemic as a "corona-quagmire" in order to link how COVID's framing as a biosecurity issue drew on metaphorical language and imagery associated with the Vietnam War, wherein both became "unwinnable, protracted forever wars, whether against communism or disease." Arguing that the war "was a galvanizing event and flashpoint for continuing the war by other means," the essay suggests that 1975 did not mark "the ideological end of history with neoliberalism" but rather the onset of "the age of permanent crisis management and permanent war." Putting in parallel the normalization of permanent war after 1975

with the normalization of the pandemic, which has not ended, the essay closes by musing on what the current moment in US biopolitical empire augurs for the future with Secretary of Health Robert F. Kennedy Jr. defunding vaccine development. In an age of compounding crises, Bui inquires what it means at this moment to analyze the dialectics of permanent wars, and the implications of their procession for our collective future.

Across these contributions to the Special Forum, the themes voiced by its authors establish a scope of concerns that give intellectual solidity to how settler colonial land dispossession, global economies of war, carceral subjectification, ecological extraction, white jingoism, liberal unfreedoms,[6] epistemological and ontological violence, and biosecuritization converge at the discursive site of the displaced refugee, not only in the immediate aftermath of the military intervention in Southeast Asia but ongoingly and increasingly as the United States amplifies its turn to migrant criminalization amidst white ethnonationalist backlash and the rise of domestic fascism. As such, they also illustrate what Yến Lê Espiritu describes as critical refugee studies's approach to conceptualizing "the refugee not as an object of investigation but rather as a paradigm whose function [is] to establish and make intelligible a wider set of problems." With thematic breadth speaking to the ongoing ability of the refugee to illuminate imaginaries beyond the normalized deathworlds produced by these social forces, the essays in the Special Forum demonstrate critical refugee studies's assertion that "it is the existence of the displaced refugee, rather than the rooted citizen, that provides the clue to a new politics and model of international relations."[7]

However, as critical refugee studies additionally reminds us, these inquiries must also be "attentive to refugees as 'intentionalized beings' who possess and enact their own politics as they emerge out of the ruins of war and its aftermath."[8] In this way, the Special Forum does not aim to reduce the refugee at this moment of fifty-year countercommemoration to simply a decontextualized means through which to critique empire. As the contributions show, refugees and the generations that succeed them carry these difficult histories[9] yet insist on their own agency to imagine and create "refugee lifeworlds"[10]—resolute in the value of "refugee livability,"[11] refusing their erasure, and making magic out of the mundane to perform and enact ecologies where personal and collective grief can become alchemized through profound witnessing, "bursts of memory," and creative expression to place us in good relation. Refugee refusals, through both joy alongside difficult affects like "resentment"[12] and ingratitude for the "gift of freedom,"[13] allow for an embrace of a refugee ontological wholeness that works against the violence of the humanitarian regime's insistence on normalizing permanent war and reducing the refugee to merely a juridico-legal object to be managed by the liberal state.

As the collection of essays in this Special Forum faces the reality of 2025 as not only marking the fifty-year anniversary of the end of the "Vietnam War" but also the year during which Donald Trump's second presidential term began, each of these essays acknowledge in their own way their inability to fully "represent" any unified

commemorative voice to resolve what transpired during this war with a difficult memory. Remarking on the familiar quality of US-backed campaigns through other proxy states elsewhere, particularly in the current genocide against Palestinians in Gaza by the State of Israel, the essays nonetheless face the current political moment in their writing as witnesses to: diasporas caught up in the crosshairs of overlapping and recurring occupations; refugee and migrant deportations and dehumanized confinements; militarized peoples and landscapes in the throes of (self)annihilation; queer and trans enactments of refusal and living against the grain of state erasure; and ecologies emerging beyond national orders of forgetting that grieve the deaths of our human and more-than-human kin.

Sitting with how there is no possible way to resolve all that has passed in the wake of these collapsing tragedies, the essays take up Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong's suggestion that witnessing then becomes the profound act that allows us to see how people who "could not entirely escape that structure of time imposed on them economically and politically … made places on the margins of that future, the almost futures that held possibilities still, even in the catastrophes that constitute our modern history."[14] From this vantage point, as Benjamin's "angel of history"[15] is swept along the progressive timeline of colonial modernity towards a future in which further annihilations are all but promised, we as coeditors of this Special Forum want to return to the invisible and often unsung accumulated labors of those who have worked to map the outlines of these other possibilities.[16] Maneuvering through the geographies produced by refugees who remain defiantly "on the run,"[17] our hope is that this volume lends some navigational wisdom as we traverse and remain agile on increasingly icy grounds.

Notes

1 Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

2 Karín Aguilar-San Juan, *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xii.

3 Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies—Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2005): 20, https://www.jstor.org/stable/i40002953

4 Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "Crossroads of Cultures," 22.

[5] Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "Land as Pedagogy: Nishnaabeg Intelligence and Rebellious Transformation," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3, no. 3 (2014): 1–25, https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/22170/17985

[6] Chandan Reddy, *Freedom with Violence* (Duke University Press, 2011).

[7] Yến Lê Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees* (University of California Press, 2014), 10.

[8] Yến Lê Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees* (University of California Press, 2014), 11.

[9] Linh Thuy Nguyen, *Displacing Kinship: The Intimacies of Intergenerational Trauma in Vietnamese American Cultural Production* (Temple University Press, 2024).

[10] Y-Dang Troeung, *Refugee Lifeworlds: The Afterlife of the Cold War in Cambodia* (Temple University Press, 2022).

[11] Yến Lê Espiritu and Ma Vang, "'Livability' and 'Ungratefulness': A Refugee Critique of the Law and Humanitarianism," *Social Inclusion* 12 (2024), https://www.cogitatiopress.com/socialinclusion/article/view/8604

[12] Vinh Nguyen, *Lived Refuge* (University of California Press, 2023).

[13] Mimi Thi Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages* (Duke University Press, 2012).

[14] Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong, *Almost Futures: Sovereignty and Refuge at World's End* (University of California Press, 2024), 5.

[15] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Critical Theory and Society*, trans. Harry Zohn and ed. Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas MacKay Kellner (Routledge, 2020).

[16] Including the labors of this Special Forum's anonymous reviewers who cannot be directly named but whose time and brilliance we want to explicitly acknowledge and for whom we want to express our sincerest gratitude.

[17] Ma Vang, *History on the Run: Secrecy, Fugitivity, and Hmong Refugee Epistemologies* (Duke University Press, 2020).

Selected Bibliography

Aguilar-San Juan, Karín. *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America*. University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." Translated by Harry Zohn. In *Critical Theory and Society*, edited by Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas MacKay Kellner. Routledge, 2020.

Espiritu, Yến Lê. *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees*. University of California Press, 2014.

Espiritu, Yến Lê, and Ma Vang. "'Livability' and 'Ungratefulness': A Refugee Critique of the Law and Humanitarianism." *Social Inclusion* 12 (2024). https://www.cogitatiopress.com/socialinclusion/article/view/8604

Fishkin, Shelley Fisher. "Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies—Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004." *American Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2005): 17–57. https://www.jstor.org/stable/i40002953

Moten, Fred. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

Nguyen, Linh Thuy. *Displacing Kinship: The Intimacies of Intergenerational Trauma in Vietnamese American Cultural Production*. Temple University Press, 2024.

Nguyen, Mimi Thi. *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages*. Duke University Press, 2012.

Nguyen, Vinh. *Lived Refuge*. University of California Press, 2023.

Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong. *Almost Futures: Sovereignty and Refuge at World's End*. University of California Press, 2024.

Reddy, Chandan. *Freedom with Violence*. Duke University Press, 2011.

Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. "Land as Pedagogy: Nishnaabeg Intelligence and Rebellious Transformation." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3, no. 3 (2014): 1–25. https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/22170/17985

Troeung, Y-Dang. *Refugee Lifeworlds: The Afterlife of the Cold War in Cambodia*. Temple University Press, 2022.

Vang, Ma. *History on the Run: Secrecy, Fugitivity, and Hmong Refugee Epistemologies*. Duke University Press, 2020.