Postwar, Relational, and Other Memories

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Abstract

This essay contemplates the multiscalar perspectives on memory and forgetting regarding the Vietnam War. It travels through the "country of memory," a space materialized through multiple state narratives, personal experiences, representational images, activists' history and constructed vignettes of their absences, to confront the political implication of enunciated forgetting in postwar Vietnam, in the refugee diaspora, and under the US's order of/to forget(ting). Highlighting new cultural and literary voices from the postwar generation in Vietnam, specifically Mai Huyền Chi's documentary *50 Years of Forgetting,* and the significance of their locality, this essay delineates the complex relationship to silence among Vietnamese war survivors. Arranged in proses that are "bursts of remembering," the essay interrogates various contexts and forms of state-sanctioned amnesia and official memory through a postwar generational critique. In a blend of cultural and historical analysis and autobiographical offering informed by the Third World radical traditions of ethnic studies, women of color feminism, and critical refugee studies, the essay gestures toward enunciating a relational memory—a framework more capacious than existing national lexicons and designations—that continues to dream toward collective liberation and decolonized landscapes.

"That's just life during war;
those weren't your roots."

–– Nguyễn Thị Hoa in the documentary
50 Years of Forgetting

Enunciated Forgetting—Revisit the Silence

"That's just life during war; those weren't your roots." Nguyễn Thị Hoa[1] in the documentary *50 Years of Forgetting*[2] makes this comment when her granddaughter Trần Nhật Anh Thư suddenly comes home, bearing an unusual request to know the past, begging to "know her roots so she can grow." Thư has just found out that her grandmother lived through the atrocious 1968 Tết Offensive through her friend, director Mai Huyền Chi, whose decorated grandfather's body never arrived home from that bloody campaign. On the train from Đà Nẵng to Huế, in preparation for that conversation, the two women, my generational peers, born the decade after the war, look at the brutal photographs of the Tết Offensive together. Flipping through the images (that I too was unaware of) of war victims filled with Huế people of all ages, they wonder aloud in a dearly missed Central Vietnamese accent I have not heard in years: "If you have seen things like that, had been through things like that, how do you live with these memories?" They "can't imagine it."[3]

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"Surely you have seen the photograph."[4] T. K. Lê frustratedly demands decency from Americans like the coworker whose unprovoked joke named her a Việt Cộng at a bar work gathering. The photographs Lê evokes here, the visual archives of famed, award-winning, iconic images in US memory, wouldn't include the Tết Offensive, which remained a local Huế tragedy in a war ordered by international politics, where local families remain restless under the official state policy that wanted and wants the dead to remain unidentifiable. But Americans have access to other images: "Agent Orange, burning skin, landmine amputees, and all the dead children … But I won't satisfy her with the gratuitous imagery of a war I never knew."[5] Because "ghosts and other unfinished conversations"[6] silenced many refugee households, generations of diaspora children since 1975 have remembered and studied Vietnam through borrowed images.[7] Due to the intentional erasure combined with ingenuine framings that flatten the diverse political projects and ethnicities of "South Vietnam" in Vietnam's and the US's official historiography, the most accessible sources for history learning for Vietnamese refugee descendants come from war journalism, visual anthropology,[8] Hollywood films and documentaries produced by white individuals with personal or

political stakes in the war, or found/abandoned Vietnamese/American family photos that Thy Phu calls the genre of the "orphaned photograph."[9]

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Against the more mainstream circulation of images, visual attention, production, and circulation of Vietnam's images exists in another thread: among war resistors, feminists, activists and revolutionaries of color, the New Left, who aligned with and were politically activated by the righteousness of North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front's rhetoric and practice of guerilla armed struggle for national liberation. Part nostalgia, part inspiration, the legacy of Vietnam's communist victory carried on in the movement's political memory as an anticolonial and anti-imperialist socialist revolution, with direct support of Third World internationalism and Black liberation. To this day, Vietnam's exportation of feminine revolutionary aesthetics,[10] particularly the image of various Vietnamese women-warrior[11] archetypes—of an ancient female-led army against Chinese invaders like Hai Bà Trưng and Bà Triệu, women political prisoners, guerilla girls, and mother soldiers—are still evoked as symbols for radical Third World feminism.[12] Vietnam's decades of revolutionary war provided material grounds for radicals of color's open embrace of armed resistance and the language of liberation. Amidst these overlapping movements in the US that became increasingly intensified with political assassinations in 1968,[13] a South Vietnamese exchange student cohort arrived to become war resistors. Mobilized by multiple US-based coalitions to end the war, including an initial training with the Black Panthers in Oakland, one of the most visible moments for this underknown movement is the visual archive about the 24-year-old Nguyễn Thái Bình, a cohort member deported for his antiwar stance and killed by the captain of the plane he was on for attempting to hijack the route to Hanoi to join the revolution in 1972.[14] In direct relation to the anticommunist massacre in Southeast Asia including the ineffable 1965–66 mass killings of approximately one million Indonesians,[15] at home, the US government brutally silenced revolutionary Black and Indigenous movement leaders through retaliation, imprisonment, and assassination in domestic counterinsurgency efforts.

The war ended in 1975 and brought about crises of political vocabulary where "Vietnam" arrived in the US not as revolutionary figures but anticommunist refugees and witnesses of revolutionary killings.[16] In response, Asian American filmmakers Christine Choy and J. T. Takagi of Third World Newsreel—founded in affiliation with anti-imperialist coalitional movements—released the understudied documentary *Bittersweet Survival* in 1982. This was the earliest and only documentary to feature a Vietnamese leftist activist who analyzed the imperialist design of Southeast Asian refugees' struggles with inadequate resettlement, racial tension, and labor conflict in Monterey, California, and Philadelphia's poorest Black neighborhood. In line with critical refugee studies scholarship that would come out three decades later, activist

Dương Trọng Lâm, an antiwar exchange student turned sponsored refugee and community organizer in the Bay Area, lent his voice to challenge the racial scapegoating practice of pitting Southeast Asian war survivors against survivors of racial terror. One year before *Bittersweet Survival* was released, Lâm was killed, the first among the seven progressive Vietnamese refugees to be assassinated in FBI-related anticommunist activities during the 1980s.[17] For even longer, since the 1970s, the US prison system has been subjecting Black and Indigenous revolutionaries—those energized by militant resistance—to slow death via impossible life sentences, torture, and prison assassination.[18] In matching logic and direct sequence with those from Vietnam, these acts of murderous silencing seek to invisibilize the body and idea of resistance.

For many, the flawed validity of Vietnamese revolution and its unfinished liberation still carried "memory and hope"[19] amidst intense engineered death, across time and space, lending vision to the men and women fighting towards Black and Indigenous liberation and currently to the agile pro-Palestine liberation movement[20] against Israel's Zionist settler-colonial-religio-ethnonationalism and its global reach in capturing political discourses—including its recent normalization in Viet Nam's political culture and militarized economy. Fifty years after it was "over," "the right to memory"[21] regarding the Vietnam War has been monopolized by nation-states against the most impacted to maintain their investment in ethnocentrism, racial capitalism, and settler colonial logic in both Vietnam, the diaspora, and the US racial state. Be it in the postwar northern Viet Nam where I grew up or in the US, the West European settler colony built on genocide, memory is that elusive site of governance, struggle, and resistance capturing millions of displaced subjects including those excluded by/escaping Western formal categorization. In the lessons provided by those silenced for their rebellions, connected through erasure, I think of the limits and possibilities of forgetting that help forge relational memory. In beholding that which must be confusion,[22] we cultivate new pathways across land-based political memories and toward nuances.

Writing about the planetary experience of the colonial brutalism that encapsulates the majority of non-Western world, Achille Mbembe reminds us that "the possession of a memory functions as a dividing line between humans and 'others,'"[23] and for that, memory takes up existentialist imaginaries that can connect across those who share the status of subhuman. Mindful of the coloniality of the Western humanist framework, Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong has developed vocabularies of "being in the world that exists in the slippages"[24] to excavate Vietnamese subjectivity from state custody, to be in relation to the dehumanized others. Juxtaposing the feminist exploration of memory work and political subjecthood, the aforementioned historical, cultural, and visual records are these slippages that hold the web of relations regarding the Vietnam War, where differentialized bodies and narratives are captured and silenced even as images linger, or haunt. These seemingly separated realities are bound together in a brutalism that Mbembe speaks of, produced by war economy and its counterpolitical culture at a local, regional, national, transnational and world-making speculative level—the articulation of which is necessary to understand the "dividing line" between

what memories are allowed to surface and become History, which ones must be left unenunciated, and to what ends.

Learning the relational history of the subjugated is to time travel, and imagining a just future is to engage in speculative world-making.[25] It is to travel through the "country of memory," a space materialized through multiple state narratives, personal experiences, representational images, activists' histories and constructed vignettes of their absences, to confront the political implication of enunciated forgetting. To think of the death and losses denied, made into state secrets,[26] or diluted into popular culture references—a common treatment that "Vietnam" shared with the oppressed in the US—is to travel through imaginative paths where universalized narratives (Reason, regimes of truth, Western knowledge) are exposed, interrogated, or referenced for localized experiences of violence. As the first and most televised war, "Vietnam's" military archives and war journalism established the sceneries and peoples captured within that imperialist ambition to restructure the world in its own images. The erasure embedded in state narratives and cultural governance is indicative of imperialist and national disciplining power; memory is organized "through the enforcement of forgetting so that only some could occupy the position of subject of knowledge."[27] Thus, the barriers erected against racialized people's capacity to participate in capacious commemoration reflect the particularisms that are, borrowing Hortense Spillers's articulation, always "markers so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean."[28] Political memory, thus, lies in the intergenerational struggle and generative hope amongst those who know and speak against historical distortions of their lived experiences, and those impacted by structural erasure *who can only imagine in parts*.

Even the act of simply looking through printed 4x6 black and white photographs of the Tết Offensive was overwhelming for Mai Huyền Chi, who gasped that "[she] can't imagine" *seeing* deaths with your own eyes and *living* with those memories. Whereas these types of photographs are often used as B-roll to corroborate historical narration in war documentaries, here we see them being interacted with *in place of* narration. They are silent snapshots of a catastrophe that survivors dared not speak of at length. During the four-week occupation of Tết Mậu Thân, approximately six thousand people were disappeared, only found months after the battle, buried in mass graves around the city. They were marked targets and civilians of all ages and genders, including some noncombatant Westerners; many found gagged, tied up, executed, even buried alive. The graves were hidden in different terrains—under creeks, in shallow graves near the Citadel, on the sand flats southeast of the city, under stretches of abnormally tall grasses, across both sides of the Perfume River.[29] It was considered the bloodiest campaign perpetrated by the liberation army. These "political killings in the revolutionary moment"[30] are still unanswered for, fabricated and minimized as inevitable casualties or combatants killed by US bombing in official state narrative,[31] mourned only in Huế and never gaining traction internationally; the massa-

cre's violence dismissed in comparison to US war crimes by the international progressive circle.[32] To this day, despite the twelve hundred bodies still unlocated, official narratives imposed on Huế insist on historical confusion, an omnipotent pressure to continue keeping the past buried.

Imagining *seeing* and *living* when confronted with the deaths of relatable selves is something that haunts the generation afterwar(d), a desire for wholeness in the recognition that things or people are shattered, but still wanting to be among them. This violent incarnation, the imagined "roots" of our postwar future, here resembles the self-negation that Sylvia Wynter terms *desêtre*—the "unbearable wrongness of being": it is felt when a person realizes their body isn't theirs, but racialized flesh saved for the zones of brutal and mass death,[33] yet this realization alone does not change the material condition. "The gradation of human worth in war zones"[34] is a relation that would put the familiar bodies Chi was imagining surrounding her from past Huế in relation to the diasporic, Indigenous, racialized, wounded, rebellious bodies I evoked in the beginning of this piece, for the sole reason that their/our bodies might have not always been brutalized on a molecular level[35]—that is, per Afropessimism, blackness—but they/we have been. In the conversation between these Central Vietnamese women, old and young separated by memory, *desêtre* establishes the postwar generation's affinity to historical trauma, a desperate yearning of the postwar generations across different temporalities between homeland and the diaspora.

Born in Nghệ An (Central Vietnam) only four years after the war, author Phan Thuý Hà once "grew up without caring"[36] about the horrifying experiences her neighbors across the street endured during war time. Now, she travels to collect and has published four oral history collections of soldiers, survivors, and witnesses of the war across the nation, reflecting regional differences and especially highlighting Central Vietnamese voices hitherto absent in official discourses. Her books, considered "traumatic literature,"[37] emerged in the aftermath of socialist revolutions and detail the mundanities of thinking about and finding the dead.[38] Her first collection on North Vietnamese soldiers, due to the storytellers' insistence on anonymity so their 17-year-old martyred comrades could be remembered, was entitled *Don't say my name*.[39] In *Family*, she interviewed witnesses of the brutal 1950 Land Reform who spoke of "the fear that had made people remember nothing," even in cases where they had buried a dead family member.[40] In the diaspora, inheriting the "exile literature"[41] of Vietnamese boat refugees who archived "the silence of the ocean,"[42] where secrets were forged due to the incapacity of language to describe the horror taking place, T. K. Le muses, "Part of memory is forgetting. I have kept my ear close to the floor of our house for years now, listening to the anecdotes of my family's history. It wasn't until recently that I realized that silence is the history."[43]

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50 Years of Forgetting was named before anything was made. It is a bold attempt by a "Vietnamese national" filmmaker residing in the homeland to make such

an assertion, contradicting the policing of cultural narratives about the meaning of the war. Fifty years since the end of the war, homeland postwar generations have just now started to bypass state narratives to examine the personal narratives of individuals and families living in its ghosts and in the shadows of a globalized migrant economy.[44] For years, director Mai Huyền Chi had thought about what she calls a "self-imposed amnesia"[45] about the omnipresent war that she experienced as "happening to a whole generation"[46] of those born in the homelands, whose right to memory and narrative is owned by the state. As a member of the postwar generation, I share with Mai many things, including two decorated grandfathers, both enlisted from Central Vietnam. Both of mine survived, unlike Mai's, and yet the feeling of losing our grandfather to the state or not knowing him as a family member resonates. This too, is something I learned on my own, granddaughter of authorized patriarchs, growing up in the shadow and discipline of the new socialist [hu]man and cultural family unit, where our men and women "belong to the revolution, but not to us, [their] family."[47] And just like Mai, the biographical detail offered here is but an entrance to a place where critiques are gestured rather than narrated—for the danger that takes shape in remembering other memories.

Taking on the narrative role of a decorated war hero's descendant, *50 Years of Forgetting* delves directly into the paradoxes of familial/genealogical and national memory in postwar Vietnam and subverts the historical cessation by the state which dictates that the homeland remembers while the diaspora forgets. It pokes holes in the national identity formation produced through a cohesive national memory[48] which imagines Viet Nam as a patriarchal blood family[49] of multigenerational citizenry subjects, realized through the tradition of sacrificial duty to "protect ancestral land" and tied together in the absolutism of historical continuity and progress. As Heonik Kwon states, "imagining the nation-state became a matter of thinking about dead war heroes within the familiar system of ancestor worship."[50] A Vietnamese sovereign future was imagined on the grounds of revolutionary identification and memory inheritance, a "contested terrain marked by struggles over power, legitimacy, and the right to remembrance of alternative histories."[51] Mai here turned to the way different generations of Vietnamese families of noncombatants resonantly negotiate with war memory, abandonment, and the arts—per Toni Morrison—of "surviving in parts, [for] the grandeur of life is that attempt."[52]

Visually, the film resembles the "homecoming stories"[53] in Vietnamese American returnees' cultural production and memory work;[54] in character, it parallels refugee descendants' strenuous journey to generate collective history through familial oral histories in the diaspora.[55] Having been influenced by these diasporic Vietnamese conventions,[56] Mai traveled across fragments of Viet Nam in search of the last generation's experiences of war, and in turn covered the urban centers impacted by war in Central, North, and South Vietnam: Central Vietnam includes Đà Nẵng—America's first land combat—and Huế—the site of the 1968 Tết Offensive. She moves then to Hà Nội's

Khâm Thiên neighborhood—the target of Operation Back Line's 1972 Christmas bombing campaign in North Vietnam, then to the South in Sài Gòn, where no interlocutors showed up, then back to Đà Nẵng Air Base, where Operation Ranch Hand sprayed defoliant for nine years,[57] contaminating the land with dioxin exposure accumulated from the continuous military activities of France and the US, leaving her uncle and his adult child developmentally and physically impaired.

Made in an autobiographical style and intended for English-speaking audiences,[58] coproduced with American producer/director Paul Sapin for Al-Jazeera, the documentary's final form implies a constant negotiation among personal stakes, state memory, and international legibility: the ambivalent exploration of the Tết Offensive in Central Vietnam and the scarce mention of the refugee exodus in South Vietnam following reunification takes place due to an international investment in telling the same "simplified binary perspectives"[59] of Viet Nam vs. the US, North vs. South, and thus reiterate the same delocalized order. The North/South binary conveniently hegemonizes both the homeland and diaspora, prioritizes Kinh ethnic dominance, downplaying Viet Nam's complex hierarchical participation within the matrix of French colonialism, Cold War proxies, US anticommunist interventionism, covert warfare, nation-building, Vietnamese ethnonationalism, transpacific[60] and continental settler colonialism in relation to indigenous populations across Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian landscapes.[61] The American structure of forgetting, one that boiled Viet Nam down to a core so small it didn't commemorate non-Vietnamese Southeast Asians impacted by the war, facilitated even the framing of a Vietnamese national documentary explored through familial memory. The American guilty consciousness that could not speak beside itself has reached Viet Nam and so too the demand to personally carry its weight. The oppressed in the US know this deeply: America wants the victims of its violence to educate their oppressors, no matter the cause. The Vietnamese state only accepts praise. Both want their respective subjects to show gratitude and repeat official narratives.

I watch *50 Years of Forgetting* for the Central Vietnamese dialect that I haven't heard in Vietnam War documentaries, that which signifies nothing universal, only a particularism that got swept underfoot with the variously scaled universalism of Viet Nam's Marxist political order. Because Central Vietnameseness isn't talked about anywhere, neither in English nor in the North Vietnamese that I grew up speaking, this particular lineage of mine is the site through which I measure my own oblivion to quickly arrive at the sentiment common with South Vietnamese refugee descendants in the US. It took me years to come to the slow realization that I had grown up in a city that wasn't mine nor was it part of my parents' birthland, that my father's generation was the first in his seven-generation clan to relocate to the capital, and that my generation had been the first to grow up without war. *50 Years* is the first Central Vietnamese directorial voice I have seen that reaffirms what I knew, that Vietnamese national subjects—descendants of Kinh Vietnamese decorated soldiers—are themselves too inheritors of loss, that which gives us a chance to decide our ethics of care.

In *50 Years,* this enunciated forgetting is delivered by the war-touched generations; their personal grief outweighs the pleasure of being institutionally recognized for fulfilling narratives about heroism and great sacrifice, rejecting the myth of national unity. For its exploration, the documentary can only mourn the totality of ten thousand Vietnamese autocides in the Tết Offensive through the unnamed dead in mass graves, cared for by local communities and Buddhist temples but narratively uncounted for with no further clarification.[62] When Chi asks, "Don't you think it's important to retell the children about the history that Huế has been through?," Grandma Hoa's replies sound almost like a state slogan, save for the uncertain look in her eyes that have seen so much, "We considered to let old stories go. Close the door ajar, orient toward the future." This future would always just be "almost," for Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong, eyewitness and scholar of what she terms "a politics of death that had become the order of the day in modern Vietnam coming out of colonialism."[63] Because nothing right can be said, we see Chi light incense to honor the disappeared, praying silently like one should when talking to your dead ancestors.

In Hà Nội, an unnamed woman and survivor of the Christmas bombing of Khâm Thiên reluctantly refuses to reveal her private loss for any recognition: "Generally, what is considered history, people would want to record, likely for later generations of our descendants to know about our country, but I don't want to recall. I don't want to talk about the sufferings of my family."

In Saigon, after a day of calling on interlocutors and not being able to secure any, Mai wonders if "people don't want these memories anymore." A Northern writer friend of Mai living in Saigon, invited to close out the Southern section, provides a forceful critique: "They must have been interviewed fifty times already. People have the right to forget and move on. Just because they experienced bad things in the past doesn't mean that they have to become the trunk of memories for me ..."

On film, Chi lets herself be seen negotiating with the historical and political weight of this silence, loaded with meaning. There is fear involved, still, for a population with ties to the defunct South Vietnamese nation, and the complex perspectives ordered to forget for the myth of national unity. There is danger, too, for the film to officially evoke the historical presence of refugees—people who were displaced for the national liberation. The filmmaker and the subjects meet each other in their mutual relation to this official narrative—a pressure to stay silent. In lieu of testimonies, the Southern section included some archival footage of the 1975 refugee exodus, sourced from the famous Associated Press's coverage of the first fifteen days in Saigon after reunification. Even this inclusion has to be fought for. The only refugee-related story was told by her aunt's single mother and son household in Đà Nẵng, but can only be from the perspective of a Central Vietnamese woman who didn't know she was a second wife, and a son left behind by his Southern Vietnamese father.

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Huệ Tâm Hồ Tài, daughter of famed Southern Vietnamese intellectual revolutionary Hồ Hữu Tường, left home for the US at 18 and had spent her career contemplating the homeland she calls "the country of memory," what it remembers, what it forgets, what it is beyond the place where her father spent his days imprisoned by all the governments that came to rule the South. More than two decades after her groundbreaking work, many of us who grew up in sanctioned forgetting are no longer connected to representations of days past. From the women who refused to cosign discourses, to those reached "beyond the pale"[64] to "stand on the side of tears,"[65] the feminine voices emerging from Viet Nam, particularly featured in *50 Years of Forgetting*, emptied out the official discourse of collective trauma for the sake of a unified future, denying the forceful shape of state narrative to form in the absence of an inherited story. Grandmother Hoa's response is a rejection of the powerful narratives by the Vietnamese state that her granddaughter internalized without a clue ("knowing injurious histories are the roots from which I grow"), that witnessing and caring for the dead up close is a reality of war, not an idealized virtue or moral mission for Vietnamese women. "Those are not your roots" is a reminder that elision is a form of worldbuilding, that the state's lies are secretly known, and that the shattered are the facts outside the regime of truth. When asked about her experience, instead of recounting testimonies of death, Hoa sung an antiwar song by famed composer Trịnh Công Sơn, written to commemorate the Huế bodies, banned by the North and South Vietnamese government but beloved by citizens of both. Reliving the moment where young people gathered to sing Trịnh's banned music despite government censorship in decades past, Hoa "sing[s] above the carcasses"[66] like time traveling through a private portal to the sensibilities she built around having to care for and honor the dead, a lesson that cannot be captured via words. Through the crack at the door between the deadly past she kept contained and the better future we are all entitled to, the melody echoes, above "the ruins among which those whose worlds have collapsed"[67] continue to live.

Land-based Memories

At this moment of writing, the planetary future is being realized through the distortion and reconfiguration of the transnational historical memory of decolonization and resistance, which provides political legitimacy and territorial claims to Indigenous land. As an adult, I moved from a postwar socialist Vietnam where refugees and highland Indigenous resistance[68] were erased and at times criminalized in all discourses of the Vietnam War, to a liberal multiculturalist US that had excused most wars on most continents, and where most nonwhite populations arrived in, through, and because of wars. When these framings became available to me through the Third World radical traditions of ethnic studies, women of color feminism, and critical refugee studies, I am often confronted with the ways the Vietnam War—a tremendous history to those

in and around it—is but an instance of violence in a web of ceaseless genocidal warfare caused and supported by the US in its pursuit of power and profit. I am most concerned about the promise and principles of national liberation, of which Viet Nam continues to serve as an example to racialized and colonized communities across the globe, including the Western European settler colony in the Americas,[69] the pro-Palestinian movement[70] in our recent time, and the irony of this rhetoric when I try to teach about this war to the increasingly younger descendants of Southeast Asian refugees—especially to the nondominant groups who are not authorized to speak on behalf of the nations they are supposedly from. Both uniquely descendants of refugees in the US and inheritors of generational Indigenous forced migration in a longue durée consideration, many Southeast Asian Americans are Indigenous highlanders[71] who experienced displacement due to imperialism or lowland expansionism long before getting swept up in French colonization, American interventionism, power struggles between dominant ethnic groups, national consolidation, and ethno-nationalist hegemonization.

Whereas the scholar Howard Adams (Métis), noted for his early advocacy of armed decolonization, spoke of Vietnam as the "hope" of "a small indigenous nation," "primitive … with barbaric weapons defeat[ing] the strongest nation (USA) in the world with the most advanced military weapons, including nuclear and napalm bombs,"[72] American-born Montagnard refugee descendant H'Abigail Mlo shared the short lesson of her people's struggle against modern nation-state naming that her grandmother instilled in her: "Not American, not Vietnamese."[73] Emphasizing the territorial project of "national unification," Vietnamese historiographical tradition has long "conveniently ignore[d] how the Vietnamese have acquired territory by annihilating, displacing, or assimilating whole populations such as the people of Champa in what is now central Vietnam in the fifteenth century, and the Khmers of the Mekong Delta since the eighteenth century."[74] In the twentieth century, the Vietnamese assisted the Pathet Lao's genocidal extermination of Hmong Indigenous tribes,[75] forcing them along with other Indigenous groups from Laos and a multiethnic population from Viet Nam into becoming refugees—where they were hunted through dangerous, unfamiliar, and deadly terrains, made to cross jungles, rivers, and oceans, and were pushed closer to certain death. Similar to the ongoing Hmong extermination carried out under the radar by the Laos government, postwar Viet Nam surveils and criminalizes Indigenous Central Highland tribes recruited by the US military; during the war, the tribes' historical demands for territorial and cultural sovereignty were suppressed by South Vietnam's nation-state building project, and in the current timeline, framed by the revolutionary state postwar as separatist movements facilitated by foreign intelligence/outside agitators.

There is an order to/of forget(ting) in regard to the Vietnam War that comes from the fractured political hierarchies post-1975 in the US interacting with the hierarchy of truth in Viet Nam. It leaves truth, fragmented and scattered among those who hold them privately or collectively like shattered glasses, unable to reflect a

totality of the past, but in itself a condition for memory. This condition is the imposed limit for nation-state sovereignty—the "dualistic self-conception of culture" which "pit[ted] citizens against barbarian"[76]—thus replicating what Édouard Glissant called "arrowlike nomadism," otherwise settler colonialism or expansionism, the original form of conquering migration and expansion that formed Western nation-states as the legitimate structure of post-decolonization. Within the limited political frameworks that dictate official memories—anticommunism vs democracy, national liberation vs foreign intervention/imperialism—we are tasked with forgetting the ones bearing the heaviest burden because of their position in the local and global racial hierarchies—Indigenous people and societies transformed and oscillating between the nations and empires that want to erase them, if not materially, then epistemologically. From bodies to landscapes, Indigenous people and ethnic minorities from former French Indochina participated against their will, caught in the crossfire, flattened under the bombardment, or murdered in the wake of regime change and power consolidation. Indigenous forces in Southeast Asia who were brought into the war have complex relationships and demands that provided alternative visions of decolonization and self-determination, even as their support was used as justification for the moral and political validity of the war, and their lands turned into battlefields, military bases, and sites of occupation or bombing.[77] This forgetting will reiterate the collusion of nation-states as the organizing force of society, the arrowlike nomadism of Western nations moving towards a vision of "peace" that normalizes perpetual war to destroy Indigenous land and people relations. In short, anti-indigeneity, similar to and often encapsulated in racism, shows up across ideological differences for the political project of inter-nation-ality.

As such, the material traces of silence/silencing, some more enunciated than others but always deeply land-based, pose a question for the radical potential of existentialist memory—the memory that sits with the conditions through which localized governed subjects have historically been made to forget, whether by designed confusion, disappearance, and silence, or recuperated into self-negating legibility.[78] It asks us to contend with the human whose ties to themselves and one another evade the naming power of Western knowledge; critically juxtaposed, who is the grandmother from Huế, once a teenage witness of mass political murder who helped empty out mass graves, now with granddaughters who cannot fathom death, in relation to whole generations of Black radicals who are still imprisoned and killed by the colonial legal administration that criminalizes any militancy and especially armed resistance?[79] Would the unexploded ordinances and chemical exposure left by American bombing during the Vietnam War fit to advance the grievance of environmental racism against Indigenous land? Bound by Western archives, infrastructures, and language(s), mainstream progressive politics continue to be facilitated in ways that fail to attend to the question of Indigenous sovereignty[80] and its function within the capitalist racial order within the boundaries of US imperial rule. Can minoritized scholars make sense of our access to peculiar conditions that invisibilize us, not in front

of those who can consume us, but the ordered others? How do we remember in a way that fulfills the promise of liberation, a liberation which remains a constant struggle for those rounded up as sacrifice for a socialist/democratic future that is always a moving target? What is an ethics of remembering that remembers that which must be erased?

Military Parades and Memory Festivals

> "This *is the world in which I move uninvited, profane on a sacred land, neither me nor mine, but me nonetheless. The story began long ago… it is old. Older than my body, my mother's, my grandmother's… For years we have been passing it on, so that our daughters and granddaughters may continue to pass it on. So that it may become larger than its proper measure, always larger than its own in-significance*."[81]
>
> –– Spoken by an elder to a group of people who did not include me until I found and followed her, mostly in secret.[82]

This elder was not keen on legible language or professed identity and took great length to evade even friendly capture.[83] It took me a while to understand her point, the futility of demanding humanization by appealing to the master.[84] That she and I came from and ended up in the same land is irrelevant. That I could borrow her words—but more importantly her disdained dismissal of all-knowing authorities—and thread them into the writings of other elders and kin I came across on "this sacred land" to map out the territory that must be forgotten, directs me to the bridge.[85] Following that which must be forgotten is the path I reluctantly tread, worried because of all the different languages—hence, secrets and truth obscured for survival—that I don't speak affectively, theoretically, or culturally, that with every expanding step into this territory so thoroughly renamed and resettled, I would get lost in the simultaneous formation and breakdown of the known foundation. I want to be, as another elder said, a "passerby," a position enunciating "in the last instance that which constitutes our common condition, that of being mortal … on the way to the future, which is open by definition."[86] (I insist on listening in to the conversations held by those speaking with the people who regard more than their own, toward what at one point had been a global aspiration, perhaps, of collective liberation).

There are military parades on our borderized[87] land. All different kinds, we observed. All legitimate, because it is the right of those who can arm soldiers. A nation was born, fought for, liberated, or restored. The enemies were photographed, but when we exhibit the pictures to the world, we show only ours—the heroic deeds we did, the victimization we endured, the victories we gained, the pitiful things we could

not spare. We rid ourselves of guilt, joined the parade or the one against it, applauding the rhetoric of national liberation, of ancestral sacrifices and future prosperity, of our moral high ground and the just wars we fought or must fight, of a good life finally realized with the absence of external enemies. We are a fervent *us*, the extended family of a nation, representatives of humankind, heirs of a chosen people, we fought for this—so we must remember to celebrate in order that our favorite memories, and nothing else, will live on. "How do you forget without annihilating?"[88]

Bombs have been intermittently falling on sacred land, weapons drawn and fired, continuously, throughout landscapes. Some of us got to tell our favorite sons and sometimes our daughters that our heroes died killing invaders, terrorists, and traitors for their safety. Families of those who died can apply for recognition, to join the rank of those with official memory assigned to the landscape, a mass graveyard with names carved in stones, a street name perhaps. A school, a library, a park—we would have plenty of land that had been rid of its inhabitants old and new, ready to be mapped. We didn't need to talk about those that disappeared, where they have gone to, whether they'll be back, or the journey they took. Their absence is what our story hinges on. We set rigid borders on each square we won, rename it most of the time, and fill it with people who love the stories we tell, those who feign to be convinced, or are convinced, violently rejecting those who could challenge the validity of our selective truth. We count those allowed to attend and must quickly hide or assign meanings on the absence. ("To eulogize a Palestinian man [Indigenous, colonized, martyred] in the colonizer's lexicon is to self-flagellate. They erase their crimes from the archives and erase us from their history books; they create nations with no natives in their dictionaries, nations that pretend not to know whose blood it is on their hands."[89])

To belong, perhaps, is to be in a military parade, performing in order, following orders, violently and idealistically, so committed one would accept the myth of making life by taking life, and transcribing those acts over and over again until it becomes the social order. To let someone declare authority on a matter is to "confuse the materiality of the thing named … with the materiality of the name," that is, "the modalities of production and reception of meaning"; and as such, to "give up all attempt at understanding the very social and historical reality of the tools one uses to unmask ideological mystifications."[90] Forgetting can be annihilating, it is said. How do we remember, then, resisting being annihilated? Without appropriating the past and its "very social and historical reality" to profess the salvation of today's, this epoch's, this era's, this generation's struggle—"the death match that had become our inheritance on a global scale when European colonial conquest spread over continents old and new"[91]?

An elder, knowing deeply about death and the globally brutalized conditions of racial death, teaches: "Insofar as the possession of a memory functions as a dividing line between humans and 'others,' the right to memory is inseparable from identity struggles."[92] What kind of memory?, I ask, and how do we evoke it? It is an old question, still, but it seems to be one we must ask over time and space. "We will have

to learn ourselves how to remember [difference] together and thus to repair together the [beautiful and suffering] fabric of the world."[93] Memories, against the identity struggle for recognition, self-affirmation, and even self-determination in a world, only get "passed on" in remnants or in parts. Insisting on beauty and solidarity with the suffered against the structural destruction of landscapes, bodies, worlds, "each of us needs the memory of the other, because it is not a virtue of compassion or charity, but of a new lucidity in a process of Relation."[94] Memory becomes knowledge when we recognize ourselves through the other's eyes.

Notes

I send my gratitude to the issue's editors for their patient support, and my blind reviewer for their generative comments.

1 All names are written according to the conventions local to the region. Vietnamese people making an appearance in documentaries or images are referred to with their first names, and authors/filmmakers cited with their last names.

2 *50 Years of Forgetting*, directed by Mai Huyen Chi (Al Jazeera, 2025), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PBgVf57aWtU

3 *50 Years of Forgetting.*

4 For readers looking for a roadmap: This essay is written in a filmic structure; here it opens with a scene from *50 Years* that transitions to T.K. Lê's writing using a jump-cut edit through a repeating object – the photograph. The photograph then is expanded to indicate the visual culture surrounds the Vietnam War, which serves as a site of subject formation for Vietnamese refugee descendants who made use of iconic war photograph to make sense of their loss of personal history through intergenerational trauma.

5 T. K. Le, "Part of Memory Is Forgetting," in *Inheriting the War*, edited by Laren McClung, W.W. Norton, 2017.

6 Yến Lê Espiritu, "Ghosts and Other Unfinished Conversations," *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 41, no. 3 (2016). https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/mlw020.

7 Thy Phu, "Diasporic Vietnamese Family Photographs: Orphan Images and the Art of Recollection," *Trans Asia Photography Review* 5, no. 1 (2014); Dinh Q. Lê, *Crossing the Farther Shore* (exhibition); Quyen Nguyen-Le, *Nước (Water/Homeland)* (short film).

8 As an example, see H'rina DeTroy, "The Vengeance of Elephants," *december* (Winter 2017). https://decembermag.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/DeTroy-28.2.pdf

9 Phu, "Diasporic Vietnamese Family Photographs."

[10] Progressive International, "Portraits of Vietnamese Women at War," *Progressive International*, March 9, 2021. https://progressive.international/wire/2021-03-09-portraits-of-vietnamese-women-at-war/en; Ashley Farmer, "'Heed the Call!': Black Women, Anti-imperialism, and Black Anti-War Activism," *AAIHS*, August 3, 2016. https://www.aaihs.org/heed-the-call-black-women-anti-imperialism-and-black-anti-war-activism/; Borton, Lyn, "Behind the Scenes, in the Forefront: Vietnamese Women in War and Peace," *ASIANetwork Exchange: A Journal for Asian Studies in the Liberal Arts* 25, no. 1 (2018): 7–59. https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.276

[11] Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, "Women Warriors." In *Radicals on the Road: Internationalism, Orientalism, and Feminism during the Vietnam Era*, Cornell University Press, 2013. https://doi.org/10.7591/9780801468193-010.

[12] Triple Jeopardy magazine, see Grace Kyungwon Hong, "Incommensurability and Intersectionality: Third World Feminism and Asian Decolonization," in *Asian American Feminisms and Women of Color Politics*, edited by Lynn Fujiwara and Shireen Roshanravan (University of Washington Press, 2018).

[13] Thuan Nguyen and Vy Nguyen, eds., *Many Bridges, One River: Organizing for Justice in Vietnamese American Communities* (UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press, 2017).

[14] Ly T Nguyen, "'Thái Bình Means Peace': (Re)positioning South Vietnamese Exchange Students' Activism in the Asian American Movement," *International Journal of Communication* 16 (2022): 4602–4618; Thi Nguyen. "Street Cred: Dauntless Antiwar Icon Nguyễn Thái Bình and His Tragic Death." *Saigoneer*, February 18, 2020, https://saigoneer.com/saigon-heritage/18331-street-cred-dauntless-antiwar-icon-nguyen-thai-binh-and-his-tragic-death

[15] Stuart Schrader, "The Murderous Legacy of Cold War Anticommunism," *Boston Review*, May 19, 2020, . https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/stuart-schrader-murderous-legacy-anticommunism/; and Vincent Bevins, *The Jakarta Method: Washington's Anticommunist Crusade and the Mass Murder Program that Shaped Our World* (Public Affairs, 2020).

[16] Sucheng Chan, *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation: Stories of War, Revolution, Flight and New Beginnings*. (Temple University Press, 2006), https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9472

[17] Ly T Nguyen, "Revolutionary Others: Migratory Subjects and Vietnamese Radicalism in the US During and After the Vietnam War," (PhD diss., University of California, San Diego, 2021), ProQuest (Nguyen_ucsd_0033D_20508).

[18] "Free Them All! Political Prisoners and the Black Radical Tradition." Abolitionist Law Center, February 27, 2024, https://abolitionistlawcenter.org/2024/02/27/free-them-all-

political-prisoners-and-the-black-radical-tradition/; "A Guide to Political Prisoners." Abolition Notes, accessed September 26, 2025. https://abolitionnotes.org/political-prisoners/; Monifa Akinwole-Bandele and Lumumba Akinwole-Bandele, "Why We Work to Free Political Prisoners of the Black Power Era," *Hammer & Hope*, Winter 2023, accessed September 26, 2025, https://hammerandhope.org/article/black-power-political-prisoners/; George Jackson, *Blood in My Eye* (Random House, 1972)

[19] Jorge Luis Borges, "Remorse for any death," quoted in Nguyễn-võ Thu-hương, *Almost Futures: Sovereignty and Refuge at World's End* (University of California Press, 2024), 20

[20] See, for example: Futures Futures Futures Collective, "From Vietnam to Palestine: Articulating Possibilities and Practices of Radical Solidarities Between Palestinians and Vietnamese Refugees," *Public Intellectuals Project*, February 4, 2025, https://publicintellectualsproject.humanities.mcmaster.ca/social-justice/from-vietnam-to-palestine-articulating-possibilities-and-practices-of-radical-solidarities-between-palestinians-and-vietnamese-refugees/; Richard Lai, Lynn Ta, and Promise Li, "From Vietnam to Palestine: Solidarity Across Time and Borders," *Spectre Journal*, May 3, 2024. https://spectrejournal.com/from-vietnam-to-palestine-solidarity-across-time-and-borders/; and Cầu Kiều Collective, "Solidarity Between Vietnam and Palestine," *Cầu Kiều Collective*, https://caukieucollective.com/solidarity-between-vietnam-and-palestine/

[20] Saba Ikram, "Parallels in Resistance: From Vietnam to Palestine," *Paradigm Shift*, October 22, 2024, https://www.paradigmshift.com.pk/vietnam-palestine/.

[21] Achille Mbembe, *Brutalism* (Duke University Press, 2024), 23.

[22] Marguerite Bich Nguyễn, *America's Vietnam: The Longue Durée of US Literature and Empire* (Temple University Press, 2018)

[23] Mbembe, *Brutalism*, 23.

[24] Nguyễn-võ, *Almost Futures*, 22.

[25] Framing from Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown, eds., *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* (AK Press, 2015).

[26] Ma Vang, *History on the Run: Secrecy, Fugitivity, and Hmong Refugee Epistemologies* (Duke University Press, 2021).

[27] Nguyễn-võ, *Almost Futures*, 153.

[28] Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65–81, https://www.mcgill.ca/english/files/english/spillers_mamas_baby.pdf

[29] Nhã Ca, *Giải Khăn Sô Cho Huế* (Việt Báo, 2023); William Marmon, "The Massacre of Hue," *TIME*, October 31, 1969, https://time.com/archive/6633194/world-the-massacre-of-hue/

[30] Nguyễn-võ, *Almost Futures*, 4.

[31] Hoang Phu Ngoc Tuong reportedly regretted to have faked his "eyewitness" account following official scripts and lent his voice to an interview for the documentary series Vietnam: A Televison History. "Lời cười cho câu chuyện quá buồn," *Tiếng Dân*, February 10, 2018, https://baotiengdan.com/2018/02/10/loi-cuoi-cho-cau-chuyen-qua-buon/

[32] For its ideological impact, the facts about The Tet Offensive in the US is way less known than the Mỹ Lai massacre of 400 American-perpetrated death in the same year. Olga Dror, "Remembering the Massacre at Huế," *New York Times*, February 20, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/20/opinion/Huế-massacre-vietnam-war.html

[33] Which is "imposed upon all Black and to a lesser degree, on non-white people." Sylvia Wynter, "On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Reimprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of Desêtre: Black Studies Toward the Human Project," 2015, https://www.decolonialitylondon.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Wynter_On-how-we-mistook-the-map.pdf

[34] Nguyễn-võ, *Almost Futures*, 14.

[35] Mbembe, *Brutalism*.

[36] Linh Thoại, "Tác giả Phan Thúy Hà: Để sự thật không mất đi," *Tuổi Trẻ Cuối Tuần* (February 10, 2018). https://cuoituan.tuoitre.vn/tac-gia-phan-thuy-ha-de-su-that-khong-mat-di-1620076.htm

[37] Nguyen Luong Hai Khoi, "Văn học chấn thương – đọc 'Gia đình' của Phan Thúy Hà," US Vietnam Research Center, February 22, 2023, https://usvietnam.uoregon.edu/van-hoc-chan-thuong-doc-gia-dinh-cua-phan-thuy-ha-1/

[38] Phan Thúy Hà, "An Untold Story on the Afternoon of April 30, 1975: The Story of Brother Trần Đình Thế," translated by Ngô Xuân Hiền, in *Những Trích Đoạn Của Các Anh (Excerpts Of The Soldiers)*, (NXB Phụ Nữ Việt Nam, 2021), https://usvietnam.uoregon.edu/en/an-untold-story-on-the-afternoon-of-april-30-1975-the-story-of-brother-tran-dinh-the/

[39] Phan Thúy Hà, *Đừng Kể Tên Tôi* [Don't Say My Name] (NXB Phụ Nữ Việt Nam, 2017).

[40] Nguyen But's testimony quoted in Nguyen Luong, "Văn học chấn thương."

[41] Nguyen But's testimony quoted in Nguyen Luong, "Văn học chấn thương"; and Nguyen Ngoc Bich, ""Văn chương lưu đày của người Việt," presented at George Mason University, 1985.

[42] Trần Trung Đạo, "Sự im lặng của biển", https://vietbao.com/p190a35528/146/su-im-lang-cua-bien

[43] Le, "Part of Memory Is Forgetting."

[44] *Viet and Nam*, directed by Trương Minh Quý (2024), for example, is an exciting new cinematic rumination on the postwar socialist working-class struggle of two queer miners who would soon separate due to one partner's emigration. The imminent departure led to a crosscountry trip for the other to find their lost father's grave.

[45] Ly Nguyen, personal email, August 9, 2025.

[46] Ly Nguyen, personal email, August 9, 2025.

[47] *50 Years of Forgetting.*

[48] Hue-Tam Ho Tai, "The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam," in *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, ed. Hue-Tam Ho Tai (University of California Press, 2001)

[49] Tai, "The Country of Memory," 171

[50] Ewa Roszko, "Commemoration and the State: Memory and Legitimacy in Vietnam," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 25, no. 1 (2010): 1–28, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41308134

[51] Christina Schwenkel, "On Memory and Materiality in the Study of Vietnam," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 12, no. 3 (2017): 23–31, https://doi.org/10.1525/jvs.2017.12.3.23., 27.

[52] Toni Morrison, in conversation with Frank McCourt, moderated by Juan Williams, *The Connecticut Forum*, May 4, 2001.

[53] Chih-ming Wang, "Politics of Return: Homecoming Stories of the Vietnamese Diaspora," *positions* 21, no. 1 (February 1, 2013): 161–87, https://doi.org/10.1215/10679847-1894317; *Oh, Saigon!*, directed by Doan Hoang (2007); GB Tran, *Vietnamerica: A Family's Journey* (Villard, 2011); and Thi Bui, *The Best We Could Do: An Illustrated Memoir* (Abrams ComicArts, 2017)

[54] Lan Duong, "Archives of Memory: Vietnamese American Films, Past and Present," *Film Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (March 1, 2020): 54–58, https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2020.73.3.54

[55] Documentaries examining self and family history can be considered a part of counterstory telling approach among communities of color, particularly to resist to

the white dominated structure that mirrors anthropology as a field which allows privileged filmmakers to produce knowledge about less privileged subjects. See Quyen Nguyen Le, *In Living Memory* (2022), Carol Nguyen, *No Crying at the Dinner Table* (2019), to name a few.

[56] Ly Nguyen, personal email, August 9, 2025.

[57] George Black, "Fifty Years Later, a Daunting Cleanup of Vietnam's Toxic Legacy," *Food and Environment Reporting Network*, May 13, 2019, https://thefern.org/2019/05/fifty-years-later-a-daunting-cleanup-of-vietnams-toxic-legacy/

[58] The documentary is commissioned by Al Jazeera for their Featured Documentaries, "landmark documentary series that seek to engage, inform and inspire with a wide range of stories from around the world." *Silenced: The War on Journalism*, exec. Prod. Farid Barsoum, "Featured Documentaries," *Al Jazeera*, accessed September 24, 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/program/featured-documentaries/

[59] Ly Nguyen, personal email, August 9, 2025.

[60] Espiritu Gandhi, "Indigenous Soldiering: Chamoru, Māori, and Hmong Narratives of the Trans-Pacific Vietnam War," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 7, no. 2 (2022): https://doi.org/10.5749/CES.0702.08

[61] Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Harvard University Press, 2016), 6-9; and Harsha Walia, *Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism* (Haymarket Books, 2021).

[62] Nhã Ca, *Giải Khăn Sô.*

[63] Nguyễn-võ, *Almost Futures*, 2.

[64] H. L. T. Quan, *Become Ungovernable: An Abolition Feminist Ethic for Democratic Living* (Pluto Press, 2024), 32. "The ungovernables and ungovernable spaces are thus beyond the pale—that is, beyond nominal jurisdiction and acceptability. In a word, counternormative."

[65] Poet Dương Tường's poem to carved on his grave: Tôi đứng về phe nước mắt (I stand on the side of tears).

[66] Trịnh Công Sơn, "Hát trên những xác người," in *Ca Khúc Da Vàng* (Sài Gòn: Nhân Bản, 1967–1968), track 32.

[67] Mbembe, *Brutalism*, 3.

[68] William B. Noseworthy, "Lowland Participation in the Irredentist 'Highlands Liberation Movement' in Vietnam, 1955–1975," *ASEAS – Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies* 6, no. 1 (2013): 7–28, https://doi.org/10.14764/10.ASEAS-6.1-2

[69] Framing from Bevins, *The Jakarta Method.*

[70] Futures Futures Futures Collective, "From Vietnam to Palestine"; Lai, Ta, and Li, "From Vietnam to Palestine;" and Cầu Kiều Collective, "Solidarity Between Vietnam and Palestine."

[71] Considered "ethnic minorities" in their own countries, the management and inclusion into national polity is often a top-down approach. Highlanders is a general term to indicate where these groups ended up occupying if not originally from there as a result of losing grounds to more powerful armies.

[72] Howard Adams, *A Tortured People: The Politics of Colonization* (Theytus Books, 1995), 13.

[73] H' Abigail Mlo, *What My Grandmother Couldn't Teach Me*, accessed September 24, 2025, https://heyzine.com/flip-book/e7d071b090.html#page/6

[74] Patricia Pelley, "The History of Resistance and the Resistance to History in Post-colonial Constructions of the Past," in *Essays into Vietnamese Pasts*, ed. K. W. Taylor and John K. Whitmore (Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1995)

[75] This assertion is prevalent in most US Hmong refugee accounts and memoirs, such as Kao Kalia Yang, *The Late Homecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir* (Coffee House Press, 2008); and Chance Chang Vang, *Thoughts from Prison: A Hmong Boy's Journey from the Mountains of Laos to the American Urban Jungle* (HER Publisher, 2021)

[76] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (University of Michigan Press, 1997), 14.

[77] Charles A. Joiner, "Administration and Political Warfare in the Highlands," *Vietnam Perspectives* 1 (1965): 19

[78] Following Sylvia Wynter's discussion of desêtre, or internalized racism as one of Black subjectivities living in Western centric mainstream aesthetics and politics. Wynter, "On How We Mistook the Map."

[79] This is a question that stemmed from Joy James's work around incarcerated Black intellectuals and radicals.

[80] Native studies focuses less on the racialization of Indigenous peoples in North America and more on the specific treaties and legal negotiations for decolonization.

[81] Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 1.

[82] Trinh T. Minh-Ha's intervention into anthropological disciplines is in her ability to weave indigenous knowledge, cultural tradition and mythological texts as sources of knowledge, including the oral tradition, that escape Western knowledge regime. This

is a call back to her intervention and using her words to describe what had just transpired above, which is an intergenerational conversation about local and land-based wisdom. This section is meant to narrate/humanize the experience of "when these framings became available to me." The way I refer to them as an elder and the next is due to the implied relation that I developed with their theories and bodies of work beyond academic citations.

[83] For the fiftieth anniversary of the Vietnam War, on April 30th, 2025, the Vietnamese state organized a festival that includes a military parade joined by China, Laos, and Cambodian military. *Time* reported that "senior diplomats including US ambassador to Vietnam Marc Knapper (the son of a Vietnam War veteran who was programming)—not to participate in April 30 commemoration events," according to the *New York Times*'s finding tipped by four unnamed sources. On the day, Consul General Susan Burns reportedly attended. On June 14th, 2025, Trump held his own poorly attended military parade, one week after violating state jurisdiction by deploying National Guards in Los Angeles.

[84] Mohammed El-Kurd, "The Politics of Defanging: On Humanization," in *Perfect Victims: And the Politics of Appeal* (Haymarket Books, 2025), 38–44.

[85] Cherríe Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Third Woman Press, 2002).

[86] Mbembe, *Brutalism*, 25.

[87] Mbembe, *Brutalism*, 25; Reece Jones, *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move* (Verso, 2016)

[88] Mbembe, *Brutalism*, 28.

[89] El-Kurd, *Perfect Victims*, 44.

[90] El-Kurd, *Perfect Victims*, 42.

[91] Nguyễn-võ, *Almost Futures*, 6.

[92] Mbembe, *Brutalism*, 23.

[93] Mbembe, *Brutalism*, 25

[94] Édouard Glissant, quoted in Mbembe, *Brutalism*, 25.

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